

**REAL
ART WAYS**

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Next" competition in 2005, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Next" was juried by Nicholas Baume, Chief Curator, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and Holly Block, Executive Director, Art in General, New York City.

The exhibition was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.



Real Art Ways is a multidisciplinary contemporary space, with an emphasis on supporting contemporary artists, fostering the creation of new work, and working in creative ways with community. Programs include music, performance, spoken word, film and video, and visual arts, including exhibitions and public art projects, and creative social events designed to connect people with each other. Founded in 1975, Real Art Ways is an alternative to mainstream museums and commercial culture; its programs are made possible by a diverse and growing audience and support from a wide range of enlightened funders.

On the cover: *Burnt*, graphite on paper, 2006.

Joseph Smolinski



Still from *Frozen*, single-channel digital video, 2006.

Joseph Smolinski: High Velocity in Slow Motion

By Saul Ostrow

Rather than the certainty associated with the aspirations of Modernism, contemporary art reflects the indeterminacy, instability, and uncertainty thrust upon everyday life by rapid changes in the technologies of communication and reproduction. The resulting environment—in which we're inundated with a surplus of data, information, simulations, novel distractions, and immaterial objects—appears to be a totalizing, inescapable phantasmagoria whose velocity denies us the possibility of claiming an objective position. We are led to believe that our intentions cannot be taken seriously; as such, our actions lose a lot of their meaning in advance. Obviously, this condition challenges artists who are interested in doing more than complaining about it or contributing to it. Joseph Smolinski is one such artist.

Though significantly different in form and content, the digital animation *Frozen*, the installation *Parasite*, and the drawings included in this exhibition all address how the virtualization of our external world has progressively led us to experience with apprehension ourselves and our social existence. While other artists approach this condition nostalgically or celebrate it,

Joseph Smolinski, originally from St. Paul, Minnesota, earned his BFA from the University of Wisconsin at River Falls in 1998. In 2001 he completed his MFA at the University of Connecticut. Joseph currently teaches drawing at the University of New Haven and Gateway Community College. His mixed-media installations and drawings are based on his interest in electronics, science, and the cycles of life and death. Joseph has shown his work both nationally and internationally. Currently he lives and works in New Haven, Connecticut.

www.smolinski.info

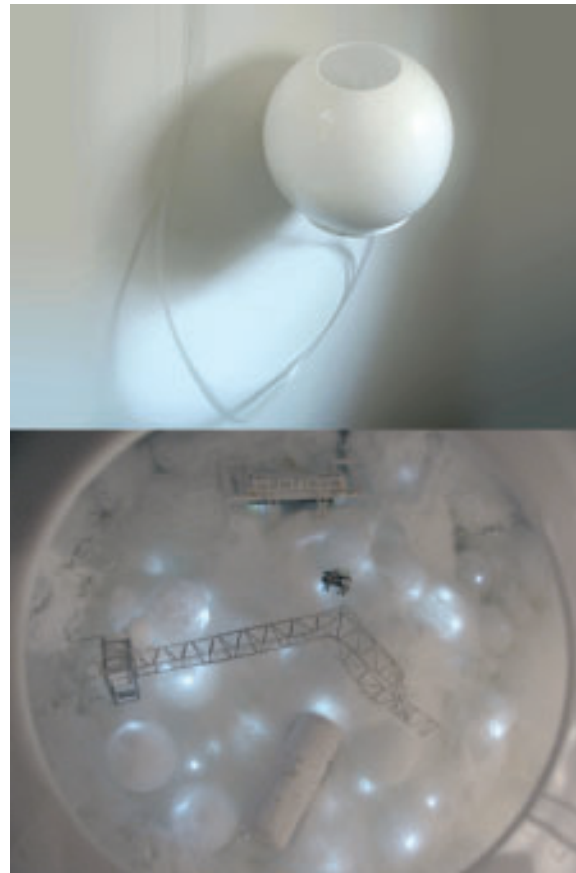
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Smolinski optimistically explores art's ability to form interfaces between differing material and conceptual categories as the means to purposefully mediate the fractured and convoluted space of contemporary life.

Smolinski formerly employed science-fair technologies, such as using potatoes to generate electricity, to critically mirror the irrational contemporary mindset that holds everything in reserve. In his most recent works, he continues to investigate the relationship between technology and the attitudes it engenders by producing the types of images and situations associated with the quirky alternate realities written about by sci-fi authors such as Philip K. Dick. For instance, Smolinski includes a series of drawings in which he uses the ubiquitous microwave antennae camouflaged as trees along our rural highways as a sign of our ever-increasing attempts to adapt nature to technology. He extends this logic in drawings such as *Crash II* (2006), in which one such tree, uprooted (and barren; it is leafless) has crushed its microwave antennae and a car. The tree is the protagonist, the car and antennae the victims. Maybe this is a suicide attack, nature taking its revenge, or just another moment in the unfolding narrative of the inexplicable "real"—that realm in which things "just happen."

