The Readymade

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Michael E. Smith, *Untitled* (2019)

Canonical knowledge credits Marcel Duchamp as the father of the readymade, beginning with his presentation of an upside-down urinal, signed with the appellation “R. Mutt,” at the Society of Independent Artists’ salon in New York in April 1917. This revolutionary Dadaist art form challenged notions of originality, authenticity, and authorship, and has ever since affirmed the legitimacy of found objects within artistic practice. Or at least that’s what the art-historical canon would have us believe.

In reality, artists were using found objects long before 1917, and the readymade still remains a contentious art form, frequently dismissed as egotistical and lazy. And to be honest, I understand why. Much of the readymade in contemporary art today feels, at best, like a nostalgic return to Duchampian gestures and, at worst, self-indulgent. That being said, found art remains the medium within contemporary practice that excites me most. It has the capacity to look forward rather than be anchored in nostalgia or insularity.

In an era defined by overproduction and waste, the act of creating something *new* can no longer be understood as purely expressive or neutral. Our cultural landscape is oversaturated with objects, materials, and images. To make something "from scratch" today risks perpetuating the same process of obsolescence that has destabilised our ecological systems. By recontextualising the object, found art rejects surplus and the cycle of extraction, consumption, and obsolescence. It offers an alternative to the horrors of industrial capitalist practices and a radical approach to making that values the material afterlives of objects.

The readymade is so much more than an aesthetic strategy rooted in the Protestant tastefulness of the discreet; it is a critical gesture that interrogates our relationships to materiality, consumption, and the environmental consequences of production, insisting that objects carry histories and potentials beyond their immediate utility.

Sculptor Michael E. Smith masterfully works with found objects, revealing the possibilities of the medium in a contemporary context. His sculptures unite banal objects in ways that initially feel unnatural, yet soon transcend the sum of their parts. Far from being inanimate, his works are imbued with an uncanny, almost dejected presence. Clothing, plastics, machinery and organic matter are arranged in assertive, elegant juxtapositions that make the readymade feel remarkably fresh and inventive.

While the layered histories of the objects he selects reveal fleeting pleasures and the spoils of consumerist culture, Smith's recontextualisation grants them new significance in their afterlives. With a subtle, often wry humour, his sculptures prompt reflection on both the objects themselves and the human practices that brought them into being.



Michael E. Smith, *Untitled* (2021)

Smith's sculptures exemplify the critical gesture of contemporary found art, and he is not alone. I have encountered several emerging artists in London whose work resists nostalgia and reanimates the readymade. In rethinking objects, we reconsider systems that produce, discard, and define value. The readymade should not be simply understood as self-serving or a historical relic; rather, it is an artform that remains relevant, inventive, and necessary in this moment of cultural and material crisis.