

Paul Anthony Smith: *Junction*

Smith's *picotage* technique acts to complicate our inspection of the photograph's subject

by Dan Cameron
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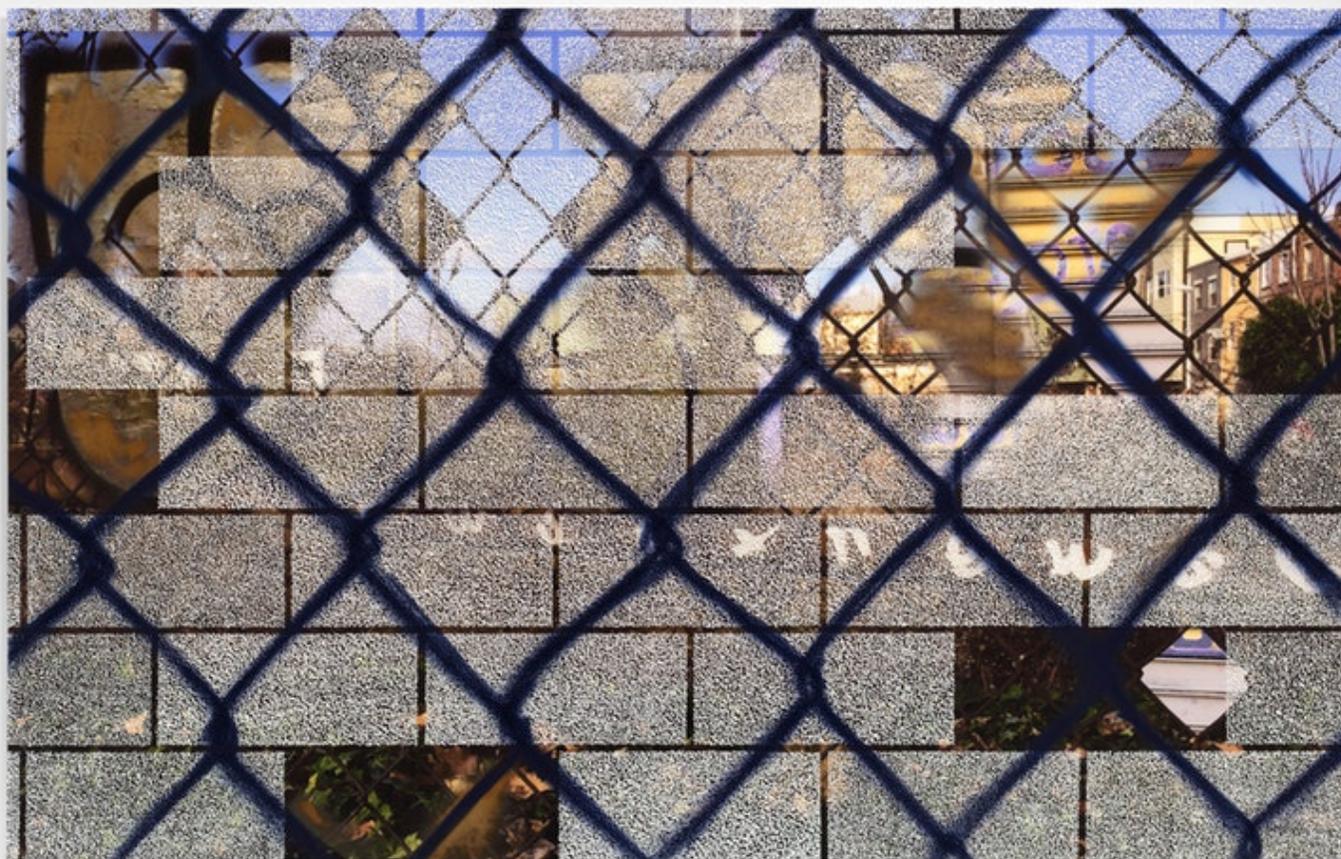
Paul Anthony Smith, *Conviction of Righteousness* (detail), 2018. Unique picotage on inkjet print, oil stick, colored pencil and spray paint, mounted on museum board, 40 x 30 inches. © Paul Anthony Smith. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Jack Shainman Gallery

