

art agenda

Michael E. Smith

CLIFTON BENEVENTO, New York
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by STEPHEN SQUIBB
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Michael E. Smith has left the gallery nearly empty. Entering the space of Clifton Benevento, my first impression was one of absence, in sharp contrast to its location. Finding the show on the sixth floor of a building in the center of New York's boutique-saturated SoHo commercial district, I could feel my eyes struggling to adjust as if blinded by a sudden transition from light to darkness. For a long time, images of luxury goods lingered like ghosts orienting my experience, as when one of Smith's untitled works appeared to be looking up towards another, in the same way I had just been looking up at the billboards in the street.

The first work (all works 2013), a pair of ostrich eggs, drained, as if for Easter, resembled a set of eyes, staring up and across the empty gallery at a painting hung in the far corner of the room. Composed of rubber, cotton, chicken feathers, and plastic, the painting represents an aspirational image of what the eggs might have been, albeit flattened out and optimized for viewing from a distance. In the same way that the pedestrian stands agape at billboards, which are constructed from advertising images rearranged to sell a kind of living death, the eggs gaze upon a painted past as though it were the future.

A third untitled work approaches traumatic memory. Smith has affixed the console from the front seat of a car—the armrest and the cup holder section usually located between the driver and passenger seats of a Chrysler Town & Country—to the edge of a window sill so that it can spin, quietly, on its axis. The first kind of trauma evoked is the silent, endless twisting of a car crash, upending everything, over and over. The second is the memory of Detroit, the artist's hometown and erstwhile capital of the automobile industry, now reduced to a fragment of its former self. In the same way that the console appears precarious at one moment and sturdy the next, the fate of Detroit also seems to shift from day to day.

All three untitled works reconfigure the raw material of memory in order to draw attention to the different ways we narrate our personal and collective history. Two works, *RBI* and *LBS*, pursue a similar set of questions in yet another format. Both consist of laptop keyboards with the touchpad removed. In the spot where the touchpad would have been, Smith has placed fragments of a human skull. The skull chips in *RBI* protrude out into space, extending upwards through the hollowed out touchpad, while in *LBS*, they are submerged just beneath the space where the pad once was. In each case, the acronyms disambiguate into a variety of relationships between

technology, agency, and memory. LBS, for example, could stand for “load balancing system,” which is a method of process distribution, or it could stand for “location based service,” something like a GPS. Which of these, Smith asks, belong to our skulls and which to our computers? What kind of memory is more important for telling us who and where we are? The meanings of *RBI*, by contrast, are more active and aggressive. *RBI* could stand for “relative bearing indicator,” which illuminates the direction we are traveling, and thus also that we are moving, or it could stand for “reactive business intelligence,” a kind of entrepreneurial thinking that aims to unite data-mining, interactivity, and visualization. Regarding the question of technology, Smith seems to say, we might have the luxury of reflection, or we might not.

Of course, it isn't only technology, advertising, and where we're from that determines our identity, but our names as well. This is an especially rich question for an artist with a moniker as common in American culture as Michael Smith. *Bubbles*—named after another Michael's favorite chimpanzee—is fashioned from sweatpants, plastic, and windowpane oysters, and is appended to the side of a shelf so that we are able to view it in profile against the window. Windowpane oysters have a transparent shell and have historically been harvested as substitutes for glass—hence their name. And, unlike other kinds of oysters, they don't naturally latch onto anything, preferring to live in the mud. Smith dislocates them by attaching them first to the sweatpants, and then again to the shelf, in close proximity to an actual pane of glass, which performs the oyster's historic function.

Another Michael, *Mike*, is a doorstop fashioned from two headless roosters. Placed so as to keep the gallery door from slamming shut, the work is named after “Miracle Mike,” a chicken that lived for eighteen months after its head was cut off. Upon his death, it was determined that although the ax had severed most of Mike's head, much of his brain stem remained attached to his body. Since the essential functions for living, like breathing and regulating a pulse, are controlled by the brain stem, the chicken was able to live three times longer than he ordinarily would have had he been killed and consumed. A side show celebrity in the mid-1940s, Mike earned nearly fifty thousand dollars a month (adjusted for inflation) because his owner kept him alive by feeding him milk and water through an eyedropper.

As animals, Smith seems to remind us, we are most valuable when our minds are detached from our bodies. Like Miracle Mike, we are kept alive by drips of sustenance and stare, mesmerized—like the untitled eggs—at distended pictures of ourselves, fashioned—like the untitled painting—from the dead material of our collective history. Or else we are like *Bubbles*, recognized for our proximate humanity, but much more obviously alien for the distance that remains, for we cannot say for certain, as in *RBI* and *LBS*, where our brains terminate and our technology begins. At best we are like *Mike*, and bind ourselves to another headless animal. With our combined weight we can hold open the door to a small room somewhere far above the roaring commercial street. This room is warm and dark, containing very little, almost nothing. We are left with decaying feathers, some soiled pants, broken tools, and the smell of what we are: untitled plastic from a console world spinning stubbornly in circles, all armrests and cup holders, waiting to be unmade.



1 View of Michael E. Smith, Clifton Benevento, New York, 2013.



2 Michael E. Smith, *Untitled*, 2013.



3 Michael E. Smith, *Untitled*, 2013.



4 (Left) Michael E. Smith, *LBS*, 2013. (Right) Michael E. Smith, *RBI*, 2013.



5 Michael E. Smith, *Bubbles*, 2013.



6 Michael E. Smith, *Mike*, 2013.



7 Michael E. Smith, *Untitled*, 2013.



8 Michael E. Smith, *Untitled*, 2013.



9 Michael E. Smith, *Untitled*, 2013.

- 1 View of Michael E. Smith, Clifton Benevento, New York, 2013. All images courtesy of Clifton Benevento, New York. All photos by Andres Ramirez.
- 2 Michael E. Smith, *Untitled*, 2013. Ostrich eggs, 4 3/4 x 9 1/12 x 6 inches.
- 3 Michael E. Smith, *Untitled*, 2013. Chrysler Town & Country center console and bearing unit, 14 x 19 x 9 inches.
- 4 View of Michael E. Smith, Clifton Benevento, New York, 2013. (Left) Michael E. Smith, *LBS*, 2013. Skull chips and altered Mac laptop, 15 1/2 x 1/2 x 5 1/2 inches. (Right) Michael E. Smith, *RBI*, 2013. Skull chips and altered Mac laptop, 15 1/2 x 2 1/4 x 5 1/2 inches.
- 5 Michael E. Smith, *Bubbles*, 2013. Sweatpants, plastic, and windowpane oysters, 17 x 9 x 8 inches.
- 6 Michael E. Smith, *Mike*, 2013. Two roosters and plastic, 15 x 11 x 12 inches.
- 7 Michael E. Smith, *Untitled*, 2013. Chicken, rubber, plastic, and cotton, 20 x 16 inches.
- 8 Michael E. Smith, *Untitled*, 2013. Chicken, rubber, plastic, and cotton, 20 x 16 inches.
- 9 Michael E. Smith, *Untitled*, 2013. Altered bow saws, 18 x 4 3/4 x 5 1/2 inches.