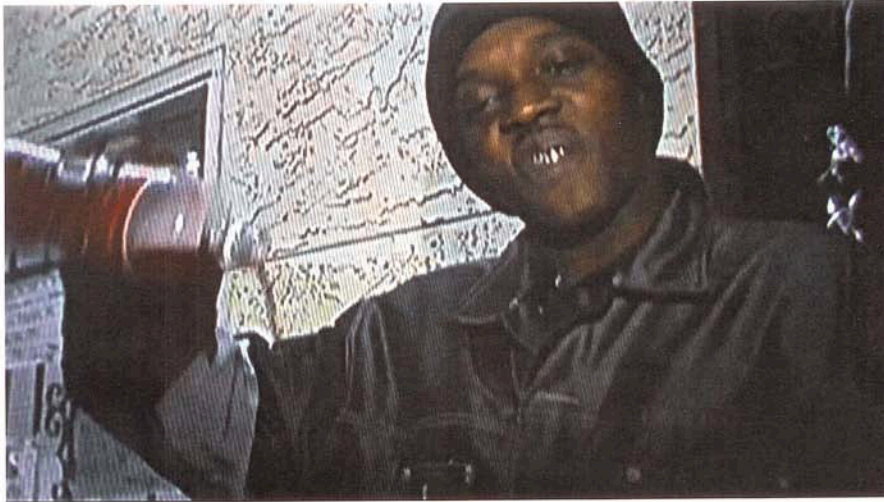


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Chris Sharp, "A complete rest," Kaleidoscope, Issue 10, Spring 2011

HIGHLIGHTS: MICHAEL E. SMITH



## A COMPLETE REST

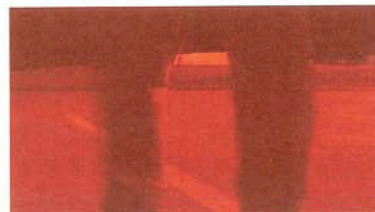
Like Robert Smithson at his grimmest and in the wake of Arte Povera's idealistic resistance, Detroit artist MICHAEL E. SMITH creates funereal constellations that depict our nightmarish condition of aftermath.

words by CHRIS SHARP

Above:  
*The Look of Love*, video still, 2010

Below:  
*Hammerpants*, video still, 2010

All images courtesy: the artist  
and Koch Oberhuber Wolff, Berlin



So much for T.S. Eliot's "fear in a handful of dust." Let me show you horror in a fishing hat, caked with red, heat-resistant rubber, nailed crown-flush to a wall. In a pair of gnarled black safety goggles, melted into something fascinatingly unrecognizable. In a fistful of blue Bic pens gruesomely fused together into a hand-like mass. Or finally, in a thin, boomerang-shaped piece of translucent yellow plastic in which two animal snouts have been imbedded.

These are but a few samples of the work of American artist Michael E. Smith. If what Smith does is marked by horror, that horror itself is the specific byproduct of a contemporary post-urban, as in post-apocalyptic, sublime. What is more, the horror of which Smith's practice speaks is compounded by the work's dual capacity both to appear as aftermath and to impart a sense of impending doom. Liable to resemble forensic evidence or debris, his work unequivocally situates itself among an "after," not to mention a whole register of "posts" (post-industrial, post-apocalyptic, etc.). Nonetheless, it seems to contain within it a vast and inconceivable promise not of gain, but of loss—a loss that belongs to a not-so-distant future.

Such foreboding language might seem a little less dramatic when you learn that Michael E. Smith grew up in Detroit, where he currently lives and works. For Detroit is the epitome of the post-urban sublime. To clarify my terms, when I say sublime, I am specifically referring to Edmund Burke's characterization: "The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature . . . is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other."<sup>14</sup> The sublime is that which cannot be assimilated, which cannot be processed into any intellectual, psychic, or emotional economy, and thus brings the whole structure to a standstill. I can think of no better way to describe what happens to my mind when beholding the urban blight and ruins that characterize Detroit [see the author's article "Panorama: Is Detroit the New Berlin?" in *Kaleidoscope* no. 4, *editor's note*], either in person or in pictures. At best, the mind grimly begins to perceive, to glimpse unwillingly the end, if not of Western civilization, then of the global superpower otherwise known as America. In this sense, Smith's work can be read like so much catastrophic punctuation to the end of the world as we know it.

