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HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Greg Smith's Amazing Eleven-Minute Road Trip

by John Yau on May 18, 2014



Installation view, Greg Smith at Susan Inglett gallery (all images courtesy Susan Inglett gallery)

From Ulysses and Arjuna to Sir Galahad, Fletcher Christian and his fellow mutineers, Jack Kerouac and, more recently, Greg Smith, the quest (or road trip) for redemption, transformation, utopia, or just some very good peach-and-banana ice cream is a theme that spans world culture, from great literature to bad movies, with lots of stops in-between. To his credit, Greg Smith does something remarkably fresh and electrifying with this easily ruined subject, and on a low, do-it-yourself budget.

In his [fifth show](#) at Susan Inglett (May 1–June 7, 2014), Smith shows an eleven-minute film on a television that has seen better days, which is set up inside a large canvas enclosure complete with two lawn chairs. I would advise viewers to watch the film before walking around the gallery to look at the various contraptions that Smith has concocted, including modified cameras, which are mounted on a wall facing the street; an altered bath tub; a large ruffled, canvas collar; fold-up lawn chairs; car parts; drawings and notes. The canvas enclosure, bathtub and lawn chairs turn the gallery into an encampment for nomads who can't get back on the road.

The name of the film showing inside the enclosure is "BREAKDOWN LANE." It is on a loop, ending and beginning without titles. There is one scene of cars driving on the highway, apparently shot from the breakdown lane, with the horizon visible in the distance, a ubiquitous view that anyone who has been in a car on a highway knows. After that come a series of close-up sequences, including one in which a flimsy apparatus mounted with the artist's modified cameras sways by the side of the highway until the



currents stirred up by the cars going by knocks it backwards, and it topples over like a cartoon character.

In another sequence, we see Smith sitting in a bathtub full of water, which is installed inside the car. He is facing the back of the car and wearing a huge canvas neck ruff. The ruff emphasizes the position of his head above the water, while the rest of his body is immersed in it. As an extension of his body, the ruff also expands toward the horizon that he will never reach. The viewer assumes the role of the invisible person (or camera) in the car with him.



Smith has a field day with the underlying narrative structure of quest literature and movies, which is customarily composed of a series of loosely linked episodes in which the hero must overcome an obstacle or pass a test. A number of scenes focus on the construction of this improbable car. Nearly all of them are filmed up-close, infusing a claustrophobic air into much of the film, which is the opposite of what you'd expect in a road movie. This feeling of being hemmed in is heightened when the camera focuses on Smith sitting in the bathtub or when you see an otherwise unexplained tow truck out the front windshield that is so close that it must be in the act of pulling you somewhere.

There is one beautiful sequence in which we seem to be inside the car watching the traffic go by, but the scene is actually a pre-shot video image projected on a flimsy piece of cloth. There are little moments like this scattered throughout the film. Smith never lingers too long over them because he is not interested in showing off. Every scene feels tight and perfectly cropped.



In addition to the masterful things that Smith does with the camera, there are the loopy and hair-raising ones he does in front of the camera. At one point, he uses a stick with a gripper on one end to control the steering wheel as he drives while facing backward. The viewer is stuck inside the car with him, an almost unwilling passenger. At the same time, the camera shows you neither what he is looking at to prevent the car from veering out of control (there are video monitors in the rear of the vehicle), nor the highway outside. We literally and metaphorically don't know where we are in relation to reality. The camera never backs away, never satisfies us with a panoramic view, never travels alongside the car as it moves through the landscape. Now part of this might be because Smith doesn't have the resources of a Matthew Barney (substitute: big studio and lots of assistants), but that seems one of the residual points of the film. You don't need money to be a genius or even very good. I could watch a Smith film any day and would never feel as if I had been hit over the head with a bag of profundity or subjected to the preening of a showoff armed with expensive materials and willing participants.

Smith's work has an affinity with those who do amazing things with what they've got (Robert Rauschenberg, Miroslav Tisby and Rahsaan Roland Kirk come to mind) — a mindset that's worlds away from virtuosity based on unlimited resources, which is the bankrupt aesthetic of Hollywood and of the 1% buying and flipping art. You can fake what might be called the bohemian by assuming a dropcloth aesthetic or pretending to be "primitive," but Smith doesn't fake anything.

Smith is an absurdist inventor, a performer attracted to risk, a scientist (he did get a Ph.D in Physics from Harvard, by the way), an analytical storyteller who refuses to settle for easy parodies, and, perhaps most importantly, an artist who is too self-respectful to take shortcuts or feints. Smith may do lots of clownish things, like wearing a huge canvas neck ruff or setting up a wobbly sculpture that is also a collection of movie cameras, but he never turns himself into a clown. He is as imperturbable as Buster Keaton, but he doesn't imitate him. Need I say more?

[Greg Smith](#) continues at *Susan Inglett Gallery (522 West 24 Street, Chelsea, Manhattan)* through June 7.