

Bio: Rodney Smith

Rodney Smith was a prominent photographer, whose whimsical work invited comparisons to that of Belgian surrealist Rene Magritte. He combined portraiture and landscapes to create enchanted worlds full of subtle contradictions and surprises. Using only film and light, his unretouched, dream-like images were matched by the craft and physical beauty of his prints. Mr. Smith was a man who cared deeply about sharing his vision with humor, optimism and grace, despite all the harshness of the world.

CHRONOLOGY (EXTENDED BIO)

Rodney Lewis Smith was born on December 24, 1947 in New York City. He found his artistic inspiration during a visit to the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection of photography while in college in 1968. He graduated from the University of Virginia in 1970, and went on to earn a master of divinity degree in theology from Yale University. In 1976 he was awarded a Jerusalem Foundation Fellowship, which resulted in his first book, *In the Land of Light*. This 3-month fellowship changed him profoundly, as he found nobility in a diverse mix of people, cultures and religions, many of whom lived an 18th-century existence in a 21st-century world.

Finding his niche, Smith traveled throughout the American South, Haiti and Wales, making portraits of workers and farmers, while also shooting the majesty and beauty of the landscape. Following in the footsteps of Ansel Adams, he mastered the zone system, a photographic technique for determining optimal film exposure and development. Smith's signature style of using light to reveal his subjects, was rendered in a broad spectrum of tones, ranging from crisp white highlights, to deep velvety shadows. In this way, he edited his world, making it sharper and clearer, bringing order to chaos.

In the mid-1980's, Smith's work caught the attention of art directors and magazine editors, who commissioned him to create journalistic portraits of CEO's. He insisted on being given complete access and creative freedom. Showing these powerful men in their personal environments, endowed them with an unseen humanity. And through this process, he began to relate to his own father, a controlling, larger-than-life fashion executive, who passed away when Smith was only 25.

The integration of figure and landscape strengthened when Smith co-authored *The Hat Book* in 1993 with creative director Leslie Smolan, whom he married in 1990. Their partnership was instrumental in giving Smith the confidence to find his own voice, and embrace his past. The book contrasted the 18th-century hat company workers with the style and whimsy of wearing hats. *Publisher's Weekly* commented, "An unusual little book, this whimsical photo-essay on hats contains short, witty prose passages which explore hats as expressions of identity, fashion statements or disguises."

By the mid-90's, editorial clients included The New York Times Magazine, W Magazine, Vanity Fair, Departures and New York Magazine. Smith was immersed in shooting fashion for Neiman Marcus, Bergdorf Goodman, Ralph Lauren, and Paul Stuart among others, demonstrating an emerging affinity for humor and surrealism. Ironically, Smith had come full circle, embracing the fashion world he'd previously rejected, yet this time on his own terms.

Smith's work has appeared in countless magazines, books, galleries and museums around the world. In the catalog of a 2003 show of Mr. Smith's photography at the University of Virginia, Jonathan Stuhlman, an art writer and curator, wrote, "In Smith's enchanted world, balance produces beauty, laughter and whimsy dance hand in hand, and things are not always what they seem. The photographs offer a perfect blend of reverie and reality."

Rodney Smith died in 2016 at the age of 68. The Rodney Smith Estate continues to exhibit his work at museums and galleries around the world, for audiences who enjoy Smith's signature aesthetic and whimsical sense of humor.