

# MATTHEW SMITH: TYPICAL WORKS

RIVINGTON ARMS, NEW YORK  
24 APRIL - 23 MAY

Matthew Smith's recent offerings at Rivington Arms (his first solo show in the US) exhibit an awareness of currents within contemporary art that verges on a kind of debilitating self-consciousness. On the one hand, this show only makes sense in the wake of artists such as Gedi Sibony (whose courtship of aesthetic failure is second to none) and all of that stuff we can now safely, if not somewhat dismissively, call 'unmonumental'. On the other hand, Smith claws his way back from the brink of such nonart gestures by returning to the forms and configurations introduced by artists that we have come to associate with the minimalist and postminimalist persuasion.

For example, *Several Ways* (all works 2008), the largest of Smith's *Typical Works*, consists of six large rectangular 'tables' (as described in the works list), each constructed from a rudimentary wood frame over and around four sides of which a white sheet has been carefully stretched and 'fitted'. The tables are then arranged along one wall of the gallery at increasingly acute angles off the perpendicular so that, together, they create a fanlike configuration that describes a simple curve.

The dialect spoken here is Donald Judd, with detectable accents of early Robert Smithson (think of the geometric progressions from 1966) and even a little Frank Stella (each table is 'open' on one side to the viewer, thus revealing its construction and suggesting, à la Frank, that 'what you see is what you see'). Of course, you don't need recourse to such references to understand what is going on: Smith wants to confront the audience with a set of 'things as themselves': assortments of items that never quite get beyond, or exceed, or transcend the things of which they are made as well as the 'things' they are.

Thus it's of the utmost importance that *Several Ways* can be described as a series of tables, even though, as we are permitted to see, each is not that; or that *Black Cigar* or *Peach Cigar* or *Purple Cigar*, each a hand-dyed feather duvet rolled up on the floor, can be exhausted by this description and yet gain the tiniest bit of meaningful traction from their titles.

All of which is to say that, though Smith begins by speaking Judd and Smithson, we quickly begin to hear the tautological musings of Joseph Kosuth (a chair is a 'chair' is a /chair/). One cannot but wonder how much air there is to breathe in this two-dimensional sliver of a world, pressed as it is between the minimal and the conceptual, which *Typical Works* would seem to inhabit. The two remaining works in the show, *Bin Bag Screen*, a pair of wooden frames carrying identical arrangements of six neatly folded black garbage bags, and *Typical Work No. 4*, a half-painted mirror positioned on the wall so as to reflect only the ceiling, allegorise this compression in very literal ways. My guess is that Smith is going to need to take some deeper breaths... *Jonathan T.D. Neil*



*Bin Bag Screen*, 2008, acrylic and wood screen, garbage bags, 224 x 366 x 71 cm. Courtesy the artist and Rivington Arms, New York