



*The following is an interview by Aja Martin for La Reunion TX*

Brad Ford Smith is a multi-media artist and an art conservator living and practicing in the Dallas metroplex. In that Smith dedicates substantial space to process and documentation on his [website](#), our conversation focused on larger concepts and the artist's experiences. Below, Smith offers his perspective on meaning in art, subjecthood, and the gravity of his participation in the La Reunion TX exhibition programming.

**1 How did you come to find Sarah Jane Semrad, and La Reunion TX, or *Make Space for Art*?**

*I've been involved with La Reunion TX for a few years now. My first contact with them was through the [Art Conspiracy](#) project. The Dallas art community is linked up just like the Internet, except it's out in the cultural landscape. So yeah, La Reunion is an active part of that landscape. When I found out that they were doing on-site installation art at a wooded lot in Oak Cliff, it sounded like something neat to do—a way to get out of the studio and push my art into a different format.*

**2 I wanted to ask about some of the other work you've done that speaks to site. [Vermont Studio Center](#), your [Houston Public Art Proposal](#) (also click [here](#)), and the [National Park Artist Program](#). Can you talk about site?**

*Funny, I was thinking the other day that 90% of my artwork is work on paper, usually done in sketchbooks, and usually in the studio. But, probably 90% of the artwork that people see is site-specific sculpture, or wall installations. So, it's kind of a weird. Anyway, I like site-specific installation because you have to take what's around you and incorporate that into your ideas.*

*I usually come to a [site-specific] project with a soft pre-conceived idea because a lot of the time when I hear about a project it will generate flashes of ideas. So I try to shuffle through those, and you know sift the ideas, mash it up with the physical space.*

**3 So, *Half a Cord Stacked up High*, I loved the [preliminary drawings](#)...Your work is so enjoyable for me. Does the sketch represent one of those initial ideas?**

*Yes, in a slower kind of a way. The year before, I did a tree carving at LRTX. I did a Cedar tree at that time. Turns out I am really allergic to Cedar, so I was pretty miserable by the time I finished it.*

*Anyway, when LRTX did the tree carving the next year, I'd already had experience that I could draw from. I knew I wanted to do something bigger, but I also knew I only had this small window of time. And that's been a really important part in the past with these installs; the project has to fit in the window of time, and that determines what you can achieve. So the easiest thing to do, to make a big impact on a tree is to use a chainsaw. So, I borrowed one from a friend. Sarah Jane chose the tree for me. It turned out to be a perfect tree. That's when the ideas happened—the tree trunk comes up and it makes a Y about 8 feet up. I cut the tree at that point and built a platform across the Y. The entire tree above the platform was cut into 12" lengths and then stacked on top of the platform.*

**So it's not wood from the site, it's more specific than that...**

*No, it's only wood from that tree itself.*

**It makes me think of commodities. I think about seriality constantly, and the organization of the logs reminds me of our consumer culture.**

**4 Can you talk about meaning?**

*The works on paper are all about my own thought processes and they're usually not about what the public will think.*

*I also do projects that are meant just for public viewing, and they're kind of cleaned up of the personal content to be more presentable to the public. Now, with installations, they do tend to be more process-oriented. I really try to keep them open to multiple interpretations, and avoid any sort of obvious political or social content. With Half a Cord Stacked up High, it's positioned where you can see it from the balcony of the LRTX house. The logs are stacked like firewood. But it's also a library of the trees growth. At the bottom, the logs are large and round. Each row gets smaller with the smallest treetop twigs on the top. It's actually been a great little tool for nature guides.*

**5 Can you talk about the title?**

*Well, the title Half A Cord Stacked Up High is what it is...it's a half a cord of wood, stacked up high.*

**So, a cord is a measure...well, then the title makes complete/common sense.**

*When you buy firewood you buy it in a cord or half a cord.*

(Laughter.)

*It's kind of a regional thing. Back east everyone has a cord of wood stacked outback...*

**6 You mentioned the idea of making work 'more presentable' and on your [blog](#) you discuss that process with works that begin in your [sketchbooks](#) as well...**

*Yeah, well, that's mostly because the works on paper tend to develop through reactionary problem solving. Working that way I often don't really know what they truly mean until enough time has passed, or I extract the image and reproduce it in another medium.*

*Another thing is that at La Reunion I've done three sculptures. The half a cord has been photographed the most. The flat cedar tree got some pics, but then another tree fell on top of it. The sculpture I did this year the Privet Sculpture Project, I tried to keep to a generic name because it's more about an experiment with materials...But it really doesn't photograph well at all. You have to see it onsite to really see it.*

### **I find the *Privet Sculpture Project* enchanting...**

*Last year we had a whole month to work on the projects. So, it was nice to have that extended period of time. During that time, lots of people came by and I got a lot of great comments—a lot of people associating it with different kinds of gates, gateways. One person asked if I was building an arch for a wedding ceremony... I don't think I would have ever made that connection, but now...*