However, unlike the staggering abundance of urban decay that ravages Detroit, Smith's exhibitions are characterized by a chilling and powerful sparseness. For example, in his solo exhibition last summer at Koch Oberhuber Wolff gallery in Berlin, the artist carefully placed a few objects and a series of canvases in the industrial, gray, cavernous space of the gallery. The main space, with its two-story-high ceiling, was occupied by three small sculptures: a stiff and crumpled pair of resin-encrusted sweatpants, a segment of garden hose partially wrapped in a soiled white t-shirt, inside of which could also be found a hockey-puck-sized supermagnet, and a series of baseball hats joined together with yellow tape to form a pinwheel. Deliberately laid out on the ground as such, this grim constellation betokened a funeral solemnity, as if the formation were the result of some kind of vigil or ritual. The objects themselves seemed to signify a strange, un-locatable loss, however not a personal loss so much as one of a more general and therefore disturbing order. Despite the fact that a fair amount of the material the artist uses is clothes, they are often so soiled, damaged, and deformed that not only is it difficult to identify them as clothes, but they also take on a remote, abstract character, wholly divorced from any credible humanity. Which is to say that it is doubtful that a former owner would be able to recognize the clothes. Thus can they never be filled in, never made to represent or signify anything other than loss or a kind of emptying-out.



Untitled, 2010  
Photo: Thomas Müller  
Courtesy: Clifton Benevento, New York



Untitled, 2010  
Photo: Thomas Müller  
Courtesy: Clifton Benevento, New York







This sense of emptying-out assumed a more aggressive mode in the artist's next solo show at Clifton Benevento gallery in New York last fall. Featuring small paintings on automobile upholstery, a sculpture fashioned out of a cylindrically compressed and truncated safety jacket, a grilled painting (a canvas covered with plastic, rubber, and white enamel and then placed on a grill like a burger), as well as the safety goggles and animal snouts mentioned above, this exhibition radiated a sense of expenditure, of energy used up or violently spent. It seemed as if the entire exhibition had issued from some defunct civilization whose resources had been entirely exhausted, and the artist, sifting through the rubble, had taken it upon himself to experimentally explore potential alternative resources. However, like trying to squeeze water from a rock, it was clear that despite his best efforts, such remnants could never be transmuted into a resource; they would yield nothing other than a confirmation of the need they could never hope to remedy.

## ARTIST'S BIO

MICHAEL E. SMITH (b. 1977) lives and works in Detroit, and has had solo exhibitions at Clifton Benevento, New York; Koch Oberhuber Wolff, Berlin; and Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Ferndale. His work has also been included in group exhibitions at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York; Zach Feuer Gallery, New York; Rivington Arms, New York; and MOCAD Detroit.



Pages 46 and 47:  
*Untitled (Detroit)*, 2009  
Courtesy: the artist and  
Koch Oberhuber Wolff, Berlin

Previous page, from top:  
*Untitled*, 2010  
*Shamu*, 2010  
Photo: Thomas Müller  
Courtesy: Clifton Benevento, New York

This page, from left:  
*Untitled*, front, 2010  
*Untitled*, back, 2010  
Courtesy: the artist and  
Koch Oberhuber Wolff, Berlin

Such nightmarish disillusionment has a postwar pedigree, which compounds its special temporal status of *after* by virtue of being so darkly and distinctly foreshadowed by its art historical precedents. I am thinking in particular of Robert Smithson at his grimmest, who, in his tour of Passaic, New Jersey, looked around and perceived "ruins in reverse," or Gordon Matta-Clark and his preoccupation with urban decay, as seen in the photograph *Window Blow Out* (1976), which portrays a series of broken windows that the artist had shot out with an air rifle in a condemned building in the Bronx. The question of before and after assumes particular salience when considered against the foil of certain practitioners of Arte Povera, what with their critical skepticism of the postwar Italian economic miracle and the consumer paradigm it ushered in. It seems safe to say that the impact of whatever specter of mass production, rapid growth, and economic fallout they resisted is the outcome *or the fully realized* aftermath that Smith depicts. Consequently, where the Arte Povera artist might have sought alternatives modes of fertile production, Smith bluntly embraces infecundity. Consider Giovanni Anselmo's celebrated *Torsione* (1968), a long swathe of fustian attached to a wall and twisted via an iron bar, seemingly barely able to contain all the energy coiled into it, vis-à-vis a textile

**CURRENT & FORTHCOMING**

MICHAEL E. SMITH's work will be on view at Mönchehaus Museum in Goslar, Germany, until May 1, 2011 and, beginning in June 2011, at Michael Benevento in Los Angeles.

