

PRESS RELEASE

Josh Smith
Mind Child

September 25 – December 11, 2026

Opening Reception, Thursday, September 24, 6 – 8 pm

Artist Talk, Josh Smith & Dr. Raphael Gygax, Thursday, September 24, 6.30 pm

Waldmannstrasse 6, Zurich

Galerie Eva Presenhuber is pleased to present Josh Smith's (*1976) fifth solo exhibition in Zurich. One of the defining painters of his generation, Smith has developed a multifaceted body of work over more than two decades, characterized by seriality, repetition, and an ongoing engagement with the possibilities of painting. At the center of the exhibition is his recent body of work *Destiny* (2025), which focuses on the figure of the Grim Reaper and connects historical pictorial traditions with a contemporary visual language. The new works are complemented by paintings from 2024 as well as monotypes, works in oil on paper, and jewelry. In parallel, the gallery presents a focused selection of works by Dieter Roth, whose artistic approach has long been an important reference for Smith.

At the center of the *Destiny* (2025) series is the Grim Reaper, the personification of death with a scythe that has been widespread since the late Middle Ages. Its attribute refers to the idea that death symbolically "harvests" human beings like ripe grain—an image rooted in agriculture. For centuries, the Grim Reaper has been an enduring figure in Western art and cultural history—as an embodiment of death, a memento mori, or a protagonist of the Dance of Death. Smith removes this iconographic tradition from its historical context and transposes it into the contemporary urban environment. His Grim Reaper rides a bicycle, moves through the streets of New York, or encounters us like a casual apparition of everyday life. At the same time, the figure points to its contemporary presence within skate, punk, and tattoo culture, as well as a visual pop culture in which death has long since become an icon that is as familiar as it is ambivalent. Moving between art-historical allegory and contemporary visual culture, the Grim Reaper oscillates between existential symbolism and pop-cultural figure. It is precisely this ambivalence that gives the paintings their distinctive tension.

Many of the paintings begin with photographic studies, which Josh Smith digitally collages into multilayered compositions before translating them into paintings. In the painting process, these source images are not simply reproduced but further developed through layering, shifts, and visible brushstrokes. In its gestural immediacy, Smith's painting stands in the tradition of an expressive figurative modernism, while consistently developing it through a contemporary visual world. Reworking and deliberate ruptures give the paintings their physical presence and distinctive expressive character. The result is a form of painting in which conceptual precision and gestural immediacy form a characteristically charged unity.

Alongside the *Destiny* paintings, the exhibition presents a selection of works from 2024 whose painterly language at times has a distinctly print-like quality. Stamps and stencils become painterly tools, establishing a direct connection to Smith's extensive graphic work. The boundaries between painting and printmaking are thus deliberately rendered permeable: processes of reproduction and repetition are transferred to the making of the individual painting. This exchange between media continues in the monotypes and oil-on-paper works on view. Some take up motifs from *Destiny*, while others revisit recurring motifs such as palm trees, revealing how Smith allows pictorial ideas to circulate between different techniques and supports.

Repetition and seriality are central principles of Smith's artistic practice. From his early paintings, in which he made his own name the subject of the image, to palm trees, fish, or skeletons, certain motifs and processes recur across different bodies of work. This repetition, however, does not serve to establish a recognizable signature style; rather, it forms the basis of an ongoing painterly experiment. Each painting constitutes an independent engagement with motif, color, composition, and gesture. The series therefore does not describe a sequence of nearly identical images, but an open-ended process in which each painting tests new possibilities of the medium.

With the *Stage Paintings*, Smith extends painting into space. The canvas becomes part of a stage-like setting in which image and presentation are inseparably connected. In terms of motif, the works relate to the body of work in which Smith repeatedly painted his own name over the course of many years. By allowing this recurring motif to occupy the exhibition space itself, the *Stage Paintings* reflect on questions of authorship, repetition, and identity. A vitrine containing jewelry works adds another facet to the exhibition and at the same time underscores the openness of a practice that is not limited to the medium of painting.

The parallel presentation with Dieter Roth points less to formal similarities than to a shared understanding of art. Both artists conceive of repetition not as the repetition of the same, but as a productive method through which each work generates new differences. For Roth as for Smith, artistic practice thus becomes an ongoing process: motifs, materials, and processes are taken up, varied, and questioned anew. It is precisely in this persistence of repetition that the possibility arises to produce something different each time.

Dr. Raphael Gygax

Josh Smith was born in 1976 in Okinawa, Japan (his father was in the military) and, after a number of relocations, grew up mostly in East Tennessee. He has lived in New York since 1998. He has had several solo exhibitions in the United States and abroad at institutions including The Drawing Center, New York, NY, US (2024); Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, DE (2016); Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma, Rome, IT (2015); The Brant Foundation, Greenwich, US (2011); Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, Geneva, CH (2009); De Hallen Haarlem, Haarlem, NL (2009); and MUMOK, Vienna, AT (2008). Recent group exhibitions include Postcards from the Future, PoMo, Trondheim, NO (2025); Day for Night: New American Realism (in association with the Aïsthi Foundation), Palazzo Barberini, Rome, IT (2024); Motion/New Perspectives, de la Cruz Collection, Miami, FL, US (2023 – 2024); Before Tomorrow – Astrup Fearnley Museet 30 Years, Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo, NO (2023); Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age, Museum Brandhorst, Munich, DE (2019-20); The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, US (2014-15); The Painting Factory: Abstraction after Warhol, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA, US (2012); Le Printemps de Septembre, Toulouse, FR (2011); ILLUMInations, Venice Biennale, Venice, IT (2011); and The Generational: Younger Than Jesus, New Museum, New York, NY, US (2009). His works are held in numerous public collections including the Centre Pompidou, Paris, FR; MUMOK, Vienna, AT; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, US; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, US.

Dr. Raphael Gygax is a Swiss art historian, curator, and writer. Following many years as curator and head of publications at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich (2003–19), he served as Deputy Director of the Department of Fine Arts at Zurich University of the Arts and as Head of the Bachelor Fine Arts program (2019–23). Since 2023, Gygax has been working internationally as an independent curator, with projects in Chicago, Locarno, Berlin, Vienna, and Luxembourg. In 2024, he was appointed Curator-at-Large at Kunsthau Zürich, and in 2026, Curator for Special Projects at Kunstmuseum Bern.

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