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Art in America

Michael E. Smith

NEW YORK,
at Clifton Benevento

by [Claire Barliant](#)



Michael E. Smith: *Untitled*, 2013, Chrysler Town & Country center console, bearing unit, 14 by 19 by 9 inches, at Clifton Benevento.

It is possible to summarize what Michael E. Smith does in a single statement: he puts odd objects in odd places. Smith's second solo at Clifton Benevento appeared characteristically spare; among the handful of small works were a pair of ostrich eggs stashed in the gallery's emptied-out bookshelves and the center console of a minivan placed near a windowsill. The long, slender handles of five or six bow saws (the serrated blades had been, perversely, sawed off) balanced on the rim of the bathtub in the gallery's

bathroom.

But there is more to the story than precious site-specific gestures and simple readymade objects, and this is what is difficult to put into words. Smith's work provokes a fugitive unease; the feeling sneaks up on you quickly and vanishes as soon as you realize it is there. The work is uncanny in the truly Freudian sense of the word, giving the semblance of an identifiable, familiar reality, then introducing some peculiarity that puts us on unstable ground.

Take, for example, a small, untitled canvas (all works 2013) hanging near the ceiling with three stark black splotches on a pure white surface. I spent some time gazing up at it and admiring its austere and Zen-like composition, and then turned queasy on learning that the black splotches are chicken pelts. With their coating of soft feathers, the black forms suddenly seemed gruesome, like used, oily hairpieces, or, worse, scalps. A compact, feathered mass on the floor near the entry turns out to be two dried-out rooster carcasses mashed together. It is titled *Mike*, in homage to an actual headless chicken that survived for some years after being decapitated. The poultry theme continues in a piece called *Chicken Stix*, composed of two strips of architectural molding that were, in essence, tarred and feathered. The artist coated the strips in glue or some other kind of sticky substance, covered them with feathers, then plucked the feathers one by one, creating a gritty surface with a few stray pieces of down whose wispy contours resemble cryptic calligraphy.

Though the objects incorporating organic material were unnerving, the one truly terrifying work here was entirely manmade. The untitled readymade sculpture consists of the hulking center console of a Chrysler Town & Country, placed on a swiveling platform. Perched on a shelf adjacent to the windowsill, it rotates smoothly and vertiginously over the edge when pushed, metonymically evoking a car spinning out of control.

One could argue that this sort of work demands explication, that it is merely eye candy until one is given more information (either via a press release or friendly gallerist). And yet its visceral, passive-aggressive nature is unavoidable; there is a niggling sense that all is not well in the world these objects inhabit. It is hard to grapple with the submerged violence of a pair of sculptures, titled *RBI* and *LBS*, that incorporate chips of bone into partially dismantled Mac laptops. Of his novel *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka wrote, "The dream reveals the reality, which conception lags behind. That is the horror of life—the terror of art." There is something nightmarish about Smith's objects, but the dream, as Kafka says, reveals reality. Kafka believed he was writing comedy that would make people laugh aloud, and a dark humor also underscores Smith's work, which, combined with its formal rigor, tempers the sense of a world coming off its hinges.

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