

# ART VOICES

DECEMBER 2008 / ISSUE 10

NEW ORLEANS

MIAMI

ATLANTA

DC

NEW YORK CITY

LOS ANGELES

SEATTLE



**TERRENCE SANDERS**

FRANKLIN SIRMANS

SHAWNE MAJOR

FRANK RELLE

AUGUSTE GARUFI

# MATTHEW M. SMITH

## HIS RECENTLY STARTED STORY

BY LARISSA LECLAIR

**M**atthew M. Smith is an unassuming young artist whose work has been seen all over DC. His photographs have been included in four shows this past year – and he has only just started. Smith first took up a camera less than two years ago, though the interest was always there. His work has been shown in “DCist Exposed” at Civilian Art Projects, Artomatic, 1460 Wall Mountables at DC Arts Center, and Move Along at Bloombars in Columbia Heights – and this all in 2008.

Smith was trained in geography and works with satellite imagery at the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center. In visual terms, his spatially mature eye exudes from his work in both how the photographs are constructed and composed and how he arranges them in relation to each other – in triptychs, diptychs and grids. The images are stripped of anything unnecessary, just as his maps are simple and easy to read. And there is a certain clinical palette that resonates throughout all his series.

When talking about his digital process in general Matt explains, “I don’t take many photos. I generally don’t get ideas through shooting. I tend to think about my work a lot during the day when things are slow at work or when I’m driving or cooking or whatever. In the meantime, I look at a lot of other photographers’ work, and at some point the concept materializes in my mind. It’s often a sort of preliminary sketch and it takes a couple of weeks of shooting to morph it into something more concrete that I feel communicates something. Even during this process I don’t take many photos because I always have a certain idea in mind. I shoot it and then it either works or it doesn’t, or it needs changes but the idea is very concrete.”

Smith has three ongoing series in which expressions of self-view of the world and personal experience play out in his photographs. His work is an internal journey that manifests itself in deliberate spatial plays of tension between the constructed and the real.

Each piece in *Series 1* is comprised of a singular image followed by a triptych of photographs. Smith isolates the banal, the mundane, the everyday and presents semi-abstract shapes devoid of context. The image of a hot water knob begins one grouping, followed by the triptych of a cold water knob, a shower head, and the artist’s forehead in the shower. Rather than creating a narrative, pairing these photographs together into a triptych actually deconstructs a process. Smith focuses on order and geometric arrangement and presents the viewer with a pragmatic view of that upon which we may not focus in our daily routine.

*Series 2*, as Smith describes, “represent[s] the awkwardness of the human experience (maybe only my own experience) as both ‘flesh-



untitled 2, from "Series 3"

# HIS WORK IS AN INTERNAL JOURNEY THAT MANIFESTS ITSELF IN DELIBERATE SPATIAL PLAYS OF TENSION BETWEEN THE CONSTRUCTED AND THE REAL.

and-bones' and as a social/technological construct that is artificial and meaningless. Hopefully, when people view these photos there will be a tension created by one image (the human form) that is then, on some level, resolved or explained by the adjacent image." In one diptych, blurry legs and feet stand on a dirty floor. The second panel counters this unkempt, imperfect state of human existence with a photograph of the book *How to Write, Speak, and Think More Effectively*. Smith strips down reality and exposes the self without embellishment. In another diptych, he pairs raw meat with a body blur in bed. Motion signifies to Smith some sort of inner struggle and parallels the meat to the human body as flesh. This piece may also allude to a not-so-positive view of relationships which brings us to his final series.

*Series 3* was inspired by the work of Sophie Calle, *Take Care of Yourself*, about which a friend and critic of Calle, Renaud-Clement, commented, "The men are afraid of it, I find. She pins them down." Matthew Smith turns that on its head, as a male artist exposing his relationship pitfalls. The text is raw and in your face, balanced with the subtlety of the photographic image. The voice is that of the women, but it is the man as artist who presents the words. The text in "untitled 2" reads:

