

David Benjamin Smith

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An Interview with David B. Smith by Bahareh Khoshooee on the occasion of Smith's solo exhibition *Same but Different* at David B. Smith Gallery, Denver CO., May 15 - June 27, 2021.

PDF of this interview

PDF of the accompanying collection of writing by Ayeh Bandeh-Ahmadi, Katie Berta, and Svetlana Kitto.

1. You're showing this work at David B. Smith gallery who shares the same name as you. How did you navigate this coincidental relationship and amplify it as an intentional analogy?

When I first heard about David B. Smith and his Gallery in Denver about 12 years ago, I thought it was a funny coincidence that we shared the same name - especially because both of us were using our middle initials in order to stand apart from David Smith the modernist sculptor. Having the same name as a famous artist, and now a gallerist, led me to consider how expectations of originality and personal narrative affect how an artist is interpreted, even before their art is seen.

After 10 years of knowing each other, we decided to do a show together, and our shared name was an opportunity to explore themes I'd been working on such as the construction of the self, memory, personal narrative, and identity. The resulting show draws a comparison between the recipes that make up artworks, and the formulae that make up narratives of self.



3. Tell me a bit about your process. What are the practical and conceptual steps that you take to get from an initial idea to the finished work?

I start with photographic images from my daily life, my memory, and digital collective consciousness, then digitally cut, paste, filter, and layer those images before outputting them onto a variety of fabrics by printing, weaving, and other transfer techniques.



2. Each of the works in the show references the other pieces and seem to belong to an imagined world that visualizes your personal mythology. Do you see yourself as a world builder through your art practice?

I work to imagine ways of being in the world - of rearranging inner and outer elements. I do this by manipulating images on fabric by collaging, cutting, folding, stuffing, decorating, and upholstering it - the pieces then relate to each other in unexpected ways, creating relational narratives that are unfolding, expanding, and open to interpretation.

I don't build specific worlds - but practice gestures that defy expectations of how things should be done - to understand how creative action can be incorporated into daily life, to make the world different from that which is given to you. I embrace chaos, mistakes, layering of intentions, and rupture - I practice breaking things down - like composting to build a foundation for growth. The worlds that emerge reflect this entropy - like vines responding to a shifting environment.



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I manipulate the fabrics by cutting, sewing, collaging, upholstering, coloring, embroidering, folding, stuffing, and an ever-expanding list of actions that are sequenced in code-like scripts to create image/action/objects that are evidence of their process - of the time, ideas, and actions that made them. I continue to transform the works over time to add chance, synchronicity and organizational principles that I couldn't have thought of before - so that the objects feel alive by exceeding and/or defying my expectations.



6. The implication of time is always present in the work. Especially in your sculptures there is a sense of movement. It's as if the sculptures and 2D images are living creatures that are frozen in time. Could you speak to the significance of time and movement in your work?

My practice aims to slow down and understand perception and narrative, which takes place not only in the moment, but includes previous knowledge, expectations and interpretations of any situation. To reflect this, I put many types of energy into each piece so that there can be a conversation between them. I may photograph a previous piece, digitally alter it and collage it with a separate image, then re-photograph them together and output this new image onto fabric. Then I might embroider into the fabric and add pigment, accumulating different speeds, intentions, and attitudes in one physical place.

By placing these different types of work together, I disorient myself and the viewer - to de-center the person viewing, and to make the object open to interpretation - making the viewer aware that the meaning of something depends on the relationship its elements, and between the situation and the meaning-maker - human, conscious, or otherwise.



4. Your older imagery often makes an appearance in the newer pieces - do you see these moments as flashbacks, foreshadows, motifs, or something else?

I see this returning to the past as a looping strategy to move forward - sort of like growing new plants in the compost of older organic scraps. Much of my work is in this space of tension between what has happened and what hasn't happened yet, so bringing in previous content, materials, and processes, but interpreting them in new ways, allows me to make something new at any moment - to see what happens, like a scientist in a lab.

