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For Immediate Release:

ORIGIN STORY

Michael Rosch: Recent Paintings | Ned Smyth: Ceramics and Mosaics 1977–86

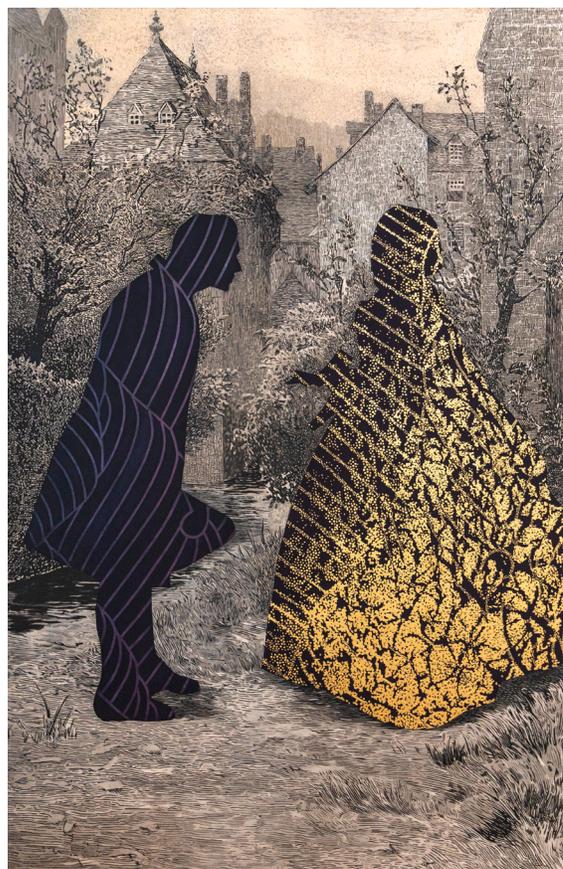
Eric Firestone Gallery | 4 Newtown Lane | East Hampton, New York

May 26 – June 25, 2023

Opening Reception: May 26, 6 PM–8 PM

Eric Firestone Gallery is pleased to announce *Origin Story*, a pairing of recent paintings by Michael Rosch, along with ceramics and mosaics from the 1970s and 80s by Ned Smyth. The two artists look to origins and sources that run counter to the zeitgeist, art world trends, and their own preconceptions.

Smyth and Rosch both live and work on the East End of Long Island. The paintings of Rosch are based on the montage of precise vintage book illustrations with silhouetted and boldly colored and patterned figural interventions. Smyth's ceramics and mosaics reflect the beginning of the Pattern and Decoration movement: palm capitals and wall reliefs, complex mosaics depicting existential dramas between humans and nature. Several works on exhibit are collaborations between Ned Smyth and artist Brad Davis. They were originally shown in a 1977 installation *The Garden* at Holly Solomon Gallery, New York.



Michael Rosch | *Stood Before Her* | 2022

Oil on canvas

80h x 52w in

About ten years ago, painter and sculptor Michael Rosch commissioned a new website documenting his artwork archive and history.

When the project was complete, he had an unexpected reaction to seeing his entire history in digital format, readily available to scroll through in minutes. He found this unsatisfying and at odds with the true experience of looking at art. He decided to not launch the website and deliberately limit his online presence.

At this time, he also began questioning everything he had formerly taken for granted about his own work, and long-held belief systems about painting. He had been working for many years as a gestural abstract painter, who had no interest in narrative. He began to consider all of the things he could change about his work and process. Could he use small brushes, a neutral, tonal palette,

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and 19th Century sources? At Boston University, where he studied in 1979, he had been trained in Old Master techniques, but after this, the art world of the time discouraged leaning into art history, in favor of a strict formalism.

Rosch started collecting and finding vintage and antique books that had been discarded. He was especially drawn to novels written by authors such as Balzac, Rousseau, and Walter Scott. These volumes were printed in an era before photography changed publishing and often contained detailed illustrations. Rosch began making collages. On top of the illustrations—he preferred those made by “journeymen” illustrators as opposed to artists with highly developed personal styles—he would superimpose broad figural forms cut from patterned paper. He liked the cognitive dissonance and resolution created by these juxtapositions.

The collages gradually became source material for large-scale oil paintings. Rosch would meticulously translate them: a process which was more about planning, and time-based as opposed to his intuitive gestural abstractions. It was a way of working that went against his nature as an artist, or at least his preconceptions. With this body of work, Rosch considered if he could remove ego from painting.

