

**CURATORIAL ESSAY**  
**HERE MANY WORDS**  
**ANN MACDONALD**



Peter Smith, *Mountain and/or Other Gods*, detail, 2008.

**“There is no reason not to consider the world as one gigantic painting.”**

**- Robert Rauschenberg**

When I received Peter Smith’s exhibition proposal, the envelope was lumpy: it contained a dollar-store globe, slightly bigger than a tennis ball and dented from its travels with Canada Post. Mysteriously, part of French Polynesia had been carefully cut away from its paper coating. A rectangular white void remained—only one of the many enigmas that were a part of Peter’s artistic production. I had admired Peter’s work for many years and, in getting to know him, quickly learned that he was a man as generous and free with his insights and quirky sense of humour as he was with his materials. One loose connection, thought, or visual moment would lead to the next; significations would break down, and new and varied meanings were created. Peter’s constructions are dense with a multitude of meanings and secrets, so many that he would at times shrug his shoulders and offer a bemused smile when queried. He found increased complexity comforting rather than unsettling.

Peter’s email messages reproduced in this catalogue were composed as we were planning the exhibition. He would send them casually, and they are stream-of-consciousness snippets that graced my inbox amidst the swell of other messages begging my more “practical” attention. I have squirreled them away and still look at them often. I am finally sitting to write these words more than one year after Peter’s passing. When he

and I decided to mount a solo exhibition, I had no idea that our working relationship would be cut short.

Peter thoughtfully absorbed the overabundance of information swirling around us in our modern world. He worked in the studio to grapple with and synthesize inherent complications and idiosyncrasies, and to represent the macrocosm in assemblages that are comprised of the detritus of our day. In his works, a universe inhales and exhales; domino dots and the heads of screws glisten like stars, while oil-painted cars on clogged expressways carry passengers to unknown destinations. His assemblages unite throwaway culture with joy, and rather than proposing a mastery of lived chaos, generate a demonstrated curiosity that compels creativity. The works offer a fresh look at the distillation of the urban experience and are an ode to the everyday. Peter brought attention to pleasure with his bold use of colour and his representation of a reality that rejoices in its bluntness and its beingness. He was able to coalesce the bombardment of urban commotion and dollar-store detritus into intricate harmonies that engage the eye, heart, and mind—compulsively yet gently enticing the viewer to recognize affinities in the midst of chaos, so that the headlights of cars may be enjoyed on the same plane as a multitude of stars in the sky.

You May Find Yourself is comprised primarily of wall assemblages, sculptures, and large-scale prints. The exhibition also includes a video component—in these unassuming vignettes, Peter describes his experience with

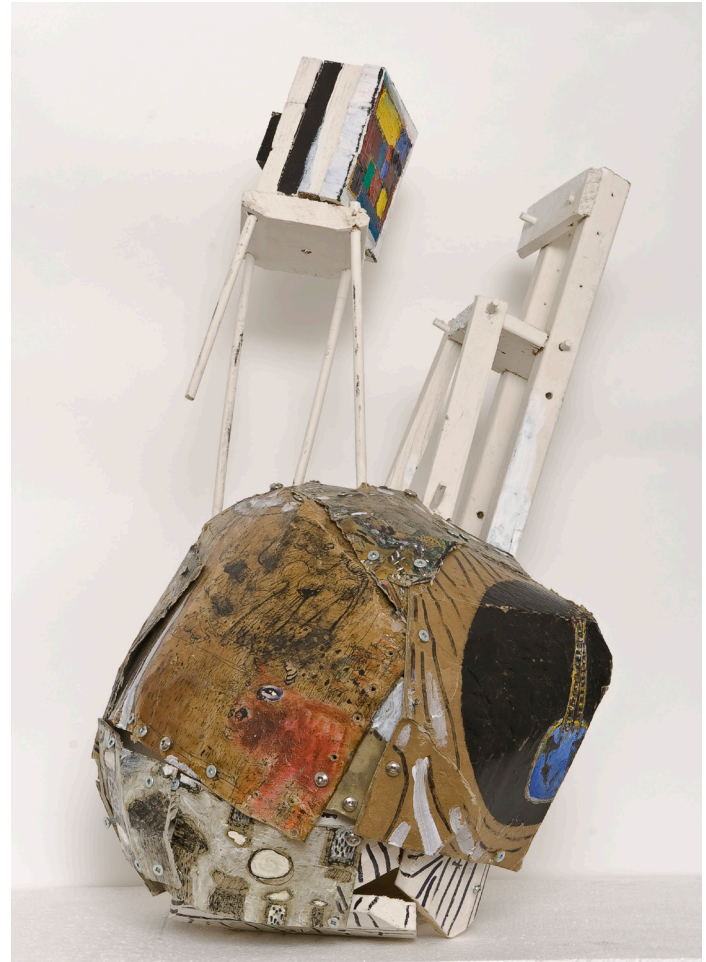
mental illness. With a calm composure that belies his compulsive assemblages, he appears bemused by his experiences and is candid in his recollections. These videos are poignant, gentle in tone, and subtly humorous. Consistent with his assemblages and prints, they present yet another facet to the diversity of understandings with which viewers may approach the world. In the videos, he presents himself as a contemporary Atlas—with not merely one but a multitude of (albeit dollar-store) globes duct-taped to his body. I think it is this tongue-in-cheek approach that enabled him to describe the perils and tortures of an enduring mental illness and its chemical treatments, alongside received moments of kindness and blessings, including artmaking.

