



## ○ London

*John Smith*

19 March — 13 April  
Royal College of Art

For the first time, the students of the Royal College of Art's Curating Contemporary Art course have selected a monographic exhibition for their final year project. A solo show with 14 curators sounds like the stuff of nightmares. The idea brings to mind a persistent image: John Smith, the well-loved London filmmaker, sitting at home, quizzed by the entire graduating year.

The show includes a broad range of work, from rarely seen early films like 'Triangles' to newer videos such as the 'Hotel Diaries' series. For such a large number of moving image works, and despite the RCA's difficult space, the show has a satisfying rhythm to it, the curators having found inventive but unobtrusive ways to installing the work.

Smith's older films often rely on a temporal or cognitive gap between sound and image. In 'Associations', 1975, words, or parts of words, in the voiceover, are illustrated by a series of fleeting pictures; the term 'mechanism', for example, is accompanied by an image of a tin can. As a consequence, retrospective understanding of sound and image puns destabilise the viewer's capacity

to comprehend what they see and hear in the next sentence. Presented at the start of the exhibition, early works like this make one way of potential for tricks being played in the works that follow.

Reveling in the mundane and unremarkable, Smith's work frequently resorts to absurd humour. In 'Home Suite', 1993-94, the artist rambles through his house and points the camera at various objects. As Smith explains the laudable attributes of his electric toothbrush, and complains about its astronomical price, he appears to be intentionally boring himself for comic effect. At one point he rather incredibly describes a huge vine that grew through his bathroom window and covered the ceiling, a story indicative of how the line between Smith's recounted memories and his wilful fabrications is unclear. The artist speaks directly to camera while panning the room, mumbling and grumbling phrases to himself like: 'Zoom in a bit', 'Make sure that's in focus'.

While employing a similar structure to 'Home Suite', Smith's series 'Hotel Diaries', 2001-2007, is less hermetic than the former, dispensing with the domestic and 'known' environment of Smith's residence. The outside world and its politics leaks into works like 'Museum Piece', 2004, where news headlines concurrent with the day of recording run along the bottom of the screen.

The viewer accompanies Smith for the

duration of these claustrophobic videos, watching him trapped in some lonely, self-constructed bind. In 'Frozen War', the artist wonders aloud how long the television has been stuck on the same image, saying, 'Can't look at my watch because that will make the camera go shaky'.

Speaking to camera in 'Third Attempt', Smith explains his reservations about using video, but also the necessity of it for his current mode of work. Conceptually central to the exhibition, this new installation consists of two works: the film '7p', 1977-78, and a video remake titled 'Regression', 1998-99, both of which include Smith trying to remember and sing the words of 'The Twelve Days of Christmas'. Played together, these voices show the difference of medium and time: alternating pitches and accents most poignantly indicates the change in the artist. Illustrating the problem of any retrospective exhibition, Smith's younger and older selves compete for attention.

Compared to the restrained treatment of the works in the show, the accompanying publication is compiled with curatorial glee. A visual essay contextualises Smith's work by placing it among fake photographs of the 9/11 attacks and headlines about forged British passports used in the recent hit on Hamas officials. The essay makes the politics of Smith's work explicit. The only irritating flourish is the inexplicably un-trimmed top edges of the pages, which requires the joined sheets to be split with the bookmark provided.

The catalogue's opening text pivots on the potential anonymity provided by John Smith's improbably ordinary sounding name, a name once proposed by Malcolm LeGrice as a 'readymade'. It seems that the members of the graduating cohort have accepted a similar anonymity this year – everyone involved in the show has become a cipher, each curator simply a 'Curating Contemporary Art student' and John Smith an 'every-artist'. Successfully synthesising a conceptual exploration of solo shows and the staging of one, the exhibition is accompanied by a series of events. Meanwhile, an additional publication is planned to address the contemporary relevance of retrospective solo shows.

The choice of Smith as subject is a suitable foil to something potentially cold and overly conceptualised – as always, the humour, humility and quality of his work shines through, and the exhibition is one that shows care and clear intent.

*Richard Whitby is an artist and writer based in London*

**Above left:** Kaye Donachie, 'I do believe that most of me floats under water', 2010, oil on canvas

**Above:** John Smith, 'Worst Case Scenario', 2001-3, video