In other drawings, Smolinski represents a more optimistic view in which trees and antennae benignly coexist, each functioning in accord with their respective purposes. The sci-fi back story for such images concerns a society in which nature, through genetic modification and nanotechnologies, has been denatured to such a degree that not only do trees

Crash II, graphite on paper, 2006.



Parasite, viewing orb and interior, mixed media, 2005.

play host to these antennae, or bear them as fruit, but the world of things has actually gained a degree of volition. Given Smolinski's straightforward, realist style of rendering and the inherent humor of the situations depicted, we can think of these drawings in terms of satire—irony—and social criticism.

Smolinski's enigmatic multimedia installation *Parasite* and his digital animation *Frozen*, however, employ decidedly more somber and less accessible strategies. In this pair of works, Smolinski takes as his subject those seemingly ominous presences that hover at the periphery of our perception

Frozen was made possible by the Outpost Cuts and Burns Artist Residency Program with funding provided by the Outpost Artist Resources. Special thanks to Ruth Kahn, David Dixon, and Keith Strand.

and come to occupy that place in our imagination that gives rise to flights of fantasy or paranoia. The combined effect of these two works is an open-ended narrative in which we find ourselves stranded in an ill-defined present delineated by a distant past and an indeterminate future.

Frozen transports us to a blue-white, arctic-like landscape shrouded in mist. It represents an inhabitable place as well as, metaphorically, an ill-defined and indistinct psychological terrain. From the vantage point of a simulated camera eye, we are optically moved through this space until we encounter (hunt) an alien entity. Its forms, seen at first indistinctly and in brief glimpses, are both insect- and machinelike, which leads us to hesitantly identify it as either some unfamiliar contraption or some yet unknown creature (both familiar mainstays of sci-fi and horror films). Likewise, given that the space inhabited is indeterminate, the "thing" seems comparatively scaleless. This sense of uncertainty is compounded by the soundtrack for *Frozen*: alternately, it can be construed as electronic music, the sound of the creature, or the sound of engines.

Inversely, *Parasite*, rather than immersing us in a virtual space, consists of a translucent white globe mounted on the wall just below eye level, allowing us to peer down into its interior. Inside is a dreamlike, winter landscape of cotton-fiber clouds and pearly white spheres that randomly blink and change color. This tiny self-contained world is inhabited by small painted figures that sit around in ones and twos. From the bottom of the container, a bundle of fiber-optic cables run to an overhead video projector. The cable's splayed ends catch light from the projector and transmit it to the miniature environment within the bowl. The video that is projected exists independent of *Parasite*. It may be anyone's. Smolinski is only concerned that *Parasite* have a host so that it may function properly.

From the descriptions offered here, it may appear that Smolinski's work *itself* purposefully mediates the fractured and convoluted space of contemporary life. We may infer that, by offering us an amusing view of a fanciful world, he momentarily alleviates our fears. We may even conclude that his work is a subtle lesson concerning how distraction can

be used to control or manipulate our perceptions. To fix Smolinski's work in this manner, however, merely turns it into illustrations that qualify a ready-made critical vision of the contemporary world.

So where else might we look for intervention, if Smolinski neither tells us what to think, nor divulges what he thinks? Perhaps it is of a phenomenological nature. In this context, the conceptual and aesthetic stimuli Smolinski supplies and the physical parameters he sets can be understood to cast us in the roles of onlooker (the microwave antennae drawings), participant (*Parasite*), and spectator (*Frozen*). Because this manipulation is not made explicit, it can be easily overlooked, yet it creates an economy in which each work



Drive-thru, graphite on paper, 2005.

scarcely come to engage and relate to everyday events. It is this awareness that offers Smolinski the means to not only communicate something about our fractured existence, but also to challenge us to self-consciously establish a position from which we may purposefully mediate our own actions.

Saul Ostrow is Chair of Visual Arts and Technologies, as well as Chair of Painting, at the Cleveland Institute of Art. He is editor of the book series Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture published by Routledge, London, art editor for Bomb Magazine, and co-editor of Lusitania Press. Since 1987, he has curated more than 70 exhibitions in the United States and abroad. His own writings have appeared in numerous art magazines, journals, catalogues, and books in the United States and Europe.