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Thirty Years' Work, Rescued From the Storm

By HILARIE M. SHEETS MARCH 15, 2013

JERSEY CITY — In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, Ray Smith's cavernous Brooklyn studio in a warehouse near the Gowanus Canal was a gigantic indoor swimming pool six feet deep, as the artist described it. There, his huge figurative canvases and totemic wooden sculptures floated in the water as he and his assistants tried desperately to pump it out, salvaging what they could of 30 years' worth of his artwork.

"It was like entering a war zone and trying to set up a triage unit," said Mr. Smith, 54, who came to art world prominence in the 1980s with his contemporary blend of magical realism and modernism, reflecting his bicultural heritage of Mexico and the United States. "At one point I thought, 'Just throw it all in the Dumpster.' But you start looking at years and years of work, portraits of your kids and family, and you get emotional. It was overwhelming."

On a recent afternoon, the artist was beaming, surrounded by more than 100 of his works, most of them rescued from his studio, displayed in the

exhibition “Ray Smith: Here/Now,” on view at Mana Contemporary in Jersey City through May 5.

Mr. Smith, who lives in SoHo, first visited this sprawling multipurpose art complex, which is housed in a former tobacco factory, at its opening two years ago. There he met the founder, Eugene Lemay. Mr. Lemay, an artist himself and a businessman who previously ran Moishe’s Moving and Storage, created Mana as a high-tech art storage and management facility for private collectors, museums and galleries that would also offer public exhibition spaces and artists’ studios.

He immediately hit it off with Mr. Smith and began discussing the possibility of hosting an exhibition of Mr. Smith’s work. After the storm, when Mr. Lemay called to check in on his friend, the idea took on some urgency.

“I knew the only way for Ray to get out of this mess was to pull everything out of the studio and do the show, which would change his whole attitude and get him back into working,” said Mr. Lemay, who sent trucks and heavy equipment to haul out around 80 waterlogged artworks and bring them to Mana’s conservation facility to dry and undergo restoration. Mana paid for the transportation, storage and hanging of the show, Mr. Smith said. Though his studio was insured, he said the insurance had yet to cover any of the restoration expenses and he doubted that it would.

All the works that were in the studio at the time of the storm suffered some damage, “but there are certain things that I actually now like of the damage,” said Mr. Smith. He pointed out a painting on wood of colossal, mirrorlike waves curling toward each other, titled “Tex-Rex (Ocean)” (2005-6), that sat in water for days. He indicated an area where the chemicals in the water had made the paint temporarily gooey, which gave the roiling surface another level of abstraction. “I never could have gotten that effect,” he said, appreciating the irony of water jeopardizing a painting depicting a wave. “I now consider that a gorgeous passage in the painting.”

With the contents of Mr. Smith's studio transposed to Mana and a large percentage of the artworks successfully conserved, Mr. Lemay had 30 years of work on hand from which to choose for the exhibition.

"I've never seen these paintings hung together at one time," Mr. Smith said. "And then to have the new sculptures in there, too, it would never have occurred to me to put it together like that." He is delighted with Mr. Lemay's installation, he said.

The show wends its way through three of the six floors of Mana, adjacent to its climate-controlled storage for about 300 collectors, its 70 artists' studios and its restaurant and beer garden.

The exhibition includes portraits, much larger than life-size yet highly intimate, celebrating Mr. Smith's wife and his daughters, painted over time. The large-scale canvas "Maricruz y Mariana" (1993), for instance, shows his wife holding their toddler, nose to nose, encircled by concentric bands of tiny festive lights radiating from this moment of love. A grown-up Mariana reappears, almost like a mythical sphinx, in a monumental 2012 two-piece wood carving of a head and a "tail." In a playful spin on nesting matryoshka dolls, another piece, titled "The Inside of Mariana," shows the innards of the larger sculpture. A third sculpture, "The Inside of the Inside of Mariana," is reduced to just a flowerlike shape for the head and a stump for the "tail."

Interspersed with the personal images are representations of public figures, including several paintings of the poet Ezra Pound in a dreamlike state, with tropical fish, and a plywood carving of a buffoonish Rod Blagojevich, the former governor of Illinois, with the exaggerated nose of a liar. Mr. Lemay also included several signature paintings on loan from the Italian collector Francesco Pellizzi, including "Guernimex III (La Olympiada)" (1989-90), in which Mr. Smith appropriated imagery from Picasso's "Guernica" and infused it with Mexican political references.

Mr. Lemay has also lent Mr. Smith a space in which to recreate his studio

and reassemble his team of assistants, interns and students, with whom he has long collaborated.

“At least for the next three months, we’re going to have an operational studio here with most of the stuff that was going on at the other space,” Mr. Smith said. An example of one of his earlier communal studio projects in the exhibition is “Cadavre Exquis” (2012), 27 canvases based on the famous Surrealist party game, in which the artist and his assistants Keegan Monaghan, Eamon Monaghan and Nik Gelormino each painted different sections of the human body in diverse styles which they then randomly mixed together to make bold, humorous composites.

“Everybody’s getting along so well here that we’re probably going to stay for a while,” Mr. Smith said. “When you’re six feet under water and somebody does something like this, it’s like magic.”

“Ray Smith: Here/Now” runs through May 5 at Mana Contemporary, 888 Newark Avenue, Jersey City. Open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and for special events. For further information: (800) 842-4945 or artmanafest.com.

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