I have always been interested in people who manage to straddle different worlds. Artists like Peter are portals into a larger, more complex life. They have broken the barrier tape and have tasted a freedom that is paradoxically enlightening and burdensome. The connection between increased wisdom and amplified grief has been documented in Greek mythology and onward.

Peter's imagery included: scrap-metal spaceships, airplanes, cars, bumblebees, illness, atoms, sun, rain, feet, shoes, socks, burgers, cows, eclipses, roads, buildings, ships, Mother Nature, love, television, constellations, Christopher Columbus, gluts of traffic, trees bearing fruit amidst smog, mountains, inner worlds, violence, time and space, advertising, vortices, arrows, brains, Barack Obama, cowboys, suburban cookie-cutter houses, guns, infirmaries, heads, medicine, and birds, to name only a few. Many things could cohabit in a single assemblage, and were democratized through his production, which combined expert painting skills with raw finds at the dollar store or whittled sticks from the yard.

The bric-a-brac—sometimes including previously carved out but now-repurposed works—coalesced into a stream of ideas representing a moment here or an eternity there. Though the landscapes could change from a television screen on the fritz to cows quietly roaming a bucolic field, Peter's gaze was the quick, city dweller's scan. Brian O'Doherty wrote about this "vernacular glance" while describing Rauschenberg's work. Peter's radical and democratic sense of interconnectivity in both philosophy and materiality continues Rauschenberg's trajectory. O'Doherty defines the term accordingly:

The vernacular glance doesn't recognize categories of beautiful and ugly. It's just interested in what's there. Easily surfeited, cynical about big occasions, the vernacular glance develops



Peter Smith, *Top of the World*, 2005-2007.

a taste for anything, often notices or creates the momentarily humorous, but doesn't follow it up. Nor does it pause to remark on unusual juxtapositions, because the unusual is what it is geared to recognize, without thinking about it. It dispenses with hierarchies of importance, since they are constantly changing according to where you are and what you need. The vernacular glance sees the world as a supermarket. A rather animal faculty, it is pithy, shrewd, and abrupt, like slang. [1]

Smith's assemblages reflect the information overload we encounter on a daily basis, but with this vernacular glance he managed to embrace and synthesize all sorts of phenomena and present them anew in a compassionate, intelligent yet uncritical manner. Pictures within pictures keep us looking and looking; the viewer makes clumsy, unexpected discoveries like the foolhardy adventurer Christopher Columbus, alluded to in one of the assemblages. The works are far from didactic and simply share with the viewer the multitude of what is. Smith's versions of chaos are life-affirming and bear witness to our existence in its wholesome imperfection. His use of text usually comes in the form of children's wooden



Peter Smith, *Mountain and/or Other Gods*, detail, 2008.

block letters. In addition to being formally engaging, they may suggest that our development and cognition is at a very naive stage.

Smith's propensity to ask questions rather than pass judgments is in keeping with notions of the contemporary sublime. While historical understandings of the sublime describe fundamentally transformative moments while one is confronted with the terror of the abyss that is typically infinity as seen in nature, the contemporary sublime is understood as the overwhelming awareness of infinity as inspired by technology. The sublime in contemporary art is less about transcendence or religious feeling, and rather more about an imminent transcendence that is grounded in the everyday. The sense of smallness or personal insignificance once inspired by nature can now be understood as stoicism in the face of all that is immeasurable in the globalized, urban environment. In *Untitled (Back of Head)*, 2009, Smith creates a relationship between the finite and the infinite—the grit of the streets reaches toward an open and expanding universe, and the universe is reflected in streetlamps and lit-up buildings. The image of artist as *rückenfigur* goes beyond the personal to represent the sense of awe and wonder that humankind has experienced through the ages.

... I am always looking for a kind of sublime beauty ... one that keeps someone to look again. There is a certain amount of pleasure dealing with uncertainty as long as your not fooling yourself about being uncertain. If your uncertain about being uncertain I figure your half way there. On my part to be fair dealing with uncertainty is easier to deal with if you have a roof over your

head good food to eat and someone you loove to share these things with[2]

While many things change, the aesthetic experience provided by the arts, including the prolific work of Peter Smith, continues to express the desire to understand infinity or that which seems beyond the abilities of our imaginations.

Peter Smith has created a distinctive visual language that defies simple categorization or genealogical tracing. Most purely seen, it is “the real thing”—artistic production that must come about: suppression would be untenable. The subjectivity of the worlds Peter created in all their confounding peculiarities ask that, in their viewing, we bring our experience and leave behind our assumptions. With openness, we can access his worlds and develop deeper appreciation for a multitude of relationships in our natural and created environments.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Brian O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth* (New York: Ridge Press, Random House, 1973), p. 197.
2. Email correspondence from the artist, 2009.

---

This essay accompanies *Peter Smith: You May Find Yourself* at The Doris McCarthy Gallery from March 13 - April 14, 2010.

COVER IMAGE: Peter Smith, *Blown His Stack*, 2005-2008.

**DORIS  
MCCARTHY  
GALLERY**



UNIVERSITY OF  
**TORONTO**  
SCARBOROUGH

