

DODGING CHAINSAWS

26 APRIL 2024 – 1 JUNE 2024





MARTIN SMITH

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Martin Smith, 2024. Photographer Marisa Bartolini.

Front cover image: *Stand up*, 2014, pigment print with hand cut letters. Private collection.

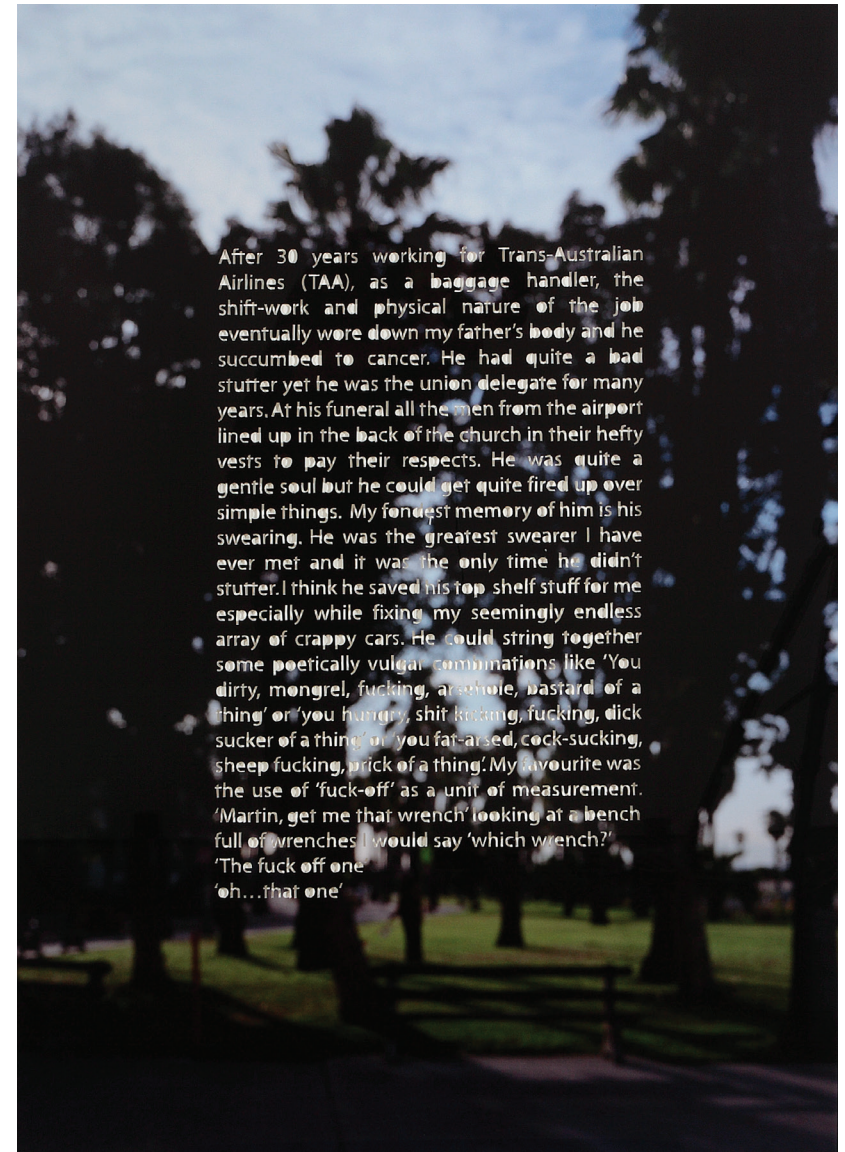
FOREWORD

Logan Art Gallery is delighted to be presenting the extraordinary *Dodging Chainsaws*, a retrospective exhibition of Martin Smith's photo-text art practice. This exhibition continues the gallery's commitment to presenting outstanding contemporary art experiences by leading Queensland artists for our community and visitors to enjoy.

In this exhibition Martin presents a series of artworks that represent 20 years of arts practice. In each artwork, a personal story is hand cut into an unrelated photographic image to construct two narratives. These narratives blend to create the final image. The text creates silhouetted voids across the photographic surface echoing the ephemeral nature of memory. The discarded letters that have fallen, line the bottom of each frame, all jumbled up, creating a shifting trace of the narratives in the artwork. Martin aims to encourage the viewer to question the role photography plays in creating memories, identity, and personal narratives.

