

on the Moon, which adapted the falteringly beautiful cello of Arthur Russell's song as a soundtrack for young sailors learning the ropes (literally) on the choppy waters of the Firth of Forth, Billing assembles and deconstructs existing elements to induce a state of pedagogical wonder, collaboration and possibility.

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Michael E Smith

Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 24 March to 18 June

A work of art is often presented along with 'meaning'. Handed out on a sheet of A4 paper, shared in a conversation, or clung to when uncertainty threatens to overwhelm a carefully arranged hermeneutics, such meaning may help people understand a particular perspective, but it can also limit what we get from art. A monoculture of interpretation does little to nourish the capacity to be touched, moved or inspired to create our own meanings in the art we encounter.

At the Henry Moore Institute, the US artist Michael E Smith is showing seven sculptures and a looped video of a dog in a kennel. Since he began exhibiting internationally around a decade ago, a sense of mystery has drifted around the artist and his work. At HMI, I was supplied with a few nuggets of information: Smith does not 'do press', nor does he make site visits ahead of exhibitions; he creates work in 'immediate response' to the exhibition rooms and takes, at most, five days to install a show; he studied art history 'via pictures not words', and all interpretations of his work are valid.

Across the HMI's suite of three exhibition rooms, Smith has turned off the lamps and left the shutters ajar, casting the first space into a murky half-light. A TV lies prone on the floor, with a beaked-shaped pebble nuzzling its corner. An old blue velvet armchair faces the scene. Its cushions are absent and a stuffed-duck diorama is attached to its back. A pair of basketballs hover near the bottom of a narrow staircase, as though arrested in flight. Sculptures and situations function as projection screens for us to throw nostalgia, memories and associations at them. In these aleatory combinations, what you get is what you see. For me: a disconsolate faceplanted TV, a blueish winged grandparent, a comical architectural phallus.

In the next room – tall and square with skylights at both ends – two black boxes hang either side of a long sliver of light that bisects a broad window cover. The only work that is not 'untitled', *BUGS*, 2023, comprises a DVD player and a VCR, which mirror each other like a pair of hard-shelled eyes. On a rubbish heap or in

the window of Cash Converters, defunct electronics are banal, but in a prestigious gallery they gain an exotic allure. High up to the right of *BUGS*, the hide of a musk ox is pinned to a wall. With long strands of wool hanging down the middle its outline resembles the map of the US. Slightly left of centre on the hide is a worn, white enamelled medicine cabinet. Is this a portrait of an ailing country, a Rorschach test that reveals the uses and abuses of native species, or something else that I haven't seen but you might?

The third room contains just one sculpture. From the ground up: a pair of white round tables, stacked so their stems line up to form a column of furniture, a stumpy domestic version of Constantin Brâncuși's 1918 *Endless Column*, perhaps. Crowning the tower of tables, an empty gallon-sized milk jug lies on its side, with a window cut into it and a string of red LED lights bunched up inside. The complementary green glow of a fire exit sign hanging near the sculpture makes the eyes work harder and the imagination follows suit. When I overheard someone utter the word 'fountain' near the work, I saw in the plastic jug a tribute to the infamous urinal that Marcel Duchamp presented at the Society of Independent Artists' Salon in 1917. The container was even turned on its side like Duchamp's readymade, but the sculpture also resembles a formal tiered fountain, its central white stem like a spurt of water pooling into the tabletops and saucer-like feet. It is a collection of utilitarian objects that have a past life, whose usefulness has been converted into other kinds of value: aesthetic, monetary or cultural.

We are seldom encouraged to play in the gallery space. Here, the combination of familiarity and sparseness in Smith's sculptures incites the imagination. The less the work dictates, the more we can pay it back with flights of fancy. But the imagination is neither a reliable nor a benevolent faculty and we empower it at our own peril. It can see things that aren't there: an insect, a map, a fountain. It can take a pebble for a good Samaritan or a neighbour for an enemy.

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Practise Till We Meet

esea contemporary, Manchester
18 February to 28 May

For those familiar with thematic curatorial trends in the UK since the 1990s, the prospect of another exhibition dealing with the subject of diaspora is unlikely to elicit much excitement. What can be said about experiences of displacement or migration, in books, projects, films and symposia, that hasn't been said before? While it's largely true that the discourse of diaspora, its imaginary and formal representations, do seem to have settled into a set of conventional interpretations and predictable aesthetic outcomes, it is also true that these conditions usually relate to the specific geographical regions of Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia and, to a lesser extent, locations in the Middle East. There is, however, an entire territory of the majority world from where concerns are seldom seen or heard: East and Southeast Asia (now identified under the acronym ESEA). With 'Practise Till We Meet', a group exhibition of artists from locations across that geographic spread, esea contemporary (the institution formerly known as the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art or CFCCA) attempts to track the diasporic road less travelled.



Michael E Smith, *Untitled*, 2023