



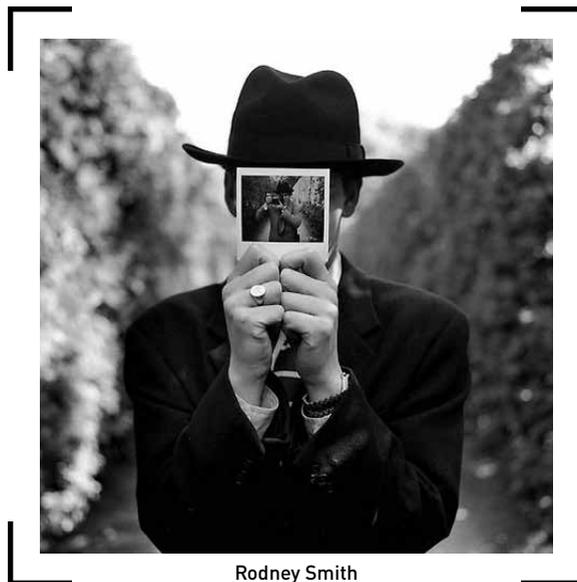


Classic

Photographs by
Rodney Smith
fall outside of time

By Robert Kiener

with a twist



Rodney Smith

This is what you need to know about

Rodney Smith, the man:

"He's tweedy. Never needy. Proud.

Not loud. He's a perfectionist.

Workaholic. Worry wart and fuss budget."

This is what you need to know about

Rodney Smith, the photographer:

"He's adamantly analog. Only shoots film.

Never uses special effects.

His work is outside of time.

He creates worlds whose logic is his own.

He's old school with a **twist.**"

At least that is what is written in Smith's whimsical biography on his website. And after spending an afternoon with the much-lauded, award-winning photographer, I can report that he is all the above—and much more.

"A writer friend of mine wrote those words," says Smith with a smile as we chat in his elegant 1850s home on the west bank of the Hudson River just north of Manhattan.

"He was having some fun, but I think he described me fairly well."

Smith, 68, is dressed in a crisp white monogrammed shirt, sleeveless blue sweater, tailored trousers, and English tasseled loafers ("my uniform" he calls it).

Timeless forms

Like his photography, Smith is elegant, witty, and impeccably composed.

"I am a classicalist," he says. "I don't like a great deal of popular culture. The world I grew up in was so much more refined than today. I haven't changed; the world around me has changed." He smiles as he remembers: "At home we dressed for dinner and I had to wear tails to dinner, at my first year of prep school in the 1960s."

The world has changed a lot since then, but Smith has worked hard to refashion, via his photography and his surroundings, his own elegant version of it. "The world I inhabit has gotten more gracious, elegant, and refined as the actual world we live in becomes more crass, vulgar, and casual," he says.

The photographs he has taken over the past 45 years are indeed elegant and timeless. The walls of Smith's nearly 7,000-square-foot home are hung with many of his massive floor-to-ceiling prints. It's hard to know when the images may have been made. "Many people cannot tell which pictures I shot decades ago and which I shot recently," he says. "I like that there is something about the pictures that still feels relevant in today's culture."

Relevant and in demand. Buyers from around the world are happy to pay \$7,000 for a small print and up to \$125,000 for a mural-sized, limited-edition print. Smith has a prestigious list of editorial and commercial clients, including *The New York Times Magazine*, *Vanity Fair*, IBM, Ralph Lauren, American Express, and the New York City Ballet. He's published five well-received books of







collected works. His current book project is a self-published retrospective called “Rodney Smith,” for which he raised seed money on the crowdfunding site Kickstarter. His photography has been exhibited internationally and has won more than 75 awards. Yale, Pratt, and the International Center of Photography are among the institutions where he’s taught.

Fighting for it

Ironically, while many of Smith’s images are almost instantly recognizable, he himself is not

well known. He seems satisfied with that. “I have always considered myself something of a loner,” he admits. “I’m on the outside looking in.”

Touring his elegantly decorated home, Smith makes a stunning confession: “I always think I have failed. I cannot enjoy my own work. This isn’t false modesty. I always think my work is mediocre, could have been better.”

This admission will surprise Smith’s fans and commercial clients because, as he admits, “I have always fought for my photography.” He recalls when he was shooting on location for a commercial client and the art director told

him, “You have to take this picture. It’s perfect for us.” Smith refused and handed the art director his Hasselblad 501, saying, “You take it.”

