

# house projects

## Martin Smith

Martin Smith's works in *Primavera 07* take the form of photographs out of which he has cut text by hand. The texts are personal, diaristic narratives and lyrics from well-known songs. The stories are based on events from the artist's own childhood or adolescence, and feature coming-of-age themes – adolescent pastimes, friendships, conflicts and the awakening of a new interest.

Smith's works highlight the photograph's significance as a social document rather than as a window into the real world. He explores how photography approaches the past; the gap that exists between human memory and its artifacts. There is a sense in which Smith's images belong to an amateur tradition that includes the snapshots we keep in our family albums. According to the artist, when he takes pictures, he seeks out those images that seem to represent moments of personal significance and flashes of intuitive truth. His approach is similar to that employed by amateur photographers, it is because he explores similar thematic territory. We author our own stories by building an archive of visual memories in photo albums, supported by the personal narratives that emerge from journals or oral history. Smith's incorporation of well-known song lyrics also suggests the ways in which music populates the landscape of the past and becomes a soundtrack to significant moments in our lives.

Smith's cutting of the photographic surface is a violent gesture. It may be likened to mutilation as it destroys each image's seamless continuity. In many of these works – particularly those in which the evacuated text covers the entire surface – the image is largely obliterated and the viewer must labour to perceive the landscape that the text carves into. Between image and text is a constant push and pull. Smith's integration of words into each image may be seen as symbolically reconciling text with the back of the photograph. When people take snapshots, they often hand-write descriptions on the backs of prints to identify what they depict. It is as if Smith brings forward this 'hidden' text which is usually concealed behind a photograph and in turn projects it into the pictorial surface.

There is, however, no casual relationship between Smith's images and his texts. In a sense the artist treats his own catalogue of snapshots as found objects. He sifts through an inventory of images, choosing a particular one to which to attach a given text – despite the fact that the subject it depicts is unconnected to the story he has written, or the song he has chosen. *The Gardeners* (2006), for example, is based on a photograph Smith found in one of his family albums. Taken not by him but by another family member, the image a souvenir of a trip they took to Seaworld when the artist was about ten years old. He has married it to an unrelated story involving a garage band and a smashed window.

When exhibited, the cut letters are presented on the floor below the images, as if they have slipped from the photographic surface. These letters evoke fallen leaves and remind us of a rupture that has resulted in spillage and loss. As the action unfolds, they are evidence that *something* is utterly finished. Yet other aspects of these photographs suggest that the surface is not sealed off. Like a net for trapping the past, or a sieve allowing it to pass through, the open structure of Smith's cut images indicates a permeability that promises a fluid exchange of ideas with the present.

Christine Morrow 2007

Martin Smith was born in Brisbane 1971, where he currently lives and works. Smith completed a Bachelor of Visual Art (Photography) at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University in 1995, and Bachelor of Visual Art (Honours) in 2001. His solo exhibitions include *My Jesus lets me tickle his belly*, Sophie Gannon Gallery Melbourne 2009, *In response to unanswered again*, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne 2008, *In Response to the boy on the train with the impediment*, Blacklab Gallery, Brisbane, 2006 and *You can give them a better life than I ever could*, at Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra, 2003, followed by Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth, 2004. His group exhibitions include

*Paris, Paris*, 2008, *Photo LA*, Los Angeles Photographic Fair, Los Angeles, 2007; *Primavera*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney 2007.

He has recently released a monograph titled *Martin Smith photographs In response to...* 2008.

His work is included in the collections of The Queensland Art Gallery, Monash Gallery of Art, The Museum of the University of Queensland and several private collections nationally and internationally

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