Before Smith arrives at an exhibition site, the materials reach only an intermediary stage or what he calls ‘material sketches’. Existing as composite parts of sculptures-to-be, each element, investigated and worked on physically to somehow charge its intensity, rests in this limbo state.

As part of his making Smith fills notebooks, covering pages with key words as might a lyricist. Hip Hop has always been a driving force for him, so too has the blues and the improvisational wanderings of free jazz. Filtering into his working processes (space, rhythm, economy of means, completing sculptures in tight, self-imposed deadlines), music cues an emotional register in his work and the responses it solicits. There’s a long history of songwriters only being able to write in moments of non-joy. Smith’s making is the same. Despite the criticality of writing to his process, however, words are seen as unnecessary weight and titles are rare, beyond ‘Untitled’. Look instead at the list of materials, which are authored, finely tuned and can be revelatory.

Only once Smith is on site do new and complete sculptures come into existence. He works to make critical juxtapositions between the different ‘sketches’ and combines them with another essential element — the gallery’s own environment. The fabric of the institution, the site of display, becomes integral. It is another component and its own traces of use, flaws, light, histories and systems become part of the sculpture. Removing signage, functional clutter (including exhibition labels and wall texts) or altering lighting, he heightens the atmospheric register of a place. The fixings of a building’s regulatory systems, its ventilation units for example, may also be stripped, its emergency exits or service lifts exposed. Smith parries back his galleries to an extreme, often uncomfortably so, sailing past the territory of ‘sparse’ to land firmly in the realm of ‘not enough’. While emptiness and removal have their established place in art history, Smith questions it now. On one hand emptiness is order and harmony, on the other it is disarray and discord; for some it is a shelf in a luxury store, for others it is eviction.

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There are conversations with art history throughout Smith’s object-making (assemblage, conceptualism, minimalism) and his approach to institutional critique, yet these are departure points for a resolutely idiosyncratic way of making and displaying sculpture. The environment of Smith’s exhibitions is typically off-kilter, remote, sometimes violent and slapstick. They are reflections upon the forces that gave birth to the constituent parts of his sculptures: global economic, environmental and political dis-ease, labour market forces and the ebb and flow of people. Cycles are important in his work (the life-cycle of the materials he uses, the incorporation of the lighting or mechanics in a building that balance conditions); so too are pairs (his sculptures are generally arranged as such). His attention to each brings an overarching human metaphor and a present, although never overwhelming, conversation with the fundamentals of life, death and decay.

While Smith’s sculptures take up space and embody time as a form of archaeological statement, they require the viewer to surrender the same. His work needs to be both looked at and looked for, and while it may give its more immediate punches, it can also be so subtle that it is barely perceptible beyond a shift in emotional intensity. It teases a consideration of what has been added, what has been taken away, of emptiness and equilibrium.

Michael E. Smith was born in 1977 in Detroit, Michigan. From 2004 to 2006 he studied in Detroit at the College for Creative Studies (CCS). In 2008 he took an MA Fine Art as a student of Jessica Stockholder at the Department for Sculpture at Yale University, after which he returned to Detroit to teach at the CCS. He now lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island.

Smith has been the subject of solo exhibitions at institutions including Pinakothek Der Moderne, Munich, (2021); Kunsthalle Basel (2018); S.M.A.K, Ghent (2017); Kunstverein Hannover (2015); De Appel, Amsterdam (2015); Sculpture Center, New York (2015); La Triennale di Milano, Milan (2014); Power Station, Dallas (2014); Capc musee d’art contemporain de Bordeaux, (2013) and Contemporary Art Museum, St Louis (2011). His work has been included in group exhibitions at Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2017); David Roberts Art Foundation, London (2015); MoMA PS1, New York (2014); Frankfurter Kunstverein (2014); and moCa Cleveland, Cleveland, (2013). He participated in the Whitney Biennial 2021 and 2012, in *May You Live in Interesting Times*, Venice Biennale 2019 and the 2018 Baltic Triennial.
LIST OF WORKS

1. **Untitled** 2023
   Video 2:07

2. **Untitled** 2023
   Television, rock

3. **Untitled** 2023
   Chair, ducks

4. **Untitled** 2023
   Basketballs, stairs

5. **Untitled** 2023
   First aid cabinet, hide

6. **BUGS** 2023
   DVD player, VCR, window

7. **Untitled** 2023
   Tables, milk jug, LEDs

8. **Untitled** 2023
   Bottle, plastic, chain
   In Seminar Room and viewable
during scheduled events

All works courtesy the artist, Modern Art, London, KOW, Berlin
and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

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AN EXHIBITION BY

MICHAEL E. SMITH

24 March – 18 June 2023