

photograph

Paul Anthony Smith: Mangos and Crab

Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago



Paul Anthony Smith, *Untitled 06*, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Carrie Secrist Gallery

Mangos and Crab is Paul Anthony Smith's excellent first solo show at Carrie Secrist Gallery (through June 14). The title recalls two foods endemic to the artist's birthplace in Jamaica; indeed, Smith conceptualized the series of altered photographs and several oil paintings during a recent visit there. He now lives and works in Brooklyn.

Smith's subject matter is portraiture. For this show, he altered nine inkjet prints of portraits (all untitled, from 2014) by pricking their surfaces with a mechanical tool. Hundreds of raised paper flecks destroy the surface of each print but create a pattern of optical effects. Viewed from either oblique angle, right or left, the faces in the portraits emerge or dissolve. The effect is subtle, with careful attention to the eyes and mouth, those expressive portals of personality.

The artist calls his pricking technique *picotage*. He borrowed the term from an 18th-century textile decoration process invented in England and popularized in France, in which groupings of pinpricks from a printed matrix create shadowed or patterned impressions.

Smith's *picotage* process defaces and disfigures his portraits. The people become unidentifiable, although vague traits remain: some are men, some are female, and all have black skin. The allover pocks of white paper evoke the current Jamaican beauty ritual of skin bleaching in the former British colony, in which black faces are lightened.

Even if Smith is effectively destroying his prints, introducing a critical commentary on his subject matter, the obsessively hand-worked objects also reflect an intimate engagement with the photographs. Whoever these people are, their faces have been consumed by the artist's hand and absorbed by his memory. The private relationship of artist and sitter is pointedly made inaccessible, even while it's on public display.

— *By Jason Foubberg* 05/23/2014