

Artist Profile – Hughie Lee-Smith

b. 1915 Eustis, FL; d. 1999 Albuquerque, NM

Lee-Smith was born in Florida, a product of both the Great Migration and the Great Depression, as well as the New Negro Movement-Harlem Renaissance. All three of these would impact Lee-Smith's work greatly as he was influenced by the issues surrounding them. Lee-Smith became one of the first black students to receive a scholarship to the Cleveland School of Art where he found his interest in neoclassical painting and architecture. After graduating, Lee-Smith worked for the Works Progress Administration as a muralist and painted pro-American pieces during World War II. Shortly after, Lee-Smith attended Wayne State University in Detroit, majoring in their art education program. After obtaining his art education degree, Lee-Smith went on to teach at numerous colleges and art associations as well as continuing to work on his own art. Lee-Smith was drafted into the Navy in 1943 where he served until the end of World War II, afterwards obtaining a teaching job at a school for veterans in Chicago.

Although Lee-Smith's later works focus more on light and architecture, his early works were figurative paintings and prints. Because African Americans were either not portrayed or negatively portrayed in art, colored artists had to constantly fight back at these representations. His early works discussed his role as a black artist in a white society, and often had social justice themes. Lee-Smith's later work is based on his practical understanding of the way light plays on surfaces, making his work similar to Edward Hopper's American modernist paintings. Lee-Smith's paintings are meant to evoke feelings of anxiety and hope while bringing up issues of race, class, and gender. His landscapes involve illumination, architecture, and a sense of emptiness and vacancy, meant to raise questions with no easy answers. Lee-Smith's works are ambiguous in that the viewer is unsure whether they are inside of the scene or looking into it from the outside.

The feelings of vacancy in Lee-Smith's work relate to his desire to portray his internal world instead of what one sees in everyday life. Isolation and oppression are modernist issues that he uses in his works and he expresses them by using realism with a metaphysical quality. Lee-Smith's paintings are not meant to be a specific place, but because of their generic ambiguity viewers feel as if the space is familiar to them. These landscapes and architecture paintings are made to make the human figure subordinate to the environment and create a sense of mystery, viewers are unsure what the buildings are for or if anyone is living in them.

In 1965, Lee-Smith was elected as an associate member to the National Academy of Design, and then received a full membership in 1967. Again in 1967, Lee-Smith became the second African American to receive full membership into the National Academy of Design in New York. Throughout his life Lee-Smith had constant exhibition opportunities, and won several prizes and awards for his prints, drawings, and paintings. In 1992 Lee-Smith was diagnosed with prostate cancer but continued to work on his paintings until his death in 1999. His works encompassed many themes such as aloneness, isolation, mystery, identity, race, and much more while examining light, architecture, and the human figure.

An example of Lee-Smith's figurative work is titled *Portrait of a Boy (1)*, and shows his style of using thick and textured brush strokes. *Boy with Tire (2)* and *Spectators (3)* are

examples of Lee-Smith's later work when the landscape and architecture become just as important as the human figures.



1



2



3

