

# Joe Smith

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**ART**

298 Banfil St St Paul, MN 55102

651-353-2451

[info@occasionalart.com](mailto:info@occasionalart.com)

[www.occasionalart.com](http://www.occasionalart.com)

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## **Joe Smith**

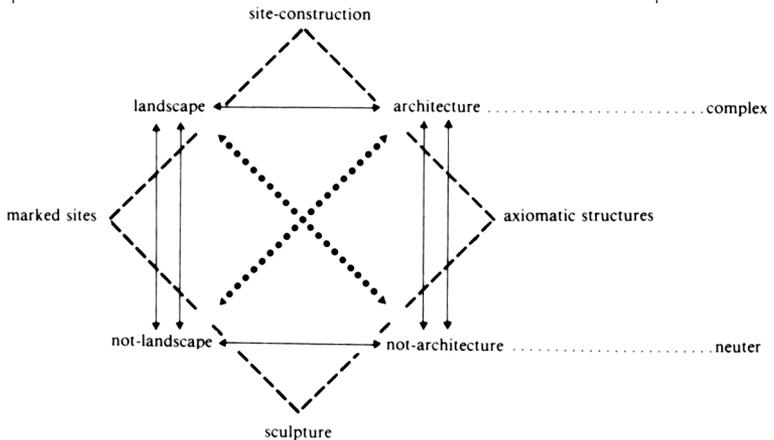
What initially attracted me to Joe Smith's work was his manic experimentation with paint. These experiments were often driven by questions about how paint could be applied to a surface and what a painting could be. He did a series where a small canvas was dipped over and over again, face down, into a bucket of paint. The paint eventually formed what looked like stalactites hanging off the surface of the canvas. In another painting Smith took small teardrop shaped pieces of paint he had peeled off a surface after the paint had dried and sewed them onto a painting. Some of these paintings became more like objects than paintings, and eventually this led to creating sculptures and installations.

One of these "paintings" that looked more object-like caught my attention. It was a canvas slipcover made to cover a painting, painted a solid, off-white. It evoked a series of questions: Is it a painting? a non-painting with

paint on it? an anti-painting? Is it functional? How can it be properly displayed? Can it be considered without the “interruption,” the distraction, of taking it off the painting it is meant to cover? Is it still a painting when it’s not covering another painting? Is it a monochrome? Is it positive in the sense that it demands attention when (or by) covering another painting? or is it negative in its refusal to demand attention by becoming a functional object? Does it retain the negativity of a monochrome by, in a sense, refusing to acknowledge its audience? that is, refusing to give them something, to entertain them? Or is that “refusal” turned positive by the overly dramatic gesture of covering another painting?

In “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” written in 1979, Rosalind Krauss maps out, in diagram form, the territory created by the new sculptural practices of the 1960s and 70s, specifically Earthworks and site-specific sculpture. She contrasts sculpture’s traditional role as monument

and site marker with its negatives, architecture and landscape, siting sculpture's degree zero as "not-landscape" and "not-architecture." (This is the state of early 1960s sculpture according to Krauss: "it was what was on or in front of a building that was not a building, or what was in the landscape that was not the landscape."<sup>1</sup>)



From Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field."

Western painting, like sculpture, has a similarly commemorative tradition stemming from its early history. However, its depicted space was virtual, while its physical site generally remains the gallery wall. I thought it would be interesting to think of painting's recent history in terms of Krauss' diagram, or perhaps as a "bud" off Krauss' diagram. In a somewhat ironic twist, it seems that painting cannot be contained by a two-dimensional diagram, but requires a third dimension to take into account its virtual space (when it has one, that is).<sup>2</sup> This diagram starts to flatten as modernist painting acknowledges its surface. This story of painting's growing self-awareness as a two-dimensional surface is most famously told by Clement Greenberg, of course. That historical tale is beyond the scope of this essay, however. I will limit myself to the type of painting that has long since given up representation in any conventional sense, painting that has discarded virtual space, and that painting's legacy in Joe Smith's work.

At some point, probably as early as the late 1950s with Frank Stella's *Black Paintings*, painting loses its "virtuality," instead becoming an object.<sup>3</sup> In

