

Goffstein, Sarah, "Greg Smith: Breakdown Lane", THE BROOKLYN RAIL, 15 July 2014.



GREG SMITH *Breakdown Lane*

by Sarah Goffstein

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When you first step into Greg Smith's installation at Susan Inglett Gallery, the artist's stunning material sensibility overshadows any realization that what you see are actually the reconfigured trappings, ruins, and byproducts of an unusual Rube Goldberg machine. Yes, the twisted lawn chair configurations, clown collars, and perforated notes sewn into aggregated textiles were all elements associated with a car MacGyvered for a strange road trip. For those less inquisitive, it would have been easy to miss the most important part of the show, "Breakdown Lane" (2013), a performance-based video found in the improvised theater at the center of the installation.



Greg Smith, "Breakdown Lane," Video Still, 2013.
DVD running 11 minutes 20 seconds.
Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC. Courtesy: Susan Inglett
Gallery, NYC.

Here, Smith drives his inspired Franken-car on the paved shoulder of a secondary highway near the Massachusetts/New York border. Crude inventions mediate basic functions like steering and viewing the road, as handmade cameras encased in homespun textiles capture the resulting journey in experimental vignettes. Unlike in most Rube Goldberg contraptions, Smith plans flaws into the systems he designs. While traveling, the vehicle self-destructs in unpredictable ways, such as catching on fire, surprising even the artist himself.

If the horizon holds the promise of something better in road trip films, for Smith it appears as a sort of mythic symbol repeated obsessively in drawings that permeate his work. Figuratively speaking, Smith drives down a similar road as Jean Tinguely, who also had an obsession with car culture and sculptures with the potential to self-destruct. What sets Smith apart is his utopian vision, even if failure is inevitable. Here is where the journey becomes a metaphor for the unswerving optimism that visits artists on good days as they relentlessly try to make work on their own terms. Of course, like many artists, Smith has a way of making his life difficult by adding obstacles. In one instance, he drives with his head protruding through the roof of the car while wearing an enormous canvas collar that blocks his view of the road. There is forward motion, but the artist's ability to steer is compromised. The stakes are high because a bathtub brimming with water monopolizes the car's interior, inviting unforeseen chain reactions.

Part of the charm of these obstructions is that Smith uses them to let chance intervene. Collaborating with environmental factors limits Smith's artistic agency, avoiding the potential pitfalls of narcissism. Although Smith intermittently takes on the role of the

struggling protagonist so often portrayed in documentary films, noise from passing traffic and unmanned cameras garble his testimonials. During the most lucid moment in which he tries to explain the circumstances of the breakdown, the precarious camera recording the scene falls over, cutting transmission.



Greg Smith, "4 Bath Tubs," 2014. Bath tubs (2), canvas, car parts, colored pencil, duct tape, fabric, gesso, graphite, hardware, lawn chair webbing, paper, spray paint, swimming pool chlorine treatment, thread, wire, wood, 40 × 70 × 50". Courtesy: Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

Just as the work courts chance, part of the magic for the viewer is the random point at which they encounter the video loop. The narrative unfolds in a non-linear manner recorded by the flawed optics of the cameras stationed throughout the vehicle and on improvised probes that are sent out when forward motion is suspended. The myopic cropping and funny analogue camera effects subjectively convey the journey. Particularly compelling is the sense of disorientation offered by the brilliantly abstracted compositions of much of the close-up footage. In fact, Smith's deft editing choices only skip a beat once, when briefly offering a clear glimpse of the entire car. This is simply best left to the imagination.

Beyond optical accidents, the makeshift mechanics of Smith's vehicle put the artist at risk, Chris Burden-style. It is hard not to expect electrocution or explosions. Mostly we are kept in suspense, but there are a few climactic moments in which the worst happens. The first disaster occurs when Smith hits the brakes suddenly, causing the bathtub to flood the car's dashboard and stall. Even more dramatically, following sparks spun by a grinder during a repair, a large blaze engulfs the body of an automobile.

While a car going up in flames is a common trope in action flicks meant to appeal to men, Smith's incorporation of sewing into his arsenal of ad hoc construction borders on what has traditionally been considered women's crafts. Instead of being souped-up with chrome, leather, and racing stripes to advertise prowess and success, Smith's rig is stitched together with do-it-yourself solutions and quilts. Its domesticity is provisional, vagabond, and obsessive. Reflecting on the idea of the "self-made man," Smith's journey is quixotic and original, making the most of available resources. If a car still symbolizes a very American idea of independence, the motif of failure in "Breakdown Lane" becomes a poignant reflection of the ways in which we, the 99%, all continue to struggle when the odds are against us.