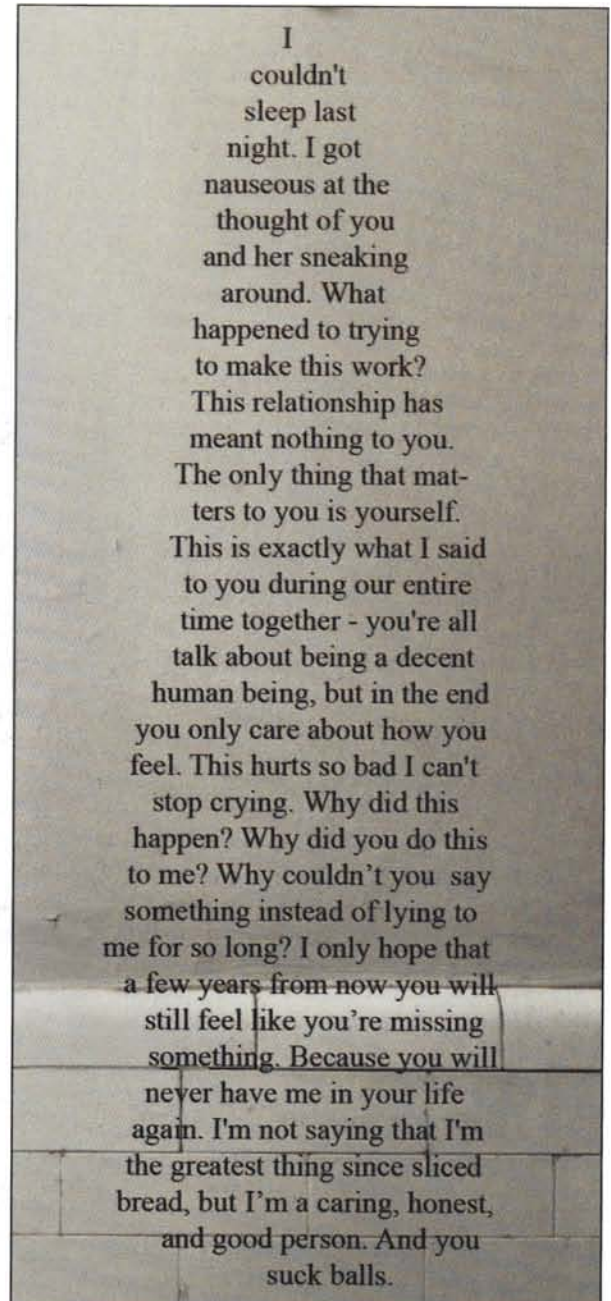
"I couldn't sleep last night. I got nauseous at the thought of you and her sneaking around. What happened to trying to make this work? This relationship has meant nothing to you. The only thing that matters to you is yourself. This is exactly what I said to you during our entire time together - you're all talk about being a decent human being, but in the end you only care about how you feel. This hurts so bad I can't stop crying. Why did this happen? Why did you do this to me? Why couldn't you say something instead of lying to me for so long? I only hope that a few years from now you will still feel like you're missing something. Because you will never have me in your life again. I'm not saying that I'm the greatest thing since sliced bread, but I'm a caring, honest, and good person. And you suck balls."

The text in all the diptychs in *Series 3* were drawn from e-mails Smith has received over the years from girlfriends. These constructed singular moments in the photographs are personal to Smith. The actual moment is long over but the e-mails still exist. The text, as evidence, signifies the other person without visually representing them in the image. By putting this work out there is Smith presenting himself as self-absorbed or as utterly vulnerable? Whose vulnerability is he showing? Is he recognizing or verifying that what the words say is true? Is he owning up to the words or having the last word? And how is this related to the cues in the photos? There is certainly a sense of loss and emptiness in the work, and that of being coolly dispassionate.

"When I was in high school and undergrad I enjoyed writing fiction. Probably not very good at it but I enjoyed it and thought I was good. But I could never finish anything I ever wrote. I would always start a story and could never take it beyond the introduction... A couple of months ago I was talking with my roommate about some photographs I was framing and he told me that what he enjoyed the most about my images was that they started telling a story but never finished the story, and this reminded me of all the half written stories I could never finish because anything I wrote in addition to the introduction seemed grotesquely obvious. Maybe I didn't have the skills to be subtle in other mediums [sic] but I do in photography."

It looks to me that Matthew M. Smith successfully expresses himself photographically and he is well on his way to developing fully many of these photographic "stories."

This work can be seen at [www.matthewmsmith.com](http://www.matthewmsmith.com). New work by Matthew M. Smith will be shown at *Touchstone Gallery, 406 7th Street NW, 2nd Floor, Washington, DC* in January 2009.



detail of *untitled 2*, from "Series 3"