

Detroit-native Michael E. Smith has earned a well-deserved reputation as one of the most radical sculptors of his generation for his terse, aesthetic prognostications. An evoker of aftermath, human fragmentation, and urban desolation, he has a strong penchant for unusual materials ranging from everything to plastics, protective gear, automotive components, foams, animal parts, industrially produced comestibles, human bone, and perhaps most importantly, textiles. When not re-contextualizing a given object or quite simply disfiguring it in order produce a work, sculptures are often the byproduct of strange and improbable conjunctions (to wit: a piece of human skull inserted into a fragment of a laptop computer; weed whacker engines dipped in oatmeal; clarinets stuffed into PCV piping). What he does brings to mind the absorbed and idiosyncratic industry of the garage-bound tinkerer, yet contrary to the harmless stereotype, his variety of tinkering borders on the psychopathic. The object, precise and harrowing as it may be, however, is not all. Placement plays an integral role in what Smith does. Carefully arranged in atypical locations (low on the wall, ceiling, corners, and obscurely lighted) with stunning economy and great dramatic effect, a given work's installation is as important as the object itself. When thus aligned in an exhibition space, a piece is liable to strike something between terror, fascination and laughter in its viewer. Indeed for all its fatalism and deadpan drama, what Smith creates is often so bleak and cornering that it is difficult not to guffaw when faced with it, as if what it portended was so stark that it forced its own inevitable catharsis.

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