

Studies in Paint:
Jonathan Lasker & John Noel Smith

Intuition and control:

the paintings of Jonathan Lasker and John Noel Smith

The paintings of Jonathan Lasker and John Noel Smith truly stand out from those of their fellow painters, occupying a distinguished position in the world of contemporary art. These are two painters whose work has changed somewhat in appearance over the years - I am thinking of Lasker's much reproduced *Moody Room* (1977) and other paintings from that period and Smith's *Tower Series* of the 1980s - but their core discourse has not. Like Giorgio Morandi whom he cites as an influence, with his "concentrated, consistent parameters", Lasker has no problem with the fact that his artistic agenda has not altered significantly over the years. Agilely working within his chosen ambit, his paintings manage to retain a remarkable degree of individuality. Likewise, Smith has been working in series for some time and while there are of course shifts in his concerns as he embarks on a new body of work, there remains a clear thread running through works that may appear

diverse in style but preserve their unique identity and coherence. Though there seems an apparent conversion from representation to abstraction, both artists have always only been concerned with how what Smith refers to as his "flotilla of elements" create the complex, anxious spaces we associate with these painters.

Lasker and Smith share an eloquent articulation that reveals some influence of the modernist tradition, while at the same time subjecting it to their analysis. Both artists make enigmatic works of enduring energy that combine a great love of texture and formal flexibility, manipulating notions of foreground and background, surface and depth. Exerting a masterful control over the process, Lasker and Smith allow chance too to play its part. The intuitive gestural mark is counterbalanced by a cerebral constructive undertaking that creates not only a sense of

authenticity but also one of sophistication and playfulness. Ultimately their paintings are about the act of painting itself, and while infinitely playful, Lasker and Smith remain two of the most serious protagonists in contemporary art.

The first time I was lucky enough to be confronted with a Lasker painting was in the late 1980s in New York; I came away from this first viewing puzzled and uncertain as to what was going on, asking myself were these compelling works even finished! Though I had spent the day before with my US Abstract Expressionist heroes at MoMA, these new works by Lasker had largely blotted out that experience and were stuck in my head demanding attention. I visited the gallery three more times; this was perhaps the first contemporary painting that I had encountered that clearly belonged in both the abstract and conceptual art camps. Smith's paintings captivate, challenge and engage us in similar vein.

Armin Zweite refers to Lasker's "potential for resistance... this lies in the entanglement of aspects that seem to exclude themselves, per se" and it may be this very questioning of assimilation in these paintings which engages us; Lasker admits that his painting defies "normal expectations of how people are supposed to paint". Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith's 2002 essay *Emblems of Estrangement* for Smith's mid-career survey exhibition at Ireland's Royal Hibernian Academy makes a similar point: "we may find that symbolic content or meaning is inevitably subordinated... we may find these works inscrutable, rebarbative or overwhelming... they resist any easy assimilation." He suggests that it is in fact "this thwarted access" which is fundamental to an understanding of these works.

In a way, both of these artists emerged as painters just as painting had been declared dead and so can be seen, certainly in their early years, as outsiders in the contemporary art world. Lasker was a student at Cal Arts in the 1970s, a time when Conceptualism was the new theoretical kid on the block and to be a painter was to take a brave stance. Lasker remarks: "In a way it was good for me, because it forced me to shape my reasons for making paintings. It also forced me to make paintings that had reasons for being paintings. So I think, in a way it pushed me in a good direction, although the experience was alienating." Lasker's challenge was to make paintings that were self-reflexive; work that stressed itself as a material object, yet also engaged the metaphor of picture making. Smith too while in Berlin was making work with quite different concerns to that of his German painter colleagues; with Markus Lüpertz, Georg Baselitz, Jörg Immendorff, A R Penck, Rainer Fetting, Walter Dahn and others in one Neo-expressionist or *Neue Wilden* camp, and Albert Oehlen, Werner Büttner and Martin Kippenberger in another distinct grouping of *infants terribles*.

While Lasker and Smith take two different routes, they are dealing with different elaborations of a general problematic. They brightly challenge us to join with them in experiencing the inherent tension of their language, both introducing elements that lead to a sort of fragmentation of the aesthetic experience. Lasker breaks up language into its constituent parts, whereas Smith seems to be more interested in the glue that holds these parts together.

