

Sink or Swim

Mavis Smith, (b. 1956)

2004

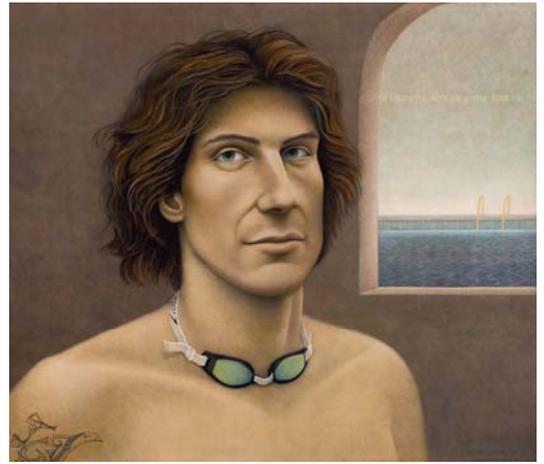
egg tempera on gesso panel

H. 26 x W. 28 inches

James A. Michener Art Museum

Museum purchase funded by Lorraine

Nevens Greenberg



“I am hopelessly fascinated by the quirky and off-beat, especially when it seeps into what appears on the surface to be banal everyday life.”

“I want the viewer to be drawn right into the image...For me, the use of a slightly distorted perspective is the most exciting part.”

-Mavis Smith

Looking Questions

- Who is this man?
- What is the man doing? Who or what is he looking at? Where is he standing?
- What appears to be on his arm?
- What do you see through the arched window?
- Are you looking at an outdoor or an indoor scene? What do you see that makes you say that?
- What do the words in the background say? Why would an artist put words in a painting?
- How does the man in the painting make you feel? Describe what you see that makes you say that.
- Describe the personality of the man in the painting. What can you tell about his character and mood?
- The artist, Mavis Smith, is interested in distorted views of people. How has she distorted the man in this painting? What kind of details can you find to support your opinion?
- What do you see in the foreground, middleground, and background of this painting?
- How has Mavis Smith composed, or arranged, this painting? What do we see? What don't we see?
- What does the expression “sink or swim” mean?
- What do you think the artist, Mavis Smith, is trying to say in this work?

About the Artist

Mavis Smith grew up in a typical suburban town in New Jersey, and has been drawing for as long as she can remember. When she was five years old, she started attending

Education Department, 2011

James A. Michener Art Museum, Copyright ©2011

art classes at the local community college. She later studied art and design at Pratt Institute in New York City, and after graduation spent a few years traveling through Europe. It was in Amsterdam that she met Monika Penders, a local children's television host, and they created their first book together, *Ik en Jij*.

Returning home to New York, Mavis continued to write and illustrate children's books. She is the illustrator of over seventy-five books for children, including *You Can't Smell a Flower with your Ear* by Joanna Cole, and the popular *Fluffy the Classroom Guinea Pig* series by Kate McMullan. She has written and illustrated 10 books of her own. Mavis illustrates her books in her home, and works on her paintings in her studio. Her books take her several weeks to complete, but while she is working on drawings to send to publishers, she frequently creates sketches of ideas for future paintings. She admits that her work as a book illustrator is filled with specific assignments and deadlines that have given her the self-discipline she needs to create fine art.

In recent years she has been concentrating on painting, with a particular interest in the ancient medium of egg tempera. She first learned about this art medium in 2001 when she attended a workshop taught by Koo Schadler. Through this process, the artist makes her own paint from a mixture of finely ground pigment, water, and diluted egg yolk. The application of the paint is tricky. Smith explains, "You apply layer upon layer of semi-transparent color to eventually build up this luminous paint surface." She enjoys the peaceful, meditative quality of working with egg tempera, even though the process is painstakingly slow and complicated.

Mavis Smith gets ideas for her images from film, music and books. She is also inspired by other artists, including Frida Kahlo, George deChirico, John Currin, and Ridley Howard. All of these artists share painterly styles and subject matter that embrace somewhat strange and mysterious worlds. Mavis Smith also feels her imagination is a very important part of her creative process. "Most of my subjects are real people," she said, " but once I am involved in the actual reverie of painting, my imagination tends to take over."

In *Sink or Swim*, Mavis Smith uses her painting process to gracefully tell a story that is mysterious and may lead to many questions. At first, the swimmer in the painting seems ordinary - until, upon closer inspection, the viewer notices a tattoo, a swimming pool, a ladder, and words floating across a pale colored surface. In some of her other paintings, bizarre elements such as gills on a human face, arrows through a smiling head, and overgrown fish in an aquarium, cause us to look more carefully. Her paintings balance a palette of pale colors and simple, broad surfaces with fascinating characters, and often-repeated text.

