

# geometry and abstraction

WINNIPEG ARTIST DOUG SMITH'S DENSLEY WORKED DRAWINGS COMBINE CONTRASTING TECHNIQUES

by Sandee Moore

**D**oug Smith wants you to get lost – lost in the mass of meticulous details in his huge drawings. Sometimes the artist, too, is literally immersed in his work: “I buy erasers by the box, and I like to really grind the graphite into the paper. I’m always covered in graphite dust and eraser bits.” Smith’s drawings are intensely physical and hugely labour-intensive – it took him a year to finish only three drawings.

“I stare at [the paper] for about a month, and, then, I just get up one day and attack it.”

Attacking, indeed, is a good descriptor for Smith’s working methods. “I kind of want to take a break from it, because it’s very physical. It’s like doing aerobics, getting up and down off my stool!” he exclaims, conjuring vivid images of the strain his art-making puts on his body.

*The freedom to toss things together and see what happens is an important artistic value for Smith*

mathematical signs... Swarms of emblems are piled upon one another to create a larger form

“I feel like I’m doing graffiti,” he says of the large, whole-body gestures in his drawings, often as large as sixteen feet long. Inky graphite is scrubbed into the paper, often forming a large, iconic “X”. Though graphically powerful, the X does not dominate the drawing, but becomes just another letter in Smith’s alphabet of symbols – isobars, airplanes, birds, restroom gender indicators,

– a vortex of birds and macaroni-like curves or a wavy ocean composed of swimmers’ arched backs. “There’s a lot of freedom in working so big,” Smith points out, “You can throw anything in there and have space to link it all up.”

The freedom to toss things together and see what happens is an important artistic value for Smith. Currently, his children remind him of the value of free-thinking. “[...] I get a lot of my ideas from kids. Kids’ interpretations are totally different from what an educated art-observer might see.” In fact, he often makes work with both audiences in mind – mixing impetuous marks with a hodgepodge of symbols to question signification, the nature of communication and the dissemination of ideas for the educated art-observers, but “editing” so that his work can include everyone.

**Formerly a ceramicist, Smith shuttered his studio to raise his family.** In the '90s, he and his wife, a medical



ARTIST: DOUG SMITH  
PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE LATSCHISLAW

researcher, moved to first to the United States, then to the Netherlands. On their return to Winnipeg, he returned to art-making while his children were at school. Starting with small works in oil, his practice has now grown to a grand scale.

Since then, Smith’s career has been steadily accelerating. Until its recent closure, he was represented by Ken Segal Gallery in Winnipeg, and he just sold several drawings to Manitoba Hydro, which will grace its new building on Portage Avenue.

Smith claims that he makes art because it’s the only thing he’s really good at. “I am an idealist, so I tend to think it’s amazing when people respond to it and think about it. That kind of makes it all worthwhile. I think, ‘okay, I’ll do it again.’” **ONE**