Neither artist proposes particular associations or metaphors, and while they clearly adhere to certain rules their approach is not systems based like Sol LeWitt and others. For both artists, a dialectic of the intuitive and the formal creates a dialogue that results in a mark-making which is at the same time conscious and unconscious in that automatic marks are consciously placed in predetermined areas. These recurring motifs act as structural components, performing formal, aesthetic roles but have no function as signifiers of meaning. Lasker has discussed the issue of signs and marks in relation to his work: "The most exciting paintings for me are the ones where you cannot really specifically discuss the sign, but you know you are dealing with something which marks something." This ambiguity and paradox in the exploration of the uncertain boundaries between sign and object is something surely Lasker owes in some part to the teaching of the influential Richard Artschwager at Cal Arts.

Whereas Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns famously through their introduction of material from outside of painting challenged the purity of both painting and our experience, Lasker and Smith achieve this through painterly means. Use of colour is a further link between Lasker and Smith with their restricted palette (with colours often seeming to work against each other formally) and use of flat areas of colour; their strong graphic sense also brings to mind artists as diverse as Piet Mondrian and Robert Motherwell. Impasto, often stucco-like, too is important to both artists. In Smith's new 'fold' paintings it serves to create what appears as a sort of powerful, spiritual discordant wound, a dynamic antithesis to the quiescent field. In Lasker's case, his cast-like gestural, sculptural forms are placed with deceptive, almost destructive randomness into a new ordered context. As Lasker remarks: "my works can become dialectically self-destructive, such as when I set up a pattern and then disrupt it with an aggressive painting gesture". It is as if both artists are attempting to test their use of language by rupturing it.

The oil studies by Lasker in this exhibition provide an opportunity to enjoy a vital stage in this artist's creative process. Often starting with a small drawing, Lasker then creates a study in oil which may later become a larger painting. Changes in composition and colour are frequently introduced as the image is transferred to a larger plane. His approach is work intensive and he famously only produces six to ten large paintings annually. Similarly Smith's labour-intensive process has been described by Ciarán Bennett: "paintings often take months to complete... layer upon layer, surface upon surface... a process which by contemporary standards is almost medieval... allows him to control every aspect of the process and determine the exact nature of the balances and interfaces of the eventual surface". Yet neither artist's paintings possess any sense of being overworked, on the contrary they appear to have been effortlessly brought forth.

The work of these two artists can be broadly characterized as a means of elucidating both the disparity and the relationship between ideas and the physical world. The infinitely fascinating tension behind such an aspiration is perhaps most likely what drives them to follow so fervently their chosen paths. Ultimately, in the painting of Lasker and Smith, disparate elements are united to form a most complex polymorphic pictorial reality in a re-invention of traditional easel painting; their achievement in combining such seemingly discordant elements and making them function should not be underestimated.

John Daly



Jonathan Lasker

“My images are very wilful, containing a certain element of violation. I’ll set up one visual system and then attack it with another type of mark that partially obliterates the preceding statement. This effects a kind of condensation of events - of one visual system overwhelming another - within one painting.”

Untitled

oil on paper, 1987

12.7 x 17.1 cm

(S-12:25)



Study for *Primordial Teenage*

oil on paper, 1987

12.7 x 17.1 cm

(S-12:26)