Mavis Smith lives in Solebury, Pennsylvania. She has exhibited in New York and Philadelphia, and has work in the permanent collection of the James A. Michener Art Museum in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

Mavis Smith and Collage

In addition to painting, Mavis Smith creates collages. She selects colored swatches from magazine photographs, and intricately cuts and places them to create images. She uses the colored pieces to create gradations of shading, giving the subjects in her artworks depth, dimension and space. She spends hours selecting pieces of paper, choosing where they will be placed in the work, trimming them with tiny scissors, and gluing them down. She describes this process as “deliberate and sometimes tedious.” For Mavis Smith, collage is also a slow, meticulous process. Her collages are noted for their beautiful color harmonies and scale. Some of these works are over six feet wide.

The details in her collages are sparse but well thought out and placed – the contents of a Chinese food container, the pattern on a rug, and the intricate pattern of blades of grass. These details create strong moods in her works, and make the viewer spend time looking carefully at her art. “I’m interested in that little matchbox that happens to be poking out from the chair, that when you look closer...” The people Mavis Smith depicts in her collages are as mysterious and thought provoking as the people in her paintings. They are very imaginary. They stare out of the picture plane, challenging the viewer to guess who they are and what is going on.

Key Vocabulary

Egg tempera	Binder	Medium	Pigment	Collage
Atmosphere	Idiom	Illustration	Surrealism	Hyper surrealism
Inscriptions	Portrait	Imagination	Surface	Speech scrolls

Themes

The figure	Portraiture	Identity	Relationships	Narrative art
Time and place	The commonplace		Human character	Imagination

Compare and Contrast

Elementary

Leonardo DaVinci created a portrait of Cecilia Gallerani, called *Lady with an Ermine* in 1483 (www.muzeum.krakow.pl). How does his 15th century image compare with *Sink or Swim*? List as many similarities and differences as you can find.

Middle School

Mavis Smith was inspired by artists Jan Lipes (www.janlipes.com), Myles Cavanaugh (www.mylescavanaugh.com), and Jim Freeman (www.jvfreeman.com). Research their art on the Internet and form your own ideas about how their work influenced hers. Present your findings in written or visual form. Discuss color, form, theme, composition, technique, and subject matter.

High School

Mavis Smith draws inspiration from many artists, including the Latin born Frida Kahlo. Learn more about Frida Kahlo at www.philamuseum.org, and explore several Mavis Smith images at mavissmithart.com. Write a descriptive essay comparing the work of these two woman painters.

Research the art terms surrealism and hyper surrealism. What do you see in *Sink or Swim* that makes these terms apply to her work? What are some similarities between Mavis Smith and other artists working in these styles? Present your findings to your class in a visual display.

Related Visual Arts Projects

Elementary

Make your own egg tempera paint by mixing crushed chalk pastels with egg yolk and some water. Share colors with your classmates. Create a realistic or abstract painting with your invention.

Middle School

Create a portrait that incorporates the distortion of proportion and perspective to establish a specific mood or feeling.

High School

Egg tempera is a complex medium, but fun to explore. Using what you know about the medium, create a small work of art that incorporates egg tempera. The work may be realistic or abstract. The purpose of the exercise is to explore a new medium and understand its challenges.

Interdisciplinary Connections

Language Arts

Elementary

Mavis Smith is a children's book illustrator. Imagine the story in which the man depicted in *Sink or Swim* is the main character. Write the story, and enhance it with some illustrations of your own.

Middle School

"Sink or swim" is a common phrase, also known as an idiom. Research its meaning and origin. Write an essay describing a time in your life when you had to, metaphorically, sink or swim.

Mavis Smith's artwork has been described as theatrical. What do you see in *Sink or Swim* that makes you see theatrical qualities? Imagine that the main character in *Sink or Swim* comes to life. What would he say? What would he do? Improvise a monologue or skit that would help an

audience understand the character we see in the painting.

High School

Sink or Swim has an air of mystery and wonder that encourages the viewer to ask questions about the character and setting depicted in the image. Mavis Smith has used visual elements to communicate this mood. Write a short story incorporating the mood of this painting in your setting, creating a unique and powerful character, and a distinctive setting.

Artists through history have incorporated written words in their artworks. Some of the words appear in speech scrolls, like *The Annunciation to Saint Anne* by Bernhard Strigel, ca. 1505-1510 (www.museothyssen.org), and in modern comic books (www.moccan.org). Other works of art have inscriptions, common in ancient Roman art (www.metmuseum.org). Compare the use of words in these images with the words in *Sink or Swim*. How are the words in these images incorporated into the work? What role do they play in bringing meaning to the work? Create an original work of art incorporating language as a key element of your image.

Social Studies and Art History

Elementary

Create a timeline of portraits through history, emphasizing common people engaged in everyday activities, like swimming. Incorporate at least ten images in your timeline. Present it to your class, describing the common elements you discovered in each of the works of art.

Middle School

Create a chronology of at least ten painting techniques from the blown dust Caves at Lascaux to contemporary digital painting imagery. Create a visual display or power point that depicts the image and the technique used by the artist to create the image. Create a work of art of your own using a technique from another period in history.

