


frieze

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John Smith

Royal College of Art, London, UK

John Smith's films and videos have been criminally under-shown in his home city. Seven years after his last London solo at the long-gone Pearl Gallery, it took the unanimous enthusiasm of graduating students on the Royal College of Art's MA in curating – where, for the first time since the course was founded in 1992, its final show was dedicated to a single artist, the 14 curators splitting admin duties while brainstorming the show en masse with Smith – to occasion this 17-film display, his biggest exhibition to date. Wit-injected and profoundly serious, theory-driven and anecdotal, Smith's filmmaking has never seemed wholly at home anywhere. So it made sense to return to the maker's Alma Mater, where it was born.

His best-known film, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), made while Smith was a student at the RCA, is on one level a classically Structuralist/Materialist disclosure of formal duplicities. Over a 16mm time capsule of mid-70s street life in Dalston, East London, Smith layers a blokeish ex post facto voice-over that recasts the chance events he had filmed as continuous theatre. ('Let's have the man in the white boiler suit coming in from the right,' etc.) Yet the film modulates unexpectedly into a coherent discussion of the run-down area's sociology, before flipping again when the narrator claims to be 'shouting into a microphone on the edge of a field near Letchmore Heath'. The demystifying impulse, *The Girl...* argues, need not preclude – indeed, might be sweetened by – comedy. It might also enfold social commentary, allying reflexive manoeuvres with a punctilious attentiveness to the everyday's warp and weft.

There's no contradiction here, politics being inherent in the distinction between how things are presented and how they actually are. Smith's prodigious warm-up films suggest as much in embryo: *The Hut* (1973), for example, is an ostentatious piece of directive editing, framed by a scrap of narrative – a voice speaking ominously of a hut discovered in the woods – which leads into forensic shots of the edifice's scorched exterior, spliced together in an accelerating martial rhythm. It's a hut; it's a horror show. In the implausibly concise four-minute switchback ride that is *Om* (1986), meanwhile, what appears to be a serene Buddhist monk sitting draped in an orange robe, incense smoke trailing into view, morphs into a smoking skinhead getting a haircut. It is hardly coincidental that this was made deep in the Thatcher years, when ugly nationalism was increasingly conspicuous in England.

What kinds of truth can be cradled within a larger structure of disabusing is a recurrent question in Smith's art. Repeatedly, he has the camera bear witness, showing the mundane intersecting with larger choices, ambient pressures, ideology. In the first part of his feature-length video trilogy *Home Suite* (1993–4), Smith surveys his house's decaying,

mouldy, bug-infested toilet, noting its timeworn surfaces and the associations they stir up. It seems that the house (is it really his?) is due for demolition, like those squatted neighbourhood residences brought down in the second part of the work, filmed on the street amid the newly evicted. We are suspended, here, just prior to the introduction of the Criminal Justice Bill of 1994: a hinge moment, an ending.

If Smith remains a potentially unreliable narrator in these works, a sense of the camera as a memorializing tool remains strong. In *Third Attempt* (2010), a film projection, 7P (1977–8) – wherein footage of a Christmas tree unravels in caffeinated editing and is sound-tracked by a screwy audio recitation of 'The 12 Days of Christmas' – plays simultaneously with *Regression* (1998–9), a later video 'remake' of it. In this second film, Smith appears before another (or maybe the same) Christmas tree, discussing his reasons for 'regressing': the advantages of video and his sense that the work is more contemporary now than it was at the time. (While too old to be a yBa, he says, he has carefully positioned the camera to take a few years off him.) If materialism still provides this work's framework – its armature is its own making and remaking – it is animated with life imperfectly lived, and the revisions made by time's onrush.

This, indeed, is both the surprise and sublimity of Smith's work. In *'Hotel Diaries'* (2001–7), he shuffles around hotel rooms in six countries, circling back to thoughts of evolving conflicts in the distant Middle East. Here, what can't be accurately known – symbolized by the first segment, in which BBC footage on a hotel television set is inexplicably frozen – is counterweighted by what can, via the camcorder's eye and Smith's loquacious monologues: anecdotes, descriptions and analyses of where he is, interwoven with geopolitical anxiety. That dimension aside, it's a surprisingly short leap to here from the 16mm *Leading Light* (1975), in which soft natural light strafes, in time-lapse, a room's contents on an amber afternoon: striped carpet, books, a turntable. Representation, Smith's work implies, is at once a haven of quiet deceits and our surest stopgap against an infinite forgetting.

Martin Herbert