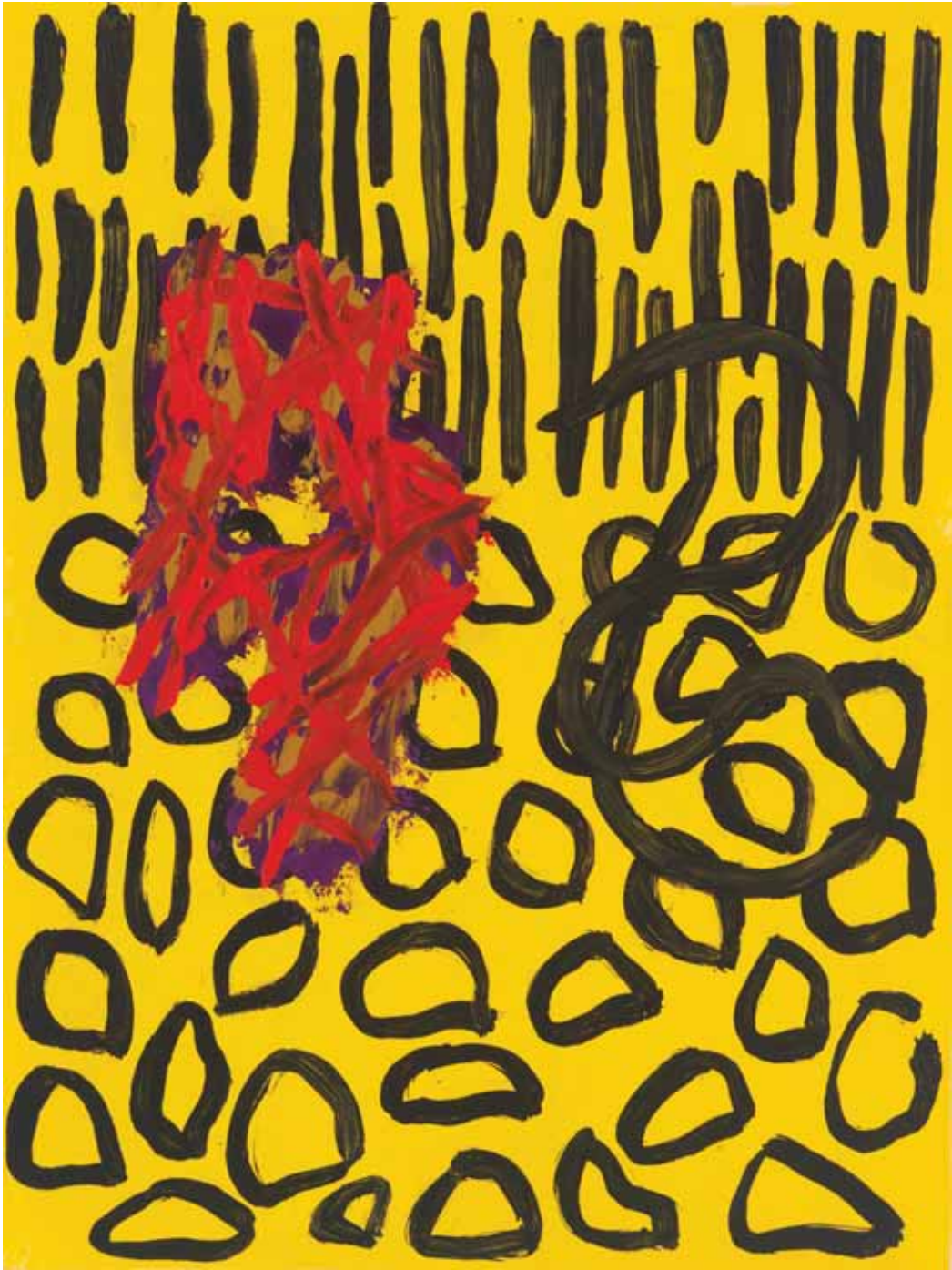


Untitled

oil on paper, 1988

17.1 x 12.7 cm

(S-18.2)