The resulting paintings employ fine brushwork, detailing the original illustrations—often interiors—with broad saturated and patterned color areas defining figures in much larger scale than the “illustrated” space. They are like strange ritual enactments and takeovers, beautifully mysterious in a way that makes the viewer question exactly what they are, and how they were made.

Ned Smyth is a sculptor whose early work came out of minimalism. Working as a carpenter, as well as looking at the repetition of simple units in the work of Frank Stella, led him to cast 2 x 4s in concrete. These were installed in different configurations—leaning, standing, flat—in order to activate architectural spaces. The cast concrete slabs and panels gradually developed into highly simplified versions of arches, columns, and altarpieces. His close artist circles included Gordon Matta Clark, Jene Highstein, Richard Nonas, and Mary Heilmann.

Smyth is the son of a Renaissance art historian and spent much of his childhood living in Italy and being taken to temples, museums, and churches. He ultimately wanted to make work that touched people and reflected his original experiences with art. He began to embrace these sources. His first exhibition with Holly Solomon created a cloistered space with the repetition of unadorned concrete forms; it was minimalist but also reflected his interest in medieval art. In the years that followed, Smyth began covering the cast concrete columns in mosaic, with elaborate palm mosaic capitals. These were sometimes installed with fabric wall coverings.

Smyth’s sculptures and installations became associated with the origins of the Pattern and Decoration movement in the mid-1970s. He showed with Holly Solomon Gallery, and credits Solomon, who also showed the work of Kim MacConnel and Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, as an instrumental supporter and collaborator in the burgeoning P&D movement.

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Smyth went back to his origins, embracing the idea of creating, with his installations, a space for reverence for nature and culture. This was the impetus behind his collaboration with Brad Davis: *The Garden* installation. Smyth was considering reverent spaces which were not necessarily associated with one religion, and the garden was an original reverent space.

The two artists sought to remove the associations of the gallery as a commercial space, creating instead one for reflection. On view will be work from this series, including ceramic columns and wall reliefs that were used as

planters. They are whimsical and painted with floral and vegetal patterns, shaped with spiraling and circular forms. They recognize and celebrate the decorative traditions, but also play off minimalism in the repetition of shapes and intervals. They are postmodern in their attitude: nothing is off-limits. Smyth's mosaics from about a decade later are similarly permissive and elaborate. In them, existential dramas play out. A man floats and tumbles through the sky into a garden; a sea creature threatens another man. Sculptor Ugo Rondinone has stated:

Ned Smyth is an artist whose work connects us with our sources in the natural world—its beauty and terrors and mysteries and connotations. His palm tree sculptures are not only an investigation of the mutable potential of sculpture as both a physical medium and a site of rich cultural disclosure in art, but also a celebration of life; its seasons and rhythms, its plants and stones with which we share the planet and our own wildlife.



Ned Smyth | *Confronting the Watery Beast* | 1986
Stone, glass, gold mosaic on wood
36h x 46w in

About the Artists

Ned Smyth (b. 1948) lives and works on Shelter Island, New York, and has been exhibiting his work since 1973. His work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Hirshhorn Museum, PS1, the Venice Biennale, Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Galerie Rudolf Zwirner, 112 Greene Street, and Holly Solomon Gallery. In 1977, Ned Smyth was awarded his first public art installation, a fountain for the Governmental Services Administration in the US Virgin Islands. From 1985 through 2005, Smyth focused solely

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on public art. He has completed over thirty large-scale public projects in locations across the United States and abroad. His work is in public collections including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY; the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA; and the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany.

Michael Rosch (b. 1959) studied in 1979 at Boston University. He moved to the East End of Long Island in 1976 to attend Southampton College, receiving his BFA in 1980. He served as Professor of Art at the Long Island University, Southampton Campus from 1990–2005. He also worked as assistant curator and editor to Henry Geldzahler from 1987–93. His work has been exhibited at Islip Art Museum, Islip, NY, LongHouse Reserve, East Hampton, NY, Guild Hall, East Hampton, NY, and Avram Gallery, Long Island University, Southampton, NY. He lives in East Hampton, NY with his wife, sculptor Aya Miyatake.

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For further information and images, contact: press@ericfirestonegallery.com