

Yau, John. "Better Days," *Hyperallergic*. 17 July, 2016.

# HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES • WEEKEND

## Better Days

by **John Yau** on July 17, 2016



*Installation View of "Zero Non Width-Joiner" (2016), Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC (all images courtesy Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC. Photo by Adam Reich, NYC)*

In 1987, Joe Becker, Lee Collins, and Mark Davis began investigating the possibilities of generating a Universal Coded Character Set (UCS) that would, among other things, enable a computer to encode, transmit, and translate one language into another. In order to do this, they had to make a catalog of every mark that can be made in a square; Unicode it is what emojis, dingbats, signs, and words have in common in the land of digital files. More than 25 years later, Unicode is basic to computer programming; it is literally everywhere and yet, like germs and air, we hardly notice it.

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In his recent exhibition, *Zero Width Non-Joiner* at Susan Inglett (June 9–July 29, 2016), Greg Smith brings together Unicode (computer language) and photographic slides, two information delivery systems, one current, the other outmoded. The inclusion of slides and slide trays suggests the possibility that Unicode will one day also be a dead container, like Latin.

At the heart of the exhibition is a filmed performance, *Total Runout, Heavy Sparkle* (2016), in which Smith employs a roster of unlikely materials and processes, including canvas, digital cameras, electronics, hardware, an outboard motor, sequins and slide projector. These objects are displayed throughout the gallery. By inviting us to find the connection between the film, in which the visuals are partially obscured, and the objects mounted on the walls of the room, Smith transforms viewers into translators receiving and transmitting information.

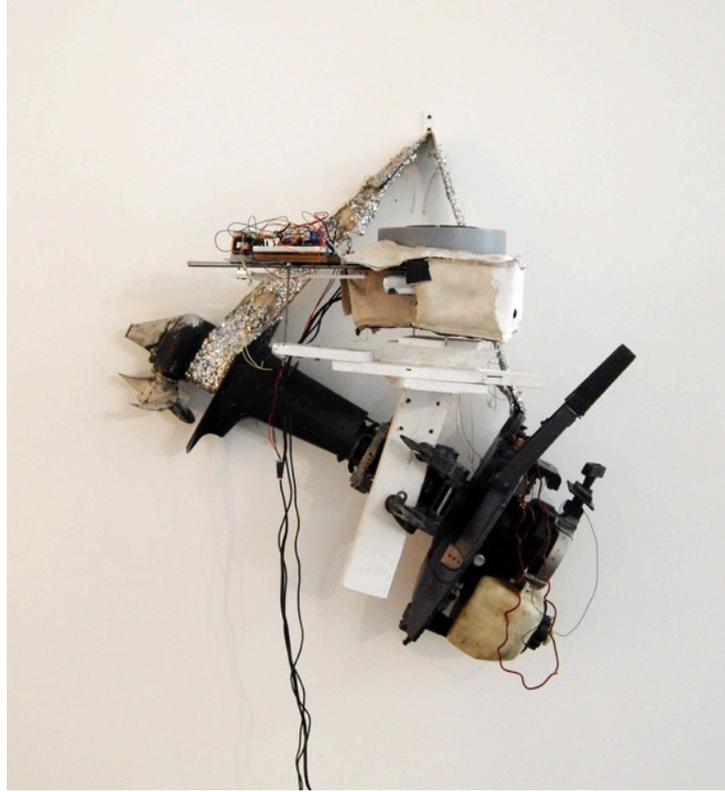


Greg Smith, "Total Runout, Heavy Sparkle (still) (2016), video, 9.05 minutes

Smith has constructed a set of stairs in the gallery where viewers can sit and watch the film projected on a wall. The construction recalls a time when artists rehabbed Soho industrial spaces and every nook and cranny became potentially a workstation. On the day my friend and I saw the show, there were two bottles of Pellegrino and a child's bucket full of snacks next to the stairs. Smith wants the viewer to relax and to enjoy the film. While obsolescence and absurdity are themes running through his work, he is never didactic. The humor permeating the work is gentle, self-mocking, and, to my mind, endearing. In his film *Breakdown Lane* (2013), which he showed in his 2014 show at this gallery, he sat in a bathtub full of water, which he installed in a car, and, with the help of mirrors, faced backwards as he drove down a highway's breakdown lane.

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The set of stairs in the current show leads to a narrow shelf or desk where notes and other ephemera have been attached, including a postcard of stacks of packing containers outside a large shipping container — something offloaded from a tanker.