Says Smith, “I am very sparing in how I shoot, and I try to do something different in every frame. I won’t put something on a contact sheet that I would be embarrassed about later.” He shoots almost entirely in black-and-white, using film and mostly available light. He owns a digital camera, a Leica M240, but rarely uses it.

Another art director story: “We were shooting an advertising campaign for MCI on loca-



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tion in Maryland. There were two busloads of us: models, makeup people, stylists, art directors and more. While driving to our location, which we had scouted previously, I saw this wonderful field and told the driver, 'Stop the bus.' The art director was fuming and told me, 'This is a total waste of time. Don't do this.' I said, 'It will just take a minute.' I had one of the models climb onto a hay bale and jump in the air. The art director was still complaining: 'This has nothing to do with the shoot.' But that was the picture they ended up using for the campaign! This has happened to me many times."

Smith remembers meeting *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter, who said, "You have a reputation for being very difficult." Says Smith, "I told him that if by being difficult you mean that I fight for my pictures, that's correct. But in other ways I am incredibly professional, always deliver, and you will get what you want."

He got the assignment. But he didn't always win. Ralph Lauren once told him, "Your pictures are much too strong for our clothes." Smith smiles at the memory. "I think it was a compliment. He was saying that people wouldn't look at his clothes, they would just see my pictures."

Like few other photographers, Smith has been able to incorporate his own vision into his commercial work. After earning a bachelor's degree from the University of Virginia in 1970 and a Master of Divinity at Yale in 1973, where he also studied with Walker Evans, Smith struggled financially. He taught and did personal photography for more than a decade before he began getting increasingly lucrative commercial work. "I grew to like having all these stylists, makeup artists, and models on those expensive shots," he remembers. "I could never have afforded to do a shoot like that on my own. I was in the right place at the right time."

Whimsical spontaneity

Because Smith's images are serene and composed, people assume they were plotted out well in advance. "Everyone says that," says Smith. "But the creation of my pictures is incredibly spontaneous. Probably less than 30 seconds or a minute before I took the shot, I had no idea I was going to take that picture."

"It's an instinctual feeling about a place. I find a location and have the feeling [that] I can make a picture here."



It is all based on what is happening at the moment." Even the surreal, whimsical twists that appear in his pictures are intuitive. "It just happens," says Smith.

Once Smith finds a location that resonates, he's confident he can make a successful picture. "It's an instinctual feeling about a place. I find a location and have the feeling [that] I can make a picture here." He once studied privately with Ansel Adams and explains, "I eventually blended portrait and landscape photography. I learned how to place a figure in the landscape rather than beside the landscape." An art director once told him, "Your exteriors are really interiors."

Like location, composition, scale, and proportion are integral parts of a Rodney Smith photograph. Inspired by photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, W. Eugene Smith, and Andre Kertesz, Smith strives for a well-

ordered composition. "It's my mission to find order out of chaos," he says.

According to Smith, great composition is almost like being in touch with one's own bodily rhythm: "It resonates within us. It's like iambic pentameter in poetry. When everything is in proportion and the scale is correct and the relationships are correct, there is a moment where it all feels right. That is one of the timeless qualities of great art."

For someone often described as old school and who calls himself a classicalist, it's no surprise that Smith gets his images right in camera. "People always ask me if I use Photoshop," he explains. "I never do. I shoot everything in camera. I am a photographer, not an illustrator." He confesses that his least favorite phrase from an art director is "Don't worry, we will fix it in post." Says Smith, "That means they don't care anymore and view photographers as technicians."

He's also not a fan of seamless backdrops: "I know many great photographers such as Edward Weston or Irving Penn have used them," says Smith. "But too many less-talented photographers use a backdrop as a shortcut. It is a way of looking good without too much risk."

Near Smith's main house is his 4,500-square-foot studio, where he and his wife, Leslie Smolan, used to live. It's impeccably maintained. In the studio's viewing room are pairs of neatly arranged white gloves ready to be worn by anyone who wishes to flip through Smith's photography albums. Prints ready to be matted, framed, and shipped are neatly lined up in the immaculate finishing room. Classically framed prints of his photographs line the walls.

Outside, a carefully raked stone driveway, manicured hedges, and a close-cropped lawn complete the picture. Smith once described this home as "a classic yet timeless edifice. It stands for a kind of beauty in a world that no longer embraces it."

Suddenly, while crossing the lawn, I feel like I've walked smack dab into one of Rodney Smith's serene, timeless photographs, an elegant and refined world that no longer exists. Click. •

rodneysmith.com

Robert Kiener is a writer based in Vermont.