I would like to sincerely thank Martin Smith for sharing this spectacular body of artwork and Dr Louise R Mayhew for her inspirational words that provide a context for the exhibition. I also extend my thanks to the private lenders who have generously lent artworks from their collections for this exhibition.

Niomi Sands
Creative Industries Program Leader
Logan Art Gallery



Fixing my seamlessly endless array of crappy cars, 2007, pigment print with hand cut letters. Private collection.

MARTIN SMITH: DODGING CHAINSAWS

In his work, Smith shares memories and recontextualises words spoken to him to create a fragmented retelling of his life. A novel, of sorts. Photography and text, or more accurately photographic texts, sit at the centre of this work. As he stretches into sculpture and sculptural forms, found objects and assemblage, the narrative devices of his image + text-based practice continue. In tandem with the landscape images, photographic portraits, and objects into/onto which his words are inscribed, Smith's words create a sense of intimate specificity and universalism. Said another way, in Smith's work we encounter both the artist as a unique individual and moments from his life, as well as feelings, sentiments, places, interrelational moments of awkward embarrassment, poignant honesty, misinterpretation, and humour familiar to our own.

In this collection, Smith excerpts works from a two-decade long and continuing project on fatherhood. Initiated when Smith's own father passed away, and when Smith himself was a new father to his first child, the series references both Smith's father and his own experiences of fathering as well as alluding to the religious fathers of Smith's Catholic schooling.

At times, the paternal figure Smith evokes is omnipresent yet distant and unknowable, such as when he pairs a black-and-white triptych of an outstretched arm and furled hand with the words: "god only knows". This mysterious image is heavy with possible meaning and im/moral undertones, begging the questions: 'what does god know?' or more directly: 'what has happened here?'. By using a lower case 'g', Smith intercepts interpretation of the knowing figure as the Christian God (whose monotheistic status is inferred and conferred by a capital 'G'), in turn locating this god, perhaps malevolently, on Earth. Elsewhere, the father is rendered more precisely, with physical characteristics, a job, colleagues, a timeline, and warmly remembered personality traits. In further works, fatherhood is an internal dialogue, a reflection on the past with ramifications in the present.

Interestingly, just as Smith shifts his focus from one father figure to another, he also changes and plays with authorial perspectives and positions.

In *Enough*, Smith speaks with his own voice. In *Credo*, he borrows advice from a collector, ironically fulfilling and undoing the request for "more sex, less death" by inscribing these words on a tombstone. In *Stand Up*, he writes about himself from the imagined, future perspective of his child, referring to himself in the past tense with the opening words: "My dad was a lecturer at university ...".

In *Revelation*, Smith's authorial disguise is especially effective. Three children stand lined up and poised for the camera in matching yellow t-shirts. Only the middle child smiles, indexing the familiar impossibility of a 'nice family portrait' where 'all the kids are smiling' and 'all of them are looking at the camera'. Across their collective front, Smith's signature hand-cut lettering reads: "My father is a deeply flawed human being". Tension and intrigue arises in locating the speaking figure who says this about their father. Both the advanced vocabulary and psychological awareness of the statement suggest an author other than the young children, but if Smith is speaking then who is the subject? Himself or his own father? These slippages between speaking children and father, named father and grandfather, open up the possibility for recognising other fathers, all fathers, our fathers, also, in Smith's words "Aren't they all?".

By using the written word in his explorations of fatherhood, Smith recollects long associations between language and patriarchy. For Jacques Lacan, for example, the name-of-the-father (note already the intertwining of language and fatherhood), is the fundamental signifier (or the primary symbol) that allows signification (language and communication) to proceed. The name-of-the-father both confers identity and establishes law. In other words, the figure of the father is inextricably tied to language, meaning, and moral order, and by extension to logic, vision, and culture.