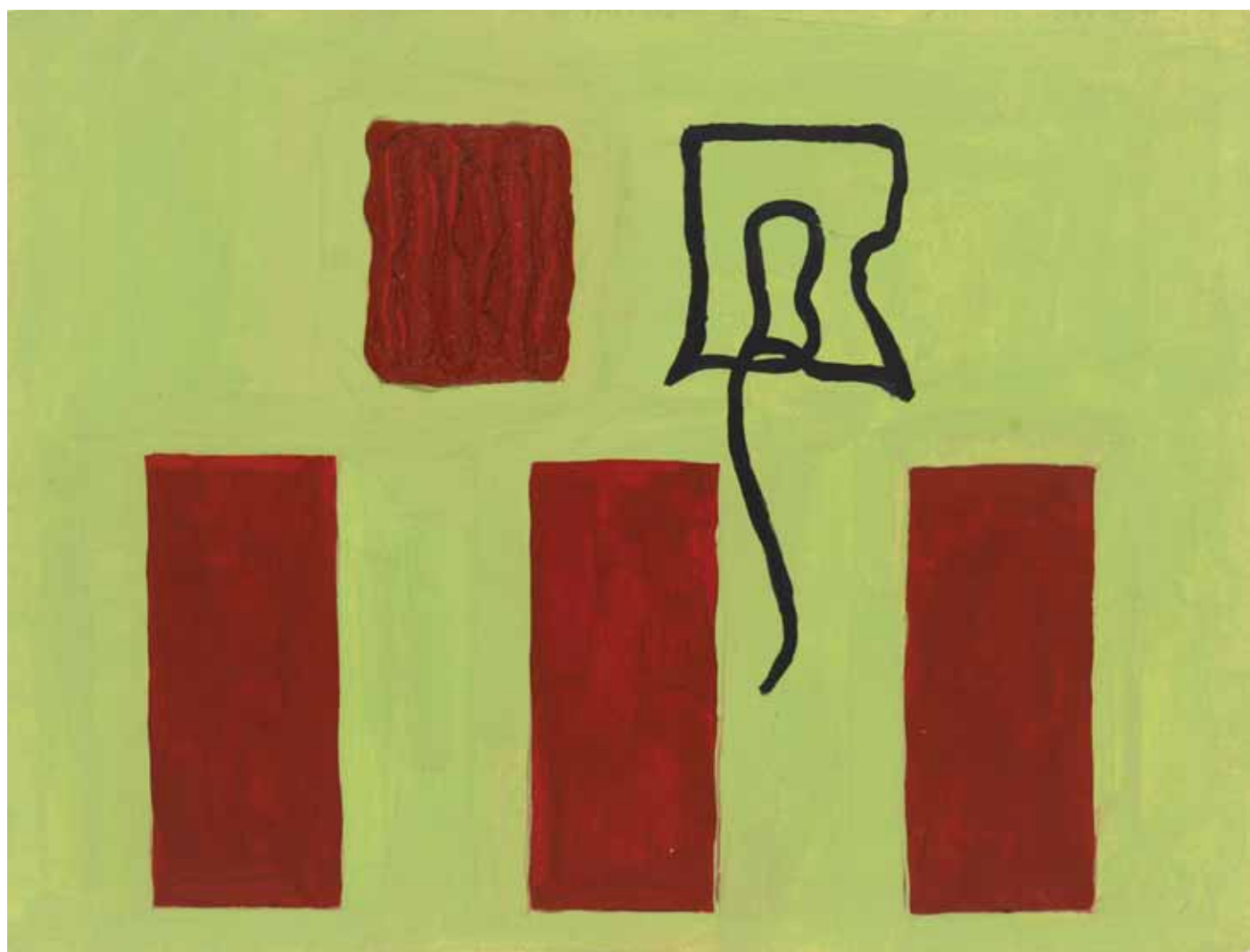


Study for After Right and Wrong

oil on paper, 1988

12.7 x 17.1 cm

(S-18.3)



Untitled

oil on paper, 1988

17.1 x 12.7 cm

(S-18.11)



Untitled

oil and ballpoint pen on paper, 1989

12.7 x 17.1 cm

(S-21.1)





John Noel Smith

“Painterly substance is an integral part of my work, whether I’m using it to create a rigorous space or counter-pointing that with a more amorphous use of colour and paint. My concern is to use the full range of this physical substance of paint.”

Fold I

oil on canvas, 2010
30 x 60 cm



Fold II

oil on canvas, 2010
30 x 60 cm



Fold III

oil on canvas, 2010
30 x 60 cm



Fold IV

oil on canvas, 2010
30 x 60 cm



Fold V

oil on canvas, 2010
30 x 60 cm



Fold VI

oil on canvas, 2010
30 x 60 cm



Fold VII

oil on canvas, 2010
60 x 120 cm



Fold VIII

oil on canvas, 2010
60 x 120 cm





Jonathan Lasker was born in 1948 in New Jersey, USA, and attended the School of Visual Arts in New York (1975-77), followed by a year at The California Institute of Arts (CalArts) in 1977.

Since the early 1980s, Lasker has been a significant figure in the international art world. His work deals with balance and constraint, examining the language of painting and questioning the processes that underly it. A major retrospective of Lasker's work was held at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, Spain, in 2003 and his paintings, drawings and graphic works are included in important art museums worldwide.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 *Studies in Paint: Jonathan Lasker and John Noel Smith*, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2010 Recent Paintings, L.A. Louver, California, USA
- 2009 Galleri Lars Bohman, Stockholm, Sweden
- 2008 Portland Art Museum, Oregon, USA
- 2008 Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin, Germany
- 2007 Galerie Sabine Knust, Munich, Germany
- 2007 *Studies for Paintings*, Timothy Taylor Gallery, London, England
- 2007 Cheim and Read, New York, USA
- 2006 Galerie Alain Noirhomme, Brussels, Belgium
- 2006 Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg, Austria
- 2005 Kunsthallen Brandts, Klædefabrik, Denmark
- 2005 Pori Art Museum, Pori, Finland
- 2005 Galleria Cardi Co, Milan, Italy
- 2004 Timothy Taylor Gallery, London, England
- 2003 Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin, Germany

