

Elisabeth Smolarz *Encyclopedia of Things*

October 13–November 12, 2022



Morgan Lehman is pleased to present “Encyclopedia of Things,” an exhibition of photographs from the ongoing conceptual portrait project and forthcoming book by Elisabeth Smolarz. This marks the artist’s first solo exhibition with the gallery.

Smolarz’s “Encyclopedia of Things” first took shape in 2014 as a reflection on the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. The artist organized sessions to visit the homes of individuals and families whose lives were upended by the disaster, learning these peoples’ stories and creating photographic portraits of their most prized and personal possessions. The project received attention, and Smolarz soon expanded her focus beyond the Sandy-affected populace to investigate the inner lives of people all over the world.

“Encyclopedia of Things” is chiefly concerned with “how we define ourselves through the objects that we inscribe with meaning,” Smolarz explains. In each image, we encounter a carefully arranged assemblage of various personal affects. The items lean against walls or stand on shelves or mantles, occupying the space of the home but without the haphazard placement typical of things in real domestic places: rather, the articles are presented against intentionally neutral backdrops in highly considered poses, often resembling totemic stacks that feel charged with a mysterious energy. The effect is that we slow down and look more closely at each pair of glasses or coffee mug, seeing it as a talisman of sorts and also emblematic of a larger life.

Smolarz’s portraits are simultaneously intimate and enigmatic. As viewers, we might feel an affinity for an item on display but wonder about why it was selected or what it holds in terms of an individual’s personal history. Smolarz, in adhering to strict formal parameters that highlight shallow perspectival space and provide a zoomed-in, almost deadpan vantage point, plays with the conventions of traditional still life and wills the form into a vehicle for real emotional resonance on a human level. Why do we hold onto certain possessions and not others? Are material things actually an essential part of our lives? “Encyclopedia of Things”, like all of Smolarz’s work from the past two decades, aims to expose how individual economic, social, and cultural environments shape the human psyche of a person, ultimately forming an identity.

Elisabeth Smolarz was born in Wałbrzych, Poland and currently lives and works in Queens, NY. She received a BA in Photography and Video and an MFA in Multimedia from the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste Stuttgart, Germany. Smolarz has shown her work at the The Bronx Museum of Art, The Sculpture Center, The Queens Museum of Art, and Wave Hill, as well as many international institutions. Smolarz received major support by the National Endowment for the Arts for her “Encyclopedia of Things,” and she is the recipient of honors including the Art and Law Residency, NYC (2019); MASS MoCA Artist Residency, North Adams, MA (2018); LMCC’s Workspace Residency Program, NYC (2016); Guttenberg Arts Residency, NJ (2015); and AIM Residency, Bronx Museum, Bronx, NY (2013). Smolarz is founder/director of Spectral Lines, an artist-run salon in Ridgewood, NY, and teaches Photography at the Pratt Institute.