

# ARTNEWS

## Michael E. Smith: An Insider's Outsider

By Rachel Corbett - February 26, 2015

**Michael E. Smith's** sculptures look like things you might see tangled in a chain-link fence, or gathering around the edges of a Walmart parking lot: a duffel bag, scraps of foam, a satellite dish, sweatpants. But rather than simply presenting them as found objects, Smith variously blankets them in oats, stiffens them with resin, stacks them together, or otherwise alters them with some personal touch.

They evoke the bottomed-out urbanism of Smith's native Detroit. But in his hands these discarded parts are retrofitted with new life, revealing along the way his own troubled reconciliation with the city. "Without a doubt, without a doubt, without a doubt, Detroit has damaged me," Smith said. "I'm very much influenced by that place, but on a level that I'm still barely coming to terms with."

For someone who has always felt like an outsider in the art world, the 37-year-old artist is rising rapidly within it. He currently has work on view at MoMA PS1 and at Michael Benevento gallery in Los Angeles. In May, he will open a solo show at SculptureCenter in New York.

No one is more surprised by this success than Smith himself. He said he has consistently gone against conventional wisdom. Though he received an M.F.A. from Yale, while his classmates all opted for the traditional route of moving to New York or Berlin after their studies, Smith and his girlfriend, artist Petrova Giberson, decided to get married, have a baby, and move back to Detroit. "I don't really like artists for the most part," he said.

He called the following three years "by far the most rewarding of my life." He took a teaching job at the College for Creative Studies in downtown Detroit, where he had studied as an undergraduate. Like him, the students were "not aspiring art stars. They didn't even think art was cool," he said. Many had never been to a museum before, but happened to show some kind of artistic proficiency. More importantly, though, he saw in them a hunger that emerges only in places where nothing is taken for granted.

In 2012, Smith had his own breakthrough when he was invited to stage a major show in Lisbon, Portugal, and to participate in the Whitney Biennial. But before he could enjoy any of it, "all hell broke loose." As Detroit languished on the verge of bankruptcy, Smith's brother died suddenly of a drug overdose. Being in his hometown felt "increasingly traumatic," he said. So, with another baby on the way, he and his wife relocated near her family in Hopkinton, New Hampshire, where they live today.

Although he remains entrenched on the sidelines—he hasn't been to an art opening in years—Smith's influence is seeping fast into the contemporary sculpture scene in New York. Its strains are particularly evident in the work of young stars like Kevin Beasley and Kate Levant, both of whom have lived in Detroit as well.

Smith is still planning his show at SculptureCenter, a process that involves combing eBay for resonant objects. He could not anticipate what the search would yield, but he knew for sure that his habitually humble scale would not increase just because of the venue's size. "That will never be the case," he said. "Human scale is what interests me. I'm basically drawing ghosts."