In *Waiting for the darkness*, Smith inscribes the work's titular question onto his childhood cricket bat. The pairing presents a suite of possible interpretations. Is the darkness metaphorical, pointing to a kind of metaphysical death? Is the bat an indicator of violence, a threat of making the world turn black? Is daddy oedipal, a fetishistic referent to a dominant but care-giving sexual partner and might darkness be 'la petite mort'? Or can we find our way in these words to the work's origin, when Smith surveyed his freshly mown lawn at the end of a day and one of his sons asked innocently, unsure of what his father was doing: "are you waiting for the darkness, daddy?".

By highlighting the fallibility of language, its inherent tendency toward truncation, miscommunication and misunderstanding, Smith starts to unravel the logic of the father. This movement away from the documentary promise of photography, and the imagined clarity and rationality of language, continues in the materiality of Smith's work. In lieu of the mechanical, type-written captions of Conceptual art (which combined data and dictionary definitions with the typewriter to suggest a 'neutral' voice), Smith hand-cuts letters from his photographs, delicately trimming each word away with the use of a surgical scalpel.

In doing so, he transforms two-dimensional photographs into three-dimensional forms, adding material depth to a medium revered for its illusory space. In keeping with the operations of memory, this cutting away also highlights the primary role that absence and negative space plays in any story. But most importantly, Smith shifts language into the physical realm, making text tactile instead of specular, bodily instead of cerebral, connected to the artist's hand rather than impersonal, authorial or distant. Smith inscribes his labour, repetitive and precise, into his work, likening language to a scar.

Sometimes Smith's extracted letters sit sprinkled and trapped within his work's frames, like fallen autumnal leaves. Sometimes they mimic tears, recollecting his family's grief at his father's passing. Sometimes, as in *Therapist*, they collate so densely as to become unspeakable. They glitch. In all of these forms, language is fragile and evocative.

Smith thinks, rather poignantly, of images and letters as the evidence of our lives. In his words, we become language after we die. Via this reasoning, Smith's work reveals itself as less concerned with the rear-view mirror of memory and nostalgia and more deliberately oriented toward a point on the road ahead, one where Smith is no longer here. In creating this archive of his future, Smith shares parts of himself with an extraordinary honesty and integrity. This makes me think of the work as a gift to Smith's children, who one day will seek to know and remember him, and by extension as a rare and very special insight into the artistic novel he pens for them.

Dr Louise R Mayhew

Dr Louise R Mayhew is an Australian Feminist Art Historian and the Founding Editor of *Lemonade: Letters to Art*. Louise and Martin worked alongside one another at Queensland College of Art, 2017–2019.



Bored of being bored, 2023, pigment print with hand cut letters. Courtesy the artist.



God only knows, 2016, silver gelatin print with hand cut letters. Courtesy the artist.