**AUTHOR**

CHRIS SHARP is *Kalidoscope's* editor-at-large. A writer and independent curator based in Paris, he recently co-curated with Gianni Jetzer the exhibition *Under Destruction* at the Museum Tinguely, which will open at the Swiss Institute in New York on April 6. He is also currently working on *A Necessarily Incomplete Anthology of Withdrawal*, to be published by Archive Books in 2011.

piece by Smith, in which a piece of begrimed fabric is pancaked into an abstract, unidentifiable sculpture, and the dichotomy of a *before* (potential energy) and *after* (expended energy) asserts itself. What is more, the rawer, more natural, uninflected materials of Arte Povera become something perfectly unnatural and toxic in Smith's practice, with his penchant for plastics, heat-resistant rubber, resin, and other unnamable substances. Finally, where somebody like Anselmo idealized certain primeval forces (gravity, magnetism, torsion), Smith could be said to do the opposite by representing a world mired in its own inorganic refuse, whose forces are depleted, and whose time is essentially up.

One final art historical contrast needs to be considered here, and that is between resistance and mourning, or perhaps better yet, between resistance and melancholy. Where the likes of Arte Povera, and the neo-avant-garde in general, were motivated by varying modes of critical resistance, Smith's practice would seem to be motivated by melancholy. Reflecting on the critical anomie that followed in the wake of postmodernism, and the loss of direction this entailed, not to mention a general inability to mourn, Hal Foster wrote as far back as 2002, "our condition is largely one of aftermath."<sup>2</sup> However, the aftermath to which he refers is one of a more ideological order, ultimately precipitated by the collapse of narrative, a dilemma that Foster would propose to resolve through the introduction of "situated stories (not *grands récits*)."<sup>3</sup> Smith's aftermath, on the other hand (also, incidentally, precipitated by the collapse of a *grand récit*—America) is not merely ideological, it is really out there. You can touch it with your own hands, see it with your own eyes, even if you might not be able to process it with your mind—yet.

That yet deserves a crucial qualification. In his essay "Melancholy Philosophy: Freud and Benjamin," Ilit Ferber maps out the differences between Freud's and Benjamin's respec-



Previous and this page:  
Exhibition view, Koch Oberhuber Wolff, Berlin, 2010  
Courtesy: the artist and Koch Oberhuber Wolff, Berlin

tive approaches to mourning and melancholy. For Freud, mourning consists of a process in which a subject successfully detaches from a lost object, while melancholy consists of an inability to detach from a lost object due to a psychic internalization of the object. Benjamin, however, does not distinguish between mourning and melancholy, ultimately seeing the latter as more of an active attitude, that encompasses the two than a passive pathological condition. "Benjamin," Ferber writes, "combines melancholy and its deep acknowledgment and responsibility toward loss, together with work."<sup>4</sup> Work here refers to the process of detachment enacted through an otherwise healthy process of mourning, which the Freudian melancholic is incapable of carrying out. A Freudian detachment from that loss, however, is not the goal of Benjamin's notion of "work." Rather, Benjamin's work consists in bringing the lost object, whose subjective internalization has rendered it half-alive, to rest. Ferber writes, "It is bringing to rest in the sense of deadening or deepening death, and bringing to a complete rest."<sup>5</sup> I can think of no more apt way to characterize not only the melancholy of Smith's work, but also of his actual working process, than as a "deepening death." As such, Smith is not necessarily an artist of aftermath, whose plastic prognostications merely fashion him into doomsayer without issue. He is better perceived as a Benjaminian melancholic, whose artistic practice is—to use psychoanalytic terminology so endemic to terminus narratives—a kind of "working through."

And perhaps this is precisely Smith's "situated story." Not only could the work be said to identify a need to shift the Freudian mode of melancholy to the Benjaminian one, but it can also be seen as an attempt to symbolically deepen the loss, depletion, and exhaustion of its context, to work through it, and thereby disarm the sublime trauma it engenders by laying to it rest. ◊

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Edmund Burke, "Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," 1757.
2. Hal Foster, "This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse," in *Design and Crime, (and Other Diatribes)* (New York/London: Verso Books, 2002), 125.
3. *Ibid.*, 128.
4. Irit Ferber, "Melancholy Philosophy: Freud and Benjamin," <http://erec.revues.org/413?lang=en>
5. *Ibid.*