April 11 – May 11, 2019

Paul Anthony Smith's first solo exhibition in New York, at Jack Shainman Gallery, arrives with the proverbial wind at the artist's back. Smith, who turns 31 this year, has already enjoyed multiple museum group shows and acquisitions around the country, and some mid career artists whose names would be familiar to most readers have been discreetly collecting his work for some time. In the interest of full disclosure, Smith, who did his undergraduate studies (in ceramics) at Kansas City Art Institute, was a participating artist in *Open Spaces*, my 2018 Kansas City-wide curatorial project (one work at Shainman, *Only in America*, was also on view there).

The visual appeal of Smith's art makes itself clear from the first glance. He is an ardent street photographer who ruthlessly self-edits and a whiz at Photoshop, with the result that the prints forming the ground for these unique works are vividly cropped and composed, and their renderings of urban texture minutely detailed. Most images appear to have been taken either at street fairs or in more intimate settings, and almost all of them zero in on facial expressions or characteristic gestures by individuals who seem both anonymous and intimately revealed.



Paul Anthony Smith, *Only in America*, 2017. Unique picotage on Inkjet print with spray paint mounted on Dibond, 58 x 89 1/2 x 2 inches. © Paul Anthony Smith. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

The underlying richness of Smith's imagery is inseparably fused in this body of work with the technique of *picotage*, a form of patterned surface abrasion familiar, mostly, to dressmakers. Typically, a special tool picks at the surface to be flayed, and in these works, countless flecks of emulsion on Smith's photographic print end up hanging like chads by a membrane of color, the underlying whiteness of the paper exposed. By dividing a third or more of each work's surface into crisply delineated *picotage* sections, Smith gets the resulting pattern to operate as an extra layer, a screen that overlays or slices diagonally through the picture plane. More pointedly, *picotage* acts to complicate our inspection of the photograph's subject, so that we repeatedly end up trying to decode or unpack the image by peering through and around the patterns.

While functioning as both a readymade grid and a form of visual filter, the *picotage* technique also incorporates the artist's hand directly into the making of the works, employing a drawing-adjacent process that is both unflinching and a little bit violent. Smith's choice of patterns is anything but arbitrary, with most taking the form of either barriers, walls, fences or curtains. In *Only in America* (2018), we appear to be looking out a window through a chain-link fence and into the middle distance, but that view is doubly obstructed: the fence's shadows fall across the photo's foreground in close-up, while two-thirds of the surface has been abraded into the pattern of a brick wall with occasional gaps. Although we search for a clear view outward towards blue sky and the freedom of the street, the composition acts instead as an impediment to our vision, not an occasion for its release. The effect is subtler but still present in *Untitled, Junction* (2018-19), wherein a languid beach scene is framed by a tropical-colored string of beadlike shapes that float carelessly in the breeze, along with a linear sequence of vertical bars that could just as easily be Venetian blinds or a jail cell.

A native of Jamaica who is now based in Brooklyn, Smith has developed a pictorial vocabulary that enables him to explore the adjacent themes of home and exile through a lens formed by the complexities of post-colonial Caribbean experience (a copy of Marlon James' *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is available on the gallery's front desk). This strong emotional connection with themes of migration and memory is inextricably bound up in Smith's work with the problematics of the colonizing gaze. We'd like to be able to discern the precise faces and features in what seems to be a celebratory montage of passing figures in *Pass Thru* (2018), but a *picotage* wall pattern based on typical Caribbean breeze block concrete fences keeps us one side of the image and them on the other. By comparison, the reclining male figure in the black-and-white *Introspection* (2018 - 19) is fully visible, but the particulars of his setting have been largely blurred by overlaid patterning that closely resembles colonial ironwork.

There's a wistfulness in Smith preventing us from having an unfiltered visual encounter with his photographic subjects which acts as a kind of counterweight to the tactile, sensual beauty of the objects themselves. As daily experience teaches us, the present social order necessitates that if we are paying attention and know how to detect them, we are never far from the forces of inclusion and exclusion. The implied message seems to be that before we can actually see each other, first we have to be willing and able to locate and identify just what it is that's keeping us apart.