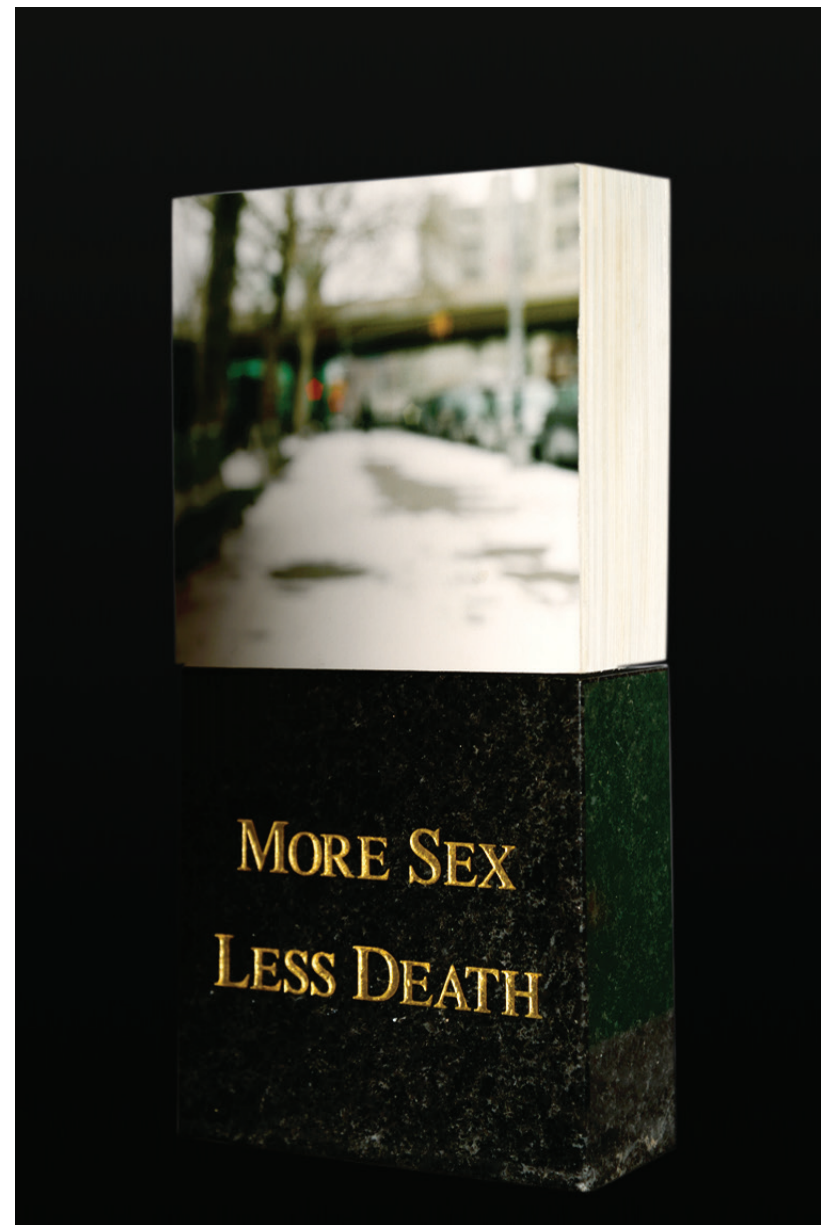
Enough, 2009, pigment print with hand cut letters. Private Collection.



Waiting for the darkness, 2008, carved cricket bat. Private collection.



In response to conversations with a therapist as a narrative device, 2008, released letters over wooden giraffe. Private Collection.



Credo, 2016, Pigment prints, granite with gold leaf. Private collection.



Revelation #1, 2011, pigment print. Courtesy the artist.



Revelation #4, 2011, pigment print. Courtesy the artist.

LIST OF WORKS

Stand up, 2014

pigment print with hand cut letters. Private collection.

Fixing my seamlessly endless array of crappy cars, 2007

pigment print with hand cut letters. Private collection.

Bored of being bored, 2023

pigment print with hand cut letters. Courtesy the artist.

God only knows, 2016

silver gelatin print with hand cut letters. Courtesy the artist.

Enough, 2009

pigment print with hand cut letters. Private collection.

Waiting for the darkness, 2008

carved cricket bat. Private collection.

In response to conversations with a therapist as a narrative device, 2008

released letters over wooden giraffe. Private collection.

Credo, 2016

pigment prints, granite with gold leaf. Private collection.

Revelation #1, 2011

pigment print. Courtesy the artist.

Revelation #4, 2011

pigment print. Courtesy the artist.

BIOGRAPHY

Martin Smith is a photo-text artist from Meanjin/Brisbane, Australia. His work stems from growing up with a profound stutter in suburban Australia. The isolation felt from the inability to communicate and engage freely with verbal language led to a desire to find alternative modes of expression to represent and define personal experience.

He received his Bachelor of Visual Arts majoring in Photography from the Queensland College of Art, and was awarded his PhD for his research titled *The Narrated Self: How can the combination of writing and photography be used to represent individual experience*, from Griffith University in 2018.

He is currently a senior lecturer in photography at the Queensland College of Art and Design. Recent projects have been *Precision* at Metro Arts, *Circle and Settle* at Res Artis as part of Photo 2022, and a commission from Hyatt Centric Hotel in Melbourne. His works are held in the collections of Queensland Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Monash City Art Gallery, University of Queensland and Artbank.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Logan Art Gallery would like to thank several people who have helped make this exhibition possible. First and foremost, the artist, Martin Smith, who helped at every stage to put together the exhibition and the catalogue. We would also like to thank lenders of Martin's work from Brisbane and Melbourne for the generous loan of the artist's significant pieces. A big thank you also to Dr Louis R Mayhew for an important and timely essay about Martin's work.

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