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| 2003 | Palacio de Velazquez, Museo Nacional
Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Spain | 1997-98 | Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Germany;
Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Germany;
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam,
Netherlands; Kunstverein St. Gallen im
Kunstmuseum, Switzerland |
| 2003 | Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen,
Düsseldorf, Germany | | |
| 2003 | Sperone Westwater, New York, USA | | |
| 2003 | Timothy Taylor Gallery, London, England | 1997 | Galerie Velge et Noirhomme,
Brussels, Belgium |
| 2002 | Galerie Kienzle und Gmeiner,
Berlin, Germany | 1997 | Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, France |
| 2002 | Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin, Germany | 1997 | Galerie Kienzle und Gmeiner,
Berlin, Germany |
| 2002 | Galerie Wang, Oslo, Norway | 1997 | Galleria Milleventi, Turin, Italy |
| 2001 | Galleri Lars Bohman, Stockholm, Sweden | 1996 | Sperone Westwater, New York, USA |
| 2000 | Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, France | 1995 | Soledad Lorenzo, Madrid, Spain |
| 1999 | Sperone Westwater, New York, USA | 1995 | L.A. Louver Gallery, Los Angeles, USA |
| 1998 | Timothy Taylor Gallery, London, England | 1994 | Galerie Buchmann, Basel, Switzerland |
| 1998 | Centre Nicolas Pomel, Association Art
Contemporain, Issoire, France | 1994 | Galleri Lars Bohman, Stockholm, Sweden |
| 1998 | Soledad Lorenzo, Madrid, Spain | 1994 | Bravin Post Lee, New York, USA |
| | | 1993 | Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art,
Rotterdam, Netherlands |

- 1993 Rhona Hoffman, Chicago, USA
- 1993 Galerie Bernd Kluser, Munich, Germany
- 1993 Sperone Westwater, New York, USA
- 1992 Institute of Contemporary Art,
University of Pennsylvania, USA
- 1992 Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, France
- 1992 Baumgartner Gallery, Washington, USA
- 1991 Gian Enzo Sperone, Rome, Italy
- 1991 Schmidt Markow Gallery, St Louis, USA
- 1991 Annette Gmeiner, Stuttgart, Germany
- 1991 Lars Bohman, Stockholm, Sweden
- 1991 Sperone Westwater, New York, USA
- 1990 Michael Werner, Cologne, Germany
- 1990 Anders Tornberg, Lund, Sweden
- 1989 Massimo Audiello, New York, USA
- 1988 Massimo Audiello, New York, USA
- 1988 Gian Enzo Sperone, Rome, Italy
- 1987 Michael Werner, Cologne, Germany
- 1987 Anders Tornberg, Lund, Sweden
- 1986 Michael Werner, Cologne, Germany
- 1986 Tibor De Nagy, New York, USA
- 1986 Massimo Audiello, New York, USA
- 1984 Annette Gmeiner, Kirchzarten, Germany
- 1984 Tibor De Nagy, New York, USA
- 1981 Landmark Gallery, New York, USA
- 1981 Gunnar Kaldewey, Düsseldorf, Germany

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Albright Knox Art Gallery, New York, USA;
Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama, USA;
The Broad Art Foundation, California, USA;
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, USA;
David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, USA;
Fond National d'Art Contemporain, Paris, France;
Fond Regional d'Art Contemporain, Auvergne,
France; Fundacio La Caixa, Barcelona, Spain;
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Washington, USA; Laguna Art Museum, California,
USA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, USA;
List Visual Arts Center, MIT, USA; Misumi Collection,
Tokyo, Japan; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden;
Mudam Luxembourg: Musée d'Art Moderne
Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg; Musée National d'Art
Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France;

Museo de Arte Contemporaneo, Seville, Spain;
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid,
Spain; Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA;
Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany;
Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Neue Galerie,
Kassel, Germany; Orlando Museum of Art, Florida,
USA; Sammlung Goetz, Munich, Germany; Staatliche
Graphische Sammlung, Munich, Germany; Peter
Stuyvesant Stichting, Amsterdam, Netherlands;
Wacoal Art Center, Tokyo, Japan; Whitney Museum
of American Art, New York, USA