High School

Egg tempera is said to date back to prehistoric times, and artists through the ages have used egg tempera to depict a variety of subject matter—religious, mythological, narrative, and autobiographical. Study the four images below. Write an essay that compares two of the works to *Sink or Swim*. Include composition, style, subject matter, color, format and theme in your analysis.

- Simone Martini (Italian, c. 1284-1344), *Madonna from the Annunciation*, 1340-1344 (State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia, www.hermitagemuseum.org)
- Sandro Botticelli (Italian, 1444-1510), *Birth of Venus*, c. 1485-86 (Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy, www.uffizi.com)
- Andrew Wyeth (American, 1917- 2009), *Christina's World*, 1948 (Museum of Modern Art, New York, www.MoMA.org)
- Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917- 2000), *The Library*, 1960 (National Gallery of American Art, Washington D.C., americanart.si.edu)

What is Egg Tempera?

Egg tempera is paint made from finely ground artist pigments, a binder of fresh egg yolks, and distilled water. Artists make a paste using powdered pigments and water, and then mix the paste with the yolk to create a creamy consistency.

Egg tempera is said to date back to prehistoric times, and artists through the ages have used egg tempera to depict a variety of subject matter. Byzantine manuscript illuminators of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are the first artists to record recipes for egg tempera. They listed egg whites and powdered pigment as the main ingredients. This mixture was brittle, and difficult to use on the paper and parchment of early books. These artists learned that the oil in the egg yolk produced a tougher, more flexible paint, so they started using the yolk instead of the white. Egg tempera took second place to oil paints when they were developed in the fifteenth century. Often, egg tempera was used as an underpainting, or first layer, on top of which artists would build up the surface of their painting with oils.

Egg tempera is one of the oldest and most versatile painting mediums. It is unaffected by humidity and temperature changes. It is durable. It is luminous. It does not darken with age as oil paint does. It dries rapidly, so artists can easily layer colors to achieve effects without having to wait for layers of paint to dry. They can also scrape off colors, which makes it easy for artists to correct their mistakes. Egg tempera is a translucent medium. Artists who use egg tempera gradually build layers of colors onto their prepared canvas or wood panel, so that eventually the surface of their artwork is complete. They start with a foundation of colors, and then paint layers become increasingly opaque and intense as the layers are applied. Egg tempera gives artists a capacity for fine detail.

Egg tempera paint cannot be stored, so the artist has to make fresh paint every time he or she has a painting session. Egg tempera works best when the eggs are freshest. Some egg tempera artists seek out their eggs from local farmers, so the eggs they get are very fresh. Egg tempera may spoil, and get very smelly. Some artists add bath salts, table salt, alcohol or bleach to their egg tempera to reverse the growth of bacteria in their tempera. Some artists pack their egg tempera in ice, to keep paint fresh while they are working, and to avoid unpleasant odors that may arise when working with raw eggs that are exposed to warm air.

Artists working in the egg tempera medium use a variety of tools to create desired effects. Egg tempera can be applied with paintbrushes, wherein artists use wet and dry brush techniques, glazing techniques, and washes of color. Egg tempera painters use paper and tape to mask out color areas. They spatter color with toothbrushes. They wipe on color with sponges, and apply minute details like facial hair and insect legs with dental picks.

For some, egg tempera is an extremely slow process, fraught with time and trouble. However, many tempera artists welcome the importance of experimentation and invention when working with egg tempera. Artist Patricia K. Kelly is more scientific. She keeps a color-mixing journal, where she records her experiments with pigments and binders. Mavis Smith's teacher Koo

Schadler said, “In spite of its reputation, I find it very flexible. I can work with precise line to create minute detail; I can splash and splatter and do every manner of faux finishing, all very loosely. I also love the layering – 40 or more distinct glazes of color in a day is possible. Try that in oil!”

Additional Resources:

The following resources were collected in December 2010:

- ArtLex, a comprehensive arts dictionary, www.artlex.com
- Artsbridge, public awareness about the arts, www.artsbridgeonline.com
- Jaeger-Smith, Erika, et. al. *An Evolving Legacy: twenty Years of Collecting at the James A. Michener Art Museum*. Doylestown, PA: JAMAM, 2009.
- James A. Michener Art Museum, www.MichenerArtMuseum.org
- Learn at the Michener, www.learn.michenerartmuseum.org
- Mavis Smith Art homepage, (content may be unsuitable for younger viewers) www.mavissmithart.com
- The Society of Tempera Painters, www.eggtempera.com
- Traditional Fine Arts Organization, arts education advocacy, www.tfaoi.com

Credits:

This teaching poster was supported by a grant from Target. Produced by the Education Department at the James A. Michener Art Museum. Written by Ruth Anderson, Assistant Curator of Education. Copyright © 2011, James A. Michener Art Museum.