

Ralston Fox Smith at Tracey Morgan Gallery, Asheville

Jeremy Phillips Mar 13, 2019 in Art Review



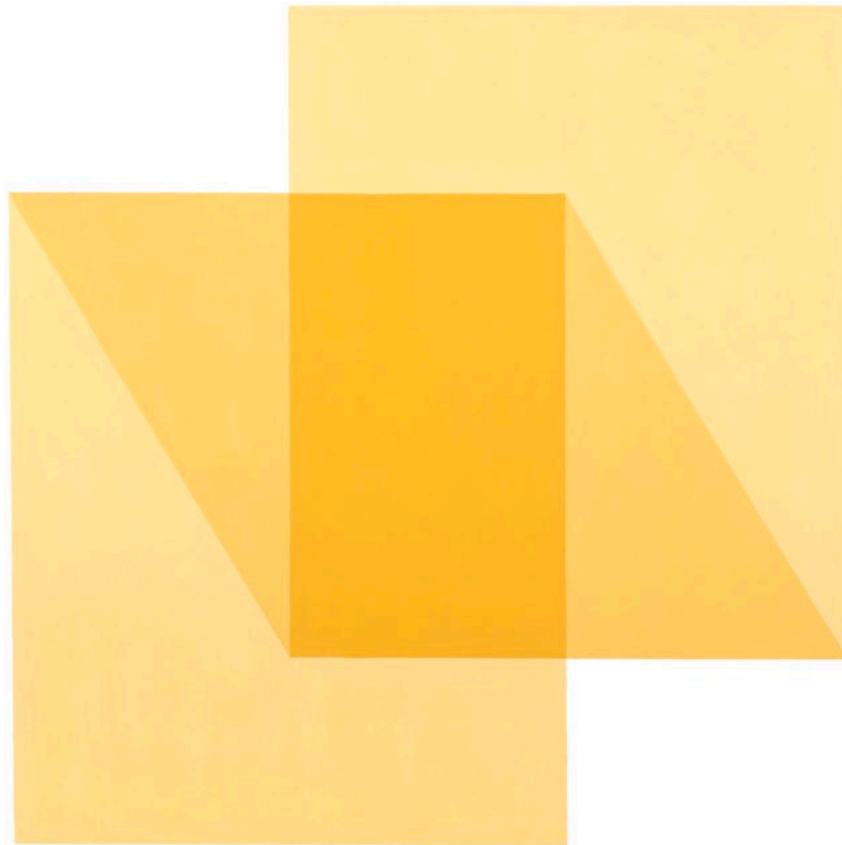
Ralston Fox Smith, *Therefore*, 2018; oil on canvas, 60 by 60 in. (All images courtesy of the artist and Tracey Morgan Gallery, Asheville.)

Asheville-based artist Ralston Fox Smith's current solo exhibition at Tracey Morgan Gallery, *Therefore*, represents the culmination of a turn towards geometric abstraction in his work that began to take shape a couple years ago. Portions of two 2017 exhibitions by Smith—*Furtherance* at the Pink Dog Gallery and *Transplants*, also at Tracey Morgan, both of which are

located in Asheville—revealed a decisive move away from his surreal and dreamlike landscapes, which had become increasingly symbolic and abstract.

Calling this exhibition *Therefore* implies a kind of argument, albeit with significant ambiguity. Does the work in this show come before or after the *therefore*? This title suggests such analytical questions, but the artworks themselves possess an emotional richness beyond their intellectual curiosities and visual tricks.

Geometric abstraction is not commonly associated with viewers' deep emotional experiences; such works are assumed to more often appeal to the intellect. Geometric works by Ellsworth Kelly, for example, may fascinate and please the mind as you contemplate their formal painterly aspects—feeling may have little to do with it. While there is plenty of formal play in Smith's new work, its emotional power is equally apparent. Especially in the largest work on view—a sixty-inch-square, gray-on-white painting also titled *Therefore*—there is a meditative gentleness and weighted stillness whose effect is like a satisfying exhaled breath.



Ralston Fox Smith, *Insight*, 2018; oil on canvas, 33 by 33 in.



In Smith's earlier works, the paint conveyed an overall evenness, characterized by monochromatic tones and subtle use of color. Few, if any, brushstrokes could be seen in Smith's application of oil paint, with shapes cleanly delineated. The artist's new work is also painted gently and precisely. Each painting shares a similar formal subject, which could be described as a sheer piece of fabric or paper that has been sharply folded, presenting an illusion of translucent depth on white canvas and creating three overlapping planes of deepening hues. The lightest shade represents a single layer, a mid-tone portion shows where two layers overlap, and the darkest tone indicates where three layers intersect. These techniques create an optical illusion that flips if you look long enough, and it works either way.

In addition to the ten oil paintings on view, two glowing light boxes enclosing painted layers of glass suggest similar visual effects. The exhibition also includes three sculptures formed out of flat metal sheets that have been cut and painted to create depth. These handsome illusions work best at a distance, but their finely textured metal finish and lusciously stained wooden bases showcase Smith's craftsmanship and attention to detail.

Many of these works, such as Smith's painting *Insight*, nod at the elaborate color theory first developed by Josef Albers during his time teaching at nearby Black Mountain College. Albers reminds us that "a color has many faces," and, in *Therefore*, Ralston Fox Smith has shown us his own.

*Ralston Fox Smith's solo exhibition **Therefore** remains on view at Tracey Morgan Gallery in Asheville, North Carolina, through April 6.*

<https://burnaway.org/ralston-fox-smith/>