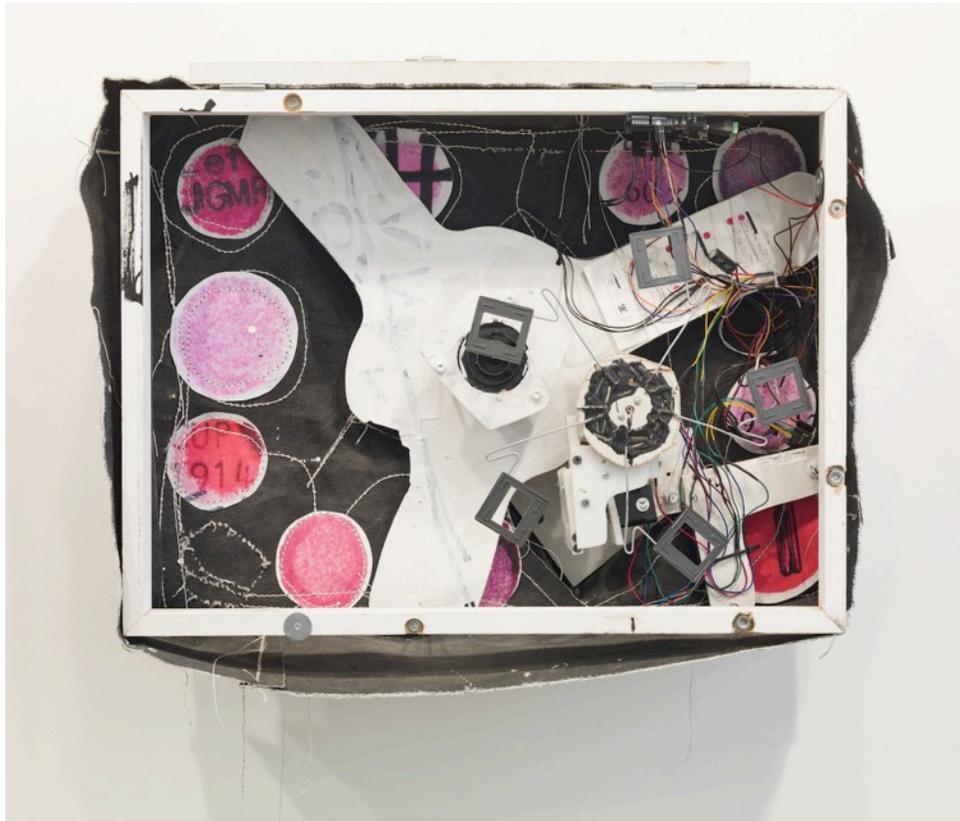
*Greg Smith, "Heavy Interrobang Ornament" (2016), canvas, digital camera, electronics, hardware, outboard motor, sequins and slide projector, 40 1/2 x 36 x 18 1/2 inches*

The exhibition's title, *Zero Width Non-Joiner*, refers to a non-printing character, which joins any two characters together to create something new — a kind of portmanteau. If I am proceeding piecemeal, it is because the show seems to demand a self-correcting approach, a slow take on what you saw and experienced. The different parts fit and don't fit together. The film documents a beguiling performance that seems to be broken up into different, highly circumscribed views. There is a clicking sound, as if a computer is determining the length of each sequence. Occasionally, lines of code appear over the performance. Sometimes the camera seems to be peering through a veil-like cloth. The artist is seen constructing something, then climbing up a structure, which you realize is the assemblage supporting the stairs you're sitting on, but before the stairs were installed. At one point, there is a view of him with "Heavy Interrobang Ornament" (2016, on display in the gallery), an artwork incorporating a slide projector, slung over his shoulder, as if it were a weapon or a tool of some kind. The camera, tightly focused on the action, never backs up, and we get only

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highly cropped views. Living inside a reality so shaped by computers and screens, how can we step outside and get an objective viewpoint?

For "Black Box (Unknown)" (2016), Smith has made a box that contains lenses and slide holders, which extend from a central point, like propeller blades. Smith has an amazing knack for turning functional objects into forms that stir up a wide range of associations, but don't look like anything we know. The work is both inviting and puzzling, which is a difficult balance to maintain. Like the great Franz West, Smith can be willfully and astutely unserious. Watching the film, I could not help but think that Smith was satirizing Matthew Barney and his series of performances, *Drawing Restraint*, having attached a sequin-covered strap to an outboard motor and in the process flipping around notions of masculinity and femininity, straight and queer. In fact, Smith's work does more than that, without ever devolving into displays of material excess or narcissism.



*Greg Smith, "Black Box (Unknown)" (2016), acrylic, canvas, hardware, latex paint, lenses, wood, epoxy and inkjet prints on paper, 20 x 25 x 8 inches*

I haven't mentioned the paintings, which upend the conventions of what is called, "the object," a term the art world has grown exceedingly fond of. They are done in acrylic on canvas, Duralar, and paper. He sews parts together and attaches them to the wall with thumbtacks. They are made in sets of four or five, which the artist arranges horizontally on the wall, like words in a sentence. Collectively, they are

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titled "Prompt," named after the signal that a computer gives when it is ready to receive a command. The paintings in each set are similar but not all the same size. There is always one canvas that is horizontal, while the others are vertical and nearly square. With their ragged edges and unpainted borders, the paintings look like they have been pulled off their stretchers. Each one is dominated by a painted sign (O, \$, :, and ~).



Greg Smith, "Three Rays Below, Heavy Sparkle (U+1F5E5, U+2748)" (2016), acrylic, canvas, cotton paper, Duralar, polyester thread and thumbtacks, 37 1/2 x 50 1/2 inches

The paintings feel temporary, as if they might be taken down and replaced. They suggest we are in the midst of changes of all kinds — which we are. The use of this abstract computer language is funny, especially since one of the signs is \$. The 0 recalls Jasper Johns' "targets" and Kenneth Noland's circles, except that these paintings feel like they were done by an unknown artist and left in the basement for years. What is new, and what is old, and does it matter?

What I like about Smith's work ever since I first saw it, is that he leaves you with questions, but he does so with a genuine sense of humor, and not with one of those strained laughs you hear at a party when someone is trying to be funny and failing. The failures you get in Smith's work feel inevitable and, in that sense, heartbreaking.

[Zero Width Non-Joiner](#) continues at Susan Inglett Gallery (522 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through July 29.