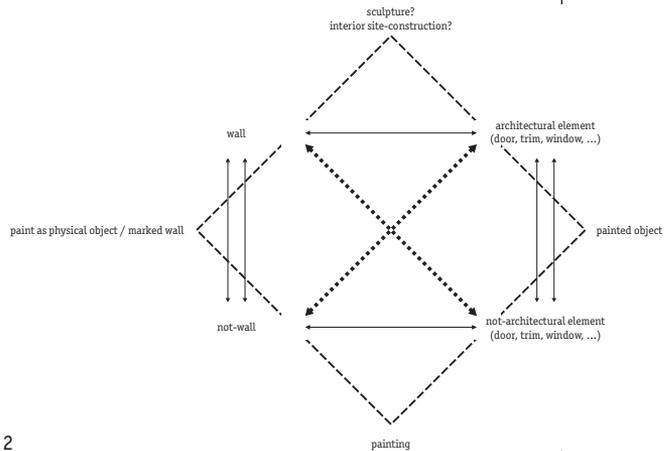
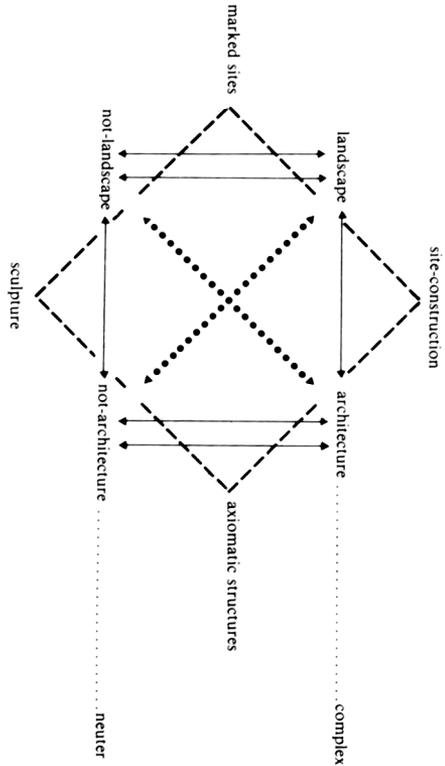
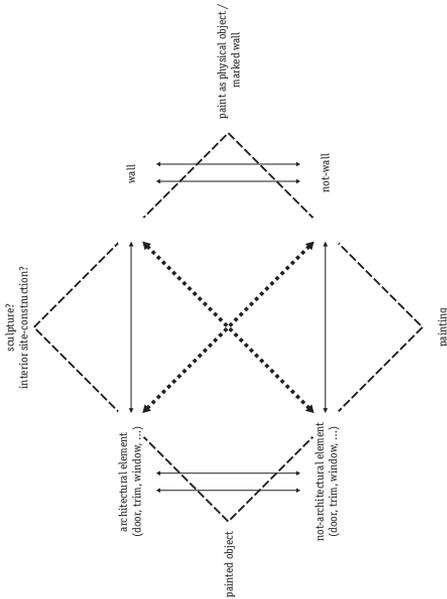


Diagram 2

essence these paintings become the equivalent of Krauss' "axiomatic structures" in sculpture's expanded field, but in the realm of painting they become

“painted objects” between “architectural elements” and “not-architectural elements” (Diagram 2). The equivalent of Krauss’ “marked site” is “paint as physical object / marked wall.” The historical examples I would cite here are Lynda Benglis’ pigmented latex poured on the floor from the late 1960s. This was essentially paint without a support, or paint as an object. One might also think of a work like Lawrence Weiner’s *A 36” x 36” Removal to the Lathing or Support of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall* from 1967.<sup>4</sup> This work was not separate from the wall, but it was also not part of the





wall, as it was a removal from the wall, yet it was dependant on the wall for its existence.

But what of the opposite tip of the painting diagram? What is painting's far end of the "expanded field?" Might it be sculpture? Or at least the type of sculpture embodied in a three-dimensional object? (And does this imply painting is fully expanded?) These three-dimensional objects, at least in the case of Smith's work, may again depict something, but they do it as sculptures

do, as objects in three-dimensional (not virtual) space. What they represent is always somewhat ambiguous and

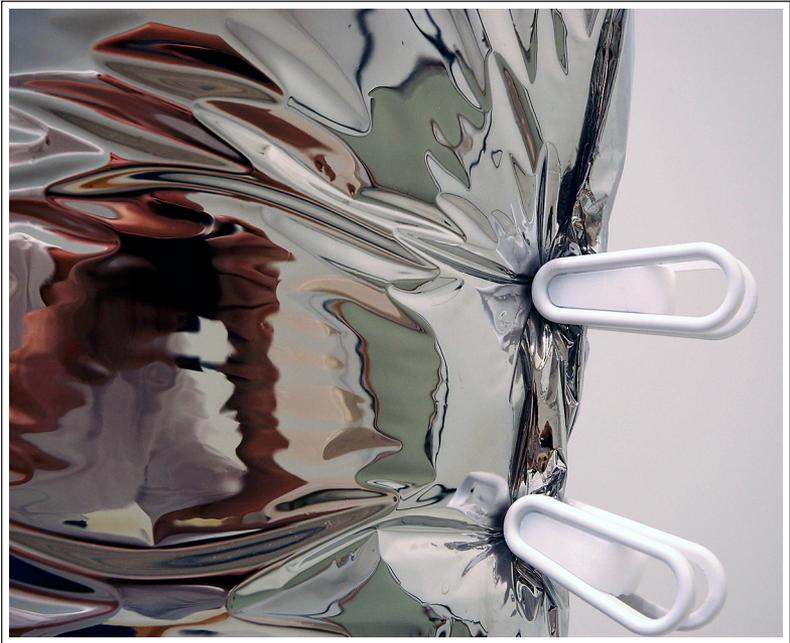


Joe Smith. Untitled (detail), 2004.  
Chrome and glass table, Magazine page, cardboard, and paint.

open to many readings. These objects can be one thing or another, but they never seem to clearly represent a single object. Smith also uses paint as a two-dimensional representation. After all, for him painting is itself an “expanded field,” not just a point or line on that field.

—Aaron Van Dyke

1. Krauss, Rosalind. “Sculpture in the Expanded Field.” *The Anti-Aesthetic: essays on postmodern culture*. Ed. Hal Foster. Seattle: Bay, 1983.
2. In conversation Joe Smith brought up this potential for Krauss’ diagram to be three-dimensional and incorporate painting and possibly photography.
3. Stella famously said about his early paintings, “what you see is what you see,” meaning they did not depict or represent anything outside themselves; they didn’t represent something even abstractly, such as an idea.
4. This work basically consisted of a three foot by three foot section of the surface of a wall being removed.



Joe Smith. *Untitled (detail)*, 2004.  
Mylar, upholstery foam, cardboard, conduit, duct tape and clips.