### **Ah, a ritual connotation. I really like the dialogue between your work and Annie Albagli's [Elsewhere](#)...**

*It was great working alongside Annie. She was just in Dallas for a short period of time. We carpooled to the site, so I got to spend time with her talking about artwork. She also used privet in her project, so we would compare privet notes. Because you think, 'Oh, I can take this—bend it, strap it together...' but privet being an organic material, it wants to do what it wants to do.*

### **7 So the first piece you created was destroyed?**

*It wasn't destroyed. It was...converted back into the landscape. And actually, that's what they're all supposed to do...I took a cedar tree, cut all the branches off the trunk, drilled holes, and stuck the branches back on, making a flat tree.*

### **I saw a [sketch](#) of that also, I believe...**

*Yes! I knew LRTX had cedar trees, so it wasn't so much about the location as much as the type of tree.*

### **8 How would you situate your work at LRTX within your overall body of work?**

*Well, I think the work at La Reunion is a chance to get out and play—to do something that's not my normal way of producing work, or thinking. Normally, I sit in my studio and work on little bits of paper by myself; usually I have some music blaring. The LRTX experience is completely different.*

### **9 Does it impact you in your return?**

*Yes, and that's one reason why I do it. Every time I do something that's different from my normal process, it adds to my vocabulary. I also do art conservation, so a lot of my experiences working with antiques and historic objects also feed into my artwork.*

*Learning new techniques like gold leafing, or flocking, or repairing lacquer, or carving wood with a chainsaw, those work into my artwork one way or another.*

**(+) It's easy to see how your artistic ability would bolster your conservation skills, but as I'm saying that I want to ask if there's a level of restraint you have to bring to your conservation...Can you talk about that dynamic?**

*Making artwork and doing art conservation, they do feed off of each other. Art conservation is my chance to do an in-depth physical study of another artist's work. So, when I get a piece that needs conservation, I get to see it from all sides. I study how it's made from the inside out. I'm really big on art history. When I come across a technique that's exciting, I'll pull it into my artwork. It's kind of like the flashing of ideas I mentioned earlier.*

*One of the biggest differences is, of course, on an artifact you never experiment, so that's done on a model or in my artwork. Also, making artwork is touchy feely, expressive, you add all that together and it's really messy. Art conservation is all about 'clean.' You don't want to leave a single fingerprint behind. It's all about keeping clean and doing no harm. So, my studio space, which is also my conservation studio, keeps flipping back and forth: from really clean to gradually dirtier and dirtier. So the two work off each other, but if conservation weren't so clean my studio would be really dirty, and if art weren't so dirty, my conservation studio would be really, really clean...*

(Laughter.)

**10 Who are you looking at? Do you have a preference for historical, or contemporary?**

*[Terry Winters](#) is my favorite artist. [Kiki Smith](#), I love the ways she handles materials. [Matthew Rich](#), [Richard Rezac](#). And then locally, [Brad Tucker](#), [Liz Ward](#), [Justin Quinn](#). I go to the galleries, museums and read art magazines and blogs. I think it's important to keep current. I also really enjoy going to art fairs, like ArtBasel Miami...*

**(+)Can you describe a moment from your early career, or schooling that continues to influence the work you make today?**

*Well, let's see, when I was in New York in the 80s, the MOMA was doing the big Picasso retrospective, and I saw [Guernica](#) (It was the last time it was shown in the USA). That was such a monumental painting to actually see. I think it's one of his last great works. There weren't very many people at the museum that day, so I had the luxury of spending time with it, and making sure to really study it, and that's when [Andy Warhol](#) and a couple of his body guards walked into the room. And you know it's Andy Warhol, you can't miss his radioactive hair.*

*Also [Julian Schnabel](#). I saw him at his retrospect a few years later. I was walking through his show and he walked in the room, and I knew who he was. And then this group of preppy college students came through, and they're giggling, and saying things like 'I don't get this... My little brother could do this...' Julian and I looked at each other, and we just sort of had this shared moment. It was like having John Wayne tip his hat to you.*

**(+) What was most enthralling about Guernica?**

*Well, it's one of those paintings like the Mona Lisa. You've seen it all your life in books and posters. I wanted to get past that Mona Lisa effect, where you hear people say, 'Oh, I saw it and it was no big deal.' Well, that's because you've come to it with a preconceived idea of what it looks like. So you have to slow down, and dump all that history, and see it for what it really is.*

**Like for the first, time...**

*Yeah, so with Guernica, I had the chance to see it from one corner all the way to the next corner, inch by inch. Just seeing the way the paint was handled, really brutish. He's taking the paint and just attacking the canvas, like he's holding the paintbrush in a balled up fist. I thought it was beautiful.*

*And it was the same when I saw [Manet's Olympia](#). It was one of my favorite paintings in college. I did a paper on it, spent a lot of time studying it, drawing it, and read a lot of the history behind it, so it really took me a lot of time to see through that cloud. What I finally came away with was that her feet are really, really small.*

(Laughter)

**(+) So what are you looking forward to this fall?**

*Going to Italy! My first time. We're going to fly into Rome then over to Florence.*

**Well, Brad, it was a pleasure. Thank you.**

*No, no, Aja. It was my pleasure waxing on and on about art. Thank you for indulging me.*