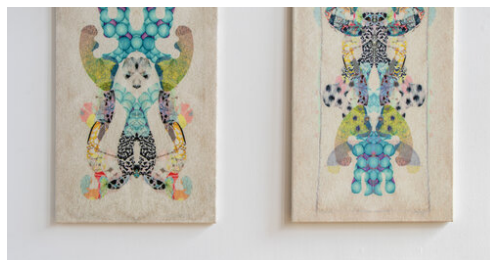
I started as a photographer, and I find that darkroom moment when the image appears on blank paper as magic. I work to extend the space and time between the source imagery and the final result. I often continue the evolution after the piece is shown - some works being reconfigured each time they are shown, such as *Tangle*, the interwoven soft sculpture made of several elements that can be composed in different ways and un-tangled infinitely.



7. In the press release you discuss complexity of identities and your refusal of pigeonholing or flattening those complexities. How does your work reflect this interest in alternative ways of perception and being?

I don't have a solid self - I transform depending on the situation and the context. One lens to view this is through my experience as a third

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8. It seems that collaboration is an extension of your practice. Could you tell me about the writing collection that accompanies this show? How did it start and how is it expanding on the themes of your exhibition?

My work is about interconnections, collectivity, and the blurring of borders between people - often focusing on the nature of relationships between beings. I think of my installations as platforms for collective creativity and have hosted sound performances, movement, meditation, ceremonies, and other group activities.

While on residency at Millay Arts, I met three writers, Katie Berta, Svetlana Kitto and Ayeh Bandeh-Ahmadi. We were all invested in our own art forms and languages, yet I was fascinated by how our languages intertwined, reflected and diverged, creating a field of meaning and form when considered as part of the same landscape. We were reflecting what was going on around us and this paradox of working separately yet together was something I wanted to highlight.

I invited these writers to contribute a text that related to the idea of Same but Different - to explore it from different directions, to encircle it. I wove the pieces together in a document interspersed with my textile works from the exhibition. The result was that we could all see our works from a different perspective - maybe as part of something larger than ourselves, also it gave us chances to talk more, to share our opinions and feelings, as we invested in, expanded, and solidified our community.

9. What's next for you and your practice? Will you be making more pairs in the future or was this a specific strategy for this body of work?

I want to make work that is both reassuring yet mysterious, that reminds me to keep dreaming and imagining, and does this with relatively modest materials and methods to exude energy from everyday materials. I want to make work that invites a range of interpretation - that welcomes curiosity, and presence, that frames changes, that

generation immigrant of Ashkenazic Jewish descent - and that my grandparents on my dad's side escaped genocide - and that persecution and discrimination is genetically encoded in my identity, so I'm equipped with skills of transformation as a defense.

I've found more of a shifting personal landscape. For a long time, I saw this as a deficit, and felt that something was wrong - but through exploring these feelings through my work, through meditation - I have come to think of flexibility and adaptability as strengths. I acknowledge that which we inherit, but also welcome transformation, re-conception, growth, and dissolution. So it's not that I seek alternative models of perception, but instead I seek to embrace the non-conventional ways of seeing reality as shifting, un-stable, and nonlinear, or non-normal.

I seek to find language that allows multiple realities to exist at once - for me and the viewer to feel comfortable moving between these different modes - and to illustrate the place where this interchange occurs. I think of this as an opportunity to explore one's discomforts, fears, in a safe way - to see them for what they are and to sit with them - as a meditator does - observing a range of shifting feelings, sensations, thoughts, rather than having one interpretation.



10. Is there anything else you would like to share?

For me, the works themselves are important, but even more important is for each person to have a way to tell their story - whether it be through making things, speaking with others, writing - to share their inner worlds - and to see that inner world mirrored in others.

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are always around the corner, as opportunities for engagement, rather than scenarios that trap us with fear.

The question of what's next is a perfect place to start this process - to lean into action, to experiment with curiosity. I am excited about the possibility of the of all the options, but also of choosing which direction might get us closer to our goals. It's a process of seeing where it takes you, and going from there - the goal and the process always in a productive and surprising dialogue.

Thank you for the invitation to host and archive our conversation, for being in relation to me, in community, and I hope both of our work and our curiosity will continue to provide the chance and inspiration for mutual learning, dreaming, building, and care-taking.

