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Royal College of Art Galleries, Kensington Gore, London SW7 2EU, 7 Apr 2010

John Smith Solo Show



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Artist : John Smith

Title : The Black Tower

Date(s) : 1985

Credit : Photo: Lauren Winsor, courtesy of the artist, Lux and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

Review by Josephine Breese

John Smith's solo show at the RCA follows an unlikely formula. The largest retrospective of the filmmaker's work in the UK to date is curated by the 14 final year students of the RCA Curating Contemporary Art MA. This is the first year that the MA course's graduate project has focused on a solo artist in this way. In line with Smith's experimental and progressive approach to his work, this collaboration yields a formidable exhibition.

Despite the emphasis on the close and complementary relationship between artist and curator(s), the curatorial imprint is subtle enough to allow visitors to develop individual relationships with Smith's films. The process of looking and engaging is central to Smith's practise, where significance is teased out of association, both through language and experience. Visual relationships and formal arrangements are proffered, often addressing a quotidian corner of Smith's life, from a half-eaten Toblerone bar to a beam of sunlight to a broad view of the Hackney Marshes. Sustained focus on observations, and therefore Smith's visual priorities, ironically endows these sometimes quiet and unremarkable episodes with stimulation. Highly contemplative works such as 'Leading Light' (1975) provide ample space for us to consider Smith's perspective, and also our own.

The effect resurfaces in works with more of an implication of narrative. 'Flag Mountain' (2010) operates through successive close-ups of a Turkish flag on a mountainside. Smith's subtle doctoring of the soundtrack, progressing from a distant muezzin and muted street sounds to a swaggering anthem, booms over the scene as Smith hones in on the flag. Another poignant example is 'Hotel Diaries' (2001-7), shot in a series of characterless hotel rooms. Smith's commentary ambles between a mundane stream of consciousness and observations on contemporaneous Middle Eastern politics, universalising everyday experience and the complexity of our individual relationships with global concerns.

Works are chosen from the entirety of Smith's career, interspersed with each other to illustrate the breadth of his achievement. More meditative works are scattered with films that range from the humorous to the absurd. Smith displays a gleeful mastery of associative play in works such as 'Associations' (1975), 'Om' (1986) and 'Third Attempt' (2010). Arranged to privilege each work in sufficient space, snippets of sound from other films nevertheless filter through the RCA, reminding of the different facets of Smith's work.

Alongside the achievements of Smith's career, the logistical successes of this curatorial brood warrants recognition. The co-ordination of this number of curators must have presented some real challenges, both among themselves and to Smith. Nevertheless, the most apparent advantage of this extensive curatorial team lies in the attention to detail. From the care taken with the bizarre and entertaining design of the catalogue, to the expansive events programme and sophisticated website (with images and audio-clips of past talks), to tricky issues presented by the disjointed RCA gallery space, the audience is prioritised. The exhibition is a wholly educative experience, whether you are a long-term Smith admirer or new to his work, offering layers of summary, analysis and explanation.

Press Release

For the first time in the 18-year history of the **RCA Curating Contemporary Art MA programme**, final year students have decided to present a solo exhibition as their graduate project. Opening on 19 March, this will be the largest UK show by the pioneering East London based artist and filmmaker **John Smith**.

Much loved for their wit, formal ingenuity and use of storytelling, Smith's films are as much influenced by the humour of Monty Python as the theories of avant-garde filmmaking. Acknowledging that much of Smith's work has rarely been shown in a gallery context, a comprehensive selection will be shown together in the RCA galleries.

This exhibition offers an opportunity for Smith to return to the RCA where he began making films as a student in the 1970s. The artist will work closely with the students to create an exhibition that reveals the multiple sensibilities which run throughout his practice. Rarely seen early films will be shown in the company of more recent work and the exhibition design will emphasise the narrative and structural devices used within Smith's work. A programme of talks and events will complement the show, providing a focused, in-depth reflection upon individual works.

Accompanying the exhibition will be a new catalogue on Smith's practice with critical texts, an extended interview with the artist and a visual essay. A second publication will follow in June focusing on the solo show as an exhibition format. Comprised of research through interviews and historical analysis it will also reflect on the making of the exhibition and include documentation of Smith's work.

The MA Curating Contemporary Art course was set up in 1992 and quickly established an international reputation. Co-funded by **Arts Council England** and the RCA, it was the first postgraduate programme in Britain to specialise in curatorial practice as it relates to contemporary art. It is a vocational and academic course designed to provide professional preparation for those wishing to work as curators of contemporary art in both the public and private spheres. The course offers a critical examination of curatorial practice, with special emphasis on the selection and presentation of exhibitions of contemporary art, the programming of public galleries and the commissioning of art for public spaces. In October 2009 a second pathway was introduced, the Inspire MA, aimed at students from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds. Structured as a two-year curatorial training placement for students based at one of a number of leading contemporary visual arts organisations in England, with additional teaching at the RCA.