

John Smith

*Object Lessons*

Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin

01.02. - 09.03.13

On entering Tanya Leighton gallery, the London accent of the British artist-filmmaker John Smith can be heard echoing through the gallery. On three monitors ranged across the main gallery there are images of a London house and the streets which surround it. One consequence of the globalisation of contemporary art is that artists tend to focus less on the primary experience of local subject matter so as to make themselves more accessible to a broader context. It is likely, for example, that a young German artist who uses text will adopt English, given that it is the foremost linguistic currency of the international art world. Similarly, references are more likely to be taken from sources which are already culturally-mediated, and therefore easier to assimilate. Smith's films highlight these tendencies by bucking them.

As the exhibition's title – *Object Lessons* – implies, each of the three works on display involve Smith training his camera onto a series of objects. But these are not artefacts, as they would probably be in a Mark Leckey or Ed Atkins film – to mention two much younger British contemporaries working in the video medium – but everyday objects drawn from Smith's life. A convention of contemporary art filmmaking is to find means of accommodating exotic cultural fragments – Atkins will pore over Surrealist curios, while Rosa Barba will haunt a museum's storage. Smith, however, begins with his immediate surroundings, and pays them such concentrated attention that they begin to seem mysterious. His work, and its relation to its contemporary context, recalls David Foster Wallace's remark that if traditional 'realism made the strange familiar ... today's most ambitious realist fiction is going about trying to *make the familiar strange*'.

This 'strangeness' is vitally highlighted by the placing of these films, subtitled, within a German cultural context. It is difficult to imagine the work of another internationally renowned contemporary artist which would pay so little heed to assimilating itself. But Smith's uncompromising subjective scrutiny of his local environment is counterbalanced by his wish to have his films meditate on the film medium itself, and therefore be objective and self-reflexive. Correspondingly, the ostensibly documentary nature of his work proves to be a means of creating narratives with fictive, even fantastic, connotations. In the interview which took place at the opening of this exhibition, Smith remarked, 'I set out to make true stories seem improbable'.

These paradoxes reflect the various cultural backgrounds out of which Smith emerged in the early 1970s. He remains an old-school deconstructionist inhabiting a post-structuralist cultural landscape. His desire to expose the mechanics behind filmic illusion signals his roots in the structuralist filmmaking movement of the 1960s, while his preoccupation with overhauling the conventions of empirical representation reflects the influence of early British conceptual art of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the first minutes of *Home Suite* (1993-4), Smith informs us – in order to excuse his poor command of the camera – that this is the first time he has used video since his college days. Typically, he is debunking his medium's capacity to generate illusion even as he exploits it. *Home Suite* records

Smith's East London home, and was filmed days before it was due to be demolished to make way for a new ring road. Features of its ramshackle interior – a candle holder, an old toilet bowl, a plug wound up in its chain – come in and out of focus. Smith weaves his overtly personal narration over the equally partial jolts and blurs of his hand-held camerawork. His subject is the act of filming as much as the house itself, as 'real-time' narration is as much a sign of time's passage as the aged objects it explores.

The title of *Home Suite* suggests 'home movies', and Smith's method is self-professingly amateurish. Its sophistication lies in its ability to accommodate every contingency it encounters and absorb it as narrative. Real-time footage is spontaneously transformed into artifice, and Smith's sleight-of-hand is to make that transformation appear unforced, and himself an inventively passive rather than controlling presence. He finds cues for his inquiry into the nature of representation embedded in the fabric of the reality he is filming. The film *Unusual Red Cardigan* (2011) recounts Smith's discovery of one of his videos on sale on Ebay, and how his curiosity about the identity of its seller lead to his purchasing some of the other items she had up for auction on the site. The attenuated virtual connection between buyer and seller metaphorically suggests our limited access, as viewers, to the world which Smith is revealing to us with his camera. The Ebay item descriptions of the objects – 'Unusual Red Cardigan', 'Furry Green Handbag' – have preceded the appearance of the objects themselves, so that as Smith draws them from their packaging we witness their transition from virtual name to actual object as though at the same time as he does. If the Ebay objects are Smith's traces of the mysterious seller, the objects in his films are our traces of Smith. As though mindful of the quantum physics dictum that the viewer of an experiment must factor his observation into his results, he exposes his role as his own protagonist even as his self-deprecating persona makes it clear that the purpose is to reveal the richness of reality and not the richness of his perception of it.

Smith has always been fascinated by the competitive relation between language's denoting an object and an image's representing it. *Dad's Stick* (2012), the most recent film in the exhibition, is the latest installment in a series of works which exploit, for dramatic potential, the ambiguity between these alternative forms of signification. The film's opening image is a multicoloured field of striated colour which appears, projected onto a gallery wall, to be a large-scale abstract colourfield painting. It is qualified by a line of superimposed text: 'My Dad did a lot of painting'. We naturally assume that this must mean painting as art, until it becomes clear, at the end of the film, that the colour field was, in fact, a close-up of a cross-section of a paint-encrusted wooden stick that Smith's father used over many decades to mix household paint before applying it to the walls of his house. Timeless abstraction is exposed as dense with compacted time, like the rings of a tree trunk, while art is exposed as an illusion concealing an artisanal truth. And yet, of course, *Dad's Stick* is an art film, and declares itself as such. Its monochrome backgrounds reference modernist painterly abstraction, as its Helvetica captions are a stylistic convention of conceptual art. But this form of allusion is implicitly questioned by the objects in the film – a wooden stick that has become a magic chromatic wand; a cup for mixing paint that is so encrusted it resembles a sea shell. They have become emblems of the resistance of reality to being represented by the images through which Smith is nevertheless revealing them to us.