Born in Dublin in 1952, John Noel Smith attended Dun Laoghaire School of Art followed by postgraduate studies in Berlin. He lived in Berlin for twenty two years where he was an important member of its vibrant art community, returning to Ireland in 2002. He is a member of Aosdána, and a major survey exhibition, the Nissan art project, was held at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Gallagher Gallery, Dublin, Ireland in 2002. Long regarded as one of Ireland's foremost contemporary painters, this artist's work forms part of important public, private and corporate collections across the world.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 *Studies in Paint: Jonathan Lasker and John Noel Smith*, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2010 *Éigse 30-Year Retrospective*, VISUAL Centre for Contemporary Art, Carlow, Ireland
- 2009 *Pandect*, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2008 J. Cacciola Gallery, New York, USA
- 2008 *New Paintings*, Wexford Vocational College, Wexford, Ireland
- 2008 *The Painted Path*, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2008 Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast, Northern Ireland
- 2007 *Liliform*, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2007 *Substrata* (with Sean Shanahan and Charles Tyrell), Solstice Arts Centre, Navan, Ireland
- 2006 *Inaugural*, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2005 *Éigse*, Carlow Arts Festival, Ireland
- 2004 *In the Time of Shaking: Irish Artists for Amnesty International*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin

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|-----------|---|------|---|
| 2004 | Berlinische Galerie State Museum of Modern Art, Photography and Architecture, Berlin, Germany | 1991 | Galerie Lars Bohman, Stockholm, Sweden |
| 2003 | <i>Colour Chart</i> , Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast, Northern Ireland | 1990 | Royal Hospital Kilmainham, (Irish Museum of Modern Art), Dublin |
| 2002 | Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) Gallery, Dublin, Ireland | 1989 | Galerie Eleni Koroneou, Athens, Greece |
| 1997-2004 | Green On Red Gallery, Dublin, Ireland | 1989 | Galleri Clemens, Aarhus, Denmark |
| 1996 | Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin, Ireland | 1989 | Galleri Lars Bohman (Galleri 16), Stockholm, Sweden |
| 1996 | Galerie Grosskinski Brummer, Karlsruhe, Germany | 1988 | Gallerie Folker Skulima, Berlin Germany |
| 1996 | Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, Germany | 1986 | Galleri Clemens, Aarhus, Denmark |
| 1994 | Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, Germany | 1986 | Galeri Folker Skulima, Berlin, Germany |
| 1994 | Galerie Neher, Essen, Germany | 1985 | Galeri Leger, Malmö, Sweden |
| 1993 | Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, Germany | 1984 | Galleri Wallner, Malmö, Sweden |
| 1992 | Galerie Biemolds, Groningen, Holland | 1982 | Peacock Theatre Gallery, Dublin, Ireland |
| 1993 | DIN Haus Der Normung, Berlin, Germany | 1980 | Triskel Arts Centre, Cork, Ireland |
| 1992 | Galleri Leger, Malmö, Sweden | 1978 | Project Arts Centre, Ireland |
| 1991 | Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, Germany | | |

PLATE LIST

JONATHAN LASKER

Untitled P11
oil on paper, 1987
12.7 x 17.1 cm, (S-12-25)

Study for Primordial Teenage P13
oil on paper, 1987
12.7 x 17.1 cm, (S-12-26)

Untitled P15
oil on paper, 1988
17.1 x 12.7 cm, (S-18-2)

Study for After Right and Wrong P17
oil on paper, 1988
12.7 x 17.1 cm, (S-18-3)

Untitled P19
oil on paper, 1988
17.1 x 12.7 cm, (S-18-11)

Untitled P21
oil and ballpoint pen on paper, 1989
12.7 x 17.1 cm, (S-21-1)

JOHN NOEL SMITH

Fold I P25
oil on canvas, 2010
30 x 60 cm

Fold II P27
oil on canvas, 2010
30 x 60 cm

Fold III P29
oil on canvas, 2010
30 x 60 cm

Fold IV P31
oil on canvas, 2010
30 x 60 cm

Fold V P33
oil on canvas, 2010
30 x 60 cm

Fold VI P35
oil on canvas, 2010
30 x 60 cm

Fold VII P37
oil on canvas, 2010
60 x 120 cm

Fold VIII P39
oil on canvas, 2010
60 x 120 cm

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oil on paper, 1988, 17·1 x 12·7 cm, (S-18·11)