# FORTUITOUS ENCOUNTERS

Lenard Smith

01.24 ——————————————————— 07.26.2026

**California Museum of Photography**

## Fortuitous Encounters: Lenard Smith

Whether speaking of medium specificity, the nature of his subject matter, or the breaking down of typical photographic genre divisions, Lenard Smith's work challenges the viewer by traversing disparate approaches to image-making. The works on view highlight the specific textures and designs of photographic ephemera, cameras, and tools, considered from the capacious position of an artist who approaches photography from the long view of contemporary visual culture.

The Ghanaian-American photographer's depiction of common objects is highly legible, personal, and interwoven with social identity. His subjects simultaneously take on an abstract quality through their radical decontextualization and juxtapositions. Smith borrows from the visual languages of commercial and product photography, questioning the boundaries between a striking still life photograph and a captivating advertisement. The contents of his assemblages range from photographic equipment, to found objects and debris, to signifiers of Black identity and culture.

Smith's work takes inspiration from Surrealist photography of the early 20th century, Conceptual photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, and African Brutalist architecture. While much of his work represents a deep investment in photography and photographic theory, sculpture has also consistently informed his practice. Select sculptural and found objects are presented alongside his photographs, emphasizing the artist's interest in intermediality and the dialogues—and distortions—between media. Smith situates himself within the lineage of the "ragpicker," poet Charles Baudelaire's mid-19th century figuration of the Bohemian artist who, against a background of the advent of Modernity, examined the possibilities of debris and Capitalism's cast-offs.

*Fortuitous Encounters* features two bodies of work: "Fortuitous Encounter" (2018–20) and "Melancholy Objects" (2022). Both titles refer to the work of critic Susan Sontag, whose writing on photography has been instrumental to the theorization of the medium.

**Lenard Smith** (b. 1975) is a first-generation Ghanaian-American interdisciplinary artist and educator who lives and works in Los Angeles. Smith combines his academic research interests—the African diaspora and architecture—with photography, assemblage, painting, field recording, and moving image. He has exhibited his work throughout the United States and abroad; published eight artist books, including *Refuge* (Perimeter Editions, 2024), *Melancholy Objects* (Perimeter Editions, 2022), and *A Change of Scenery* (Pau Wau Publications, 2013); and published photographs in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *G2 | The Guardian*. Smith's work is included in the permanent collections of The Wallis Annenberg Photography Department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), The Whitney and Lee Kaplan African American Visual Culture Collection at the Getty Research Institute, and Light Work (Syracuse, NY), among others. In 2024, he was a MacDowell Fellow. He earned his MFA in Advanced Photographic Studies at Bard College. In 2023–25, Smith was a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Art at UCR, and is currently teaching Large Format Photography as a USC Roski School of Art and Design Faculty member.

**Kathryn Poindexter-Akers** is Head of Exhibitions at UCR ARTS, where she has curated and co-curated numerous exhibitions at California Museum of Photography, including *Shadow Archive: Meggan Gould* (2025); *Off Reservation: Sofia Valiente and the Photo Students of Sherman Indian High School* (2025); *Fictive Kin: Sarah Conaway, Annette Kelm, Kim Schoen* (2017); *Penelope Umbrico: Master, Mountain, Range (and Rangers)* (2016), and *Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors* (2015), and at Riverside Art Museum: *David Leapman: The Tumbling Surveyors Pursuit* (2014), *Women Artists of the Permanent Collection* (2013), *Eretai: John Beech, Lael Marshall, David Rabinowitch, Michael Voss* (2012), *Naida Osline: Photosynthetic Portraits* (2012), and *Julie Torres: Close Encounters* (2012), among others. Her writing has been published in *Contemporary Art Reviews Los Angeles* (CARLA), *KCET ArtBound*, *Artillery*, and in the publications *Lenard Smith: Fortuitous Encounters* (2025) and *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas* (2017). Poindexter-Akers earned her MA in Art History and a Visual Studies Graduate Certificate at the University of Southern California, where she specialized in 20th century American photography, visual culture, theories of photography, and intermedial studies. She earned her BA in Studio Art from UC Irvine and completed the Study Abroad program at the University of British Columbia.

# Recommended reading

Charles Baudelaire, "The Ragpicker's Wine," *The Flowers of Evil*,
trans. William Aggeler. Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954.

Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*.
Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007.

Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*.
Beacon Press, 2021.

Rosalind Krauss, *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism*.
New York: Abbeville press, 1985.

Jacques Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse – Séminaire XI
(The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis)* (1964), Paris, Points, 1990.

Susan Laxton, *Surrealism at Play*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

Paul Martineau, *Still Life in Photography*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2010.

Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture*.
Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

Rebecca Morse, ed. *Objects of Desire: Photography and the Language of Advertising*.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2022.

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1973.

Mary Statzer, ed. *The Photographic Object in 1970*. Oakland: UC Press, 2016.

Matthew Witkovsky, ed. *Light Years: Conceptual Art and the Photograph 1964–1977*.
Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago 2012.

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