**FIG. 1** Still from *Being John Smith*, by John Smith. 2024. Video, duration 27 minutes. (Courtesy Secession, Vienna; exh. Secession, Vienna).

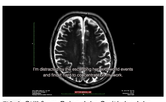

**FIG. 2** Still from *Being John Smith*, by John Smith. 2024. Video, duration 27 minutes. (Courtesy Secession, Vienna; exh. Secession, Vienna).

**FIG. 3** Still from *Being John Smith*, by John Smith. 2024. Video, duration 27 minutes. (Courtesy Secession, Vienna; photograph Tony Smith; exh. Secession, Vienna).

**FIG. 4** Still from *The Black Tower*, by John Smith. 1985–87. Video, duration 24 minutes. (Courtesy Secession, Vienna; exh. Secession, Vienna).

**FIG. 5** Installation view of *Being John Smith* at Secession, Vienna, 2025, showing *Silent Servants (after Edward Morris)*, by John Smith. 2025. Stained pine, 21.5 by 46 by 119 cm.; and *Great Grandson*, by John Smith. 2025. Giclée print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 66 by 100 cm. (Courtesy Secession, Vienna; photograph Oliver Ottenschläger).

**FIG. 6** Installation view of *Being John Smith* at Secession, Vienna, 2025, showing *Coffee Table Books*, by John Smith. 2025. Mixed media, dimensions variable; and *Great Grandfather*, by John Smith and unknown photographer. c.1910. Giclée print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 119 by 140 cm. (Courtesy Secession, Vienna; photograph Oliver Ottenschläger).

**FIG. 7** Still from *Being John Smith*, by John Smith. 2024. Video, duration 27 minutes. (Courtesy Secession, Vienna; exh. Secession, Vienna).

**FIG. 8** Still from *Dad's Stick*, by John Smith. 2012. Video, duration 5 minutes. (Courtesy Secession, Vienna; exh. Secession, Vienna).

# Being John Smith

by Alex Hull
Reviews / Exhibition • 22.10.2025

What is in a name, and what does it mean to share one with 30,000 others? For the artist and film-maker John Smith (b.1952), his name has long been a site of conceptual inquiry. Continuing this exploration, his latest exhibition at Secession, Vienna, centres on a deceptively simple question: who is John Smith? Born in East London, Smith is a central figure in British avant-garde cinema and structural film. Since the premiere of his short film *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) at the London Film-Makers' Co-operative (LFMC), he has relentlessly challenged cinematic conventions, pursuing his interest in semiotics through the medium of film. The LFMC, a hub of structural cinema from the late 1960s to 1999, supported the production and distribution of British avant-garde work. Like Smith, the co-op and its members were committed to a genre that revealed the illusions of conventional cinema and demystified the film-making process.

Smith interrogates meaning-making by creating works that blur fact and fiction, scratching at the surface of representation to reveal something else – or nothing at all. Through his precise edits, wry observations and impeccable comic timing, he has built a body of work that documents and questions the world. This exhibition takes its title from its centrepiece, the artist's most recent film. *Being John Smith* FIG.1 is an autobiographical, essayistic film that charts the artist's life and career – from the moment he was born and given a name so generic he feared he would never stand out to his reflections on the current sociopolitical climate FIG.2. Narrated through a combination of Smith's voice and written captions that evoke a stream of consciousness, the film is largely illustrated by a series of static images: family photographs FIG.3, school reports, screenshots of internet searches, photographs of other John Smiths, brand logos and – most repeated of all – a completely black screen.

The film is at times deeply moving. The viewer learns that the artist was bullied as a child and, more recently, has faced anxieties about returning to his creative practice after undergoing cancer treatment. Yet Smith resists eliciting pity. Just as the viewer's emotions threaten to reach boiling point, they are arrested by a reminder of the film's artifice. At one point, a sharp whipping sound punctuates the film before cutting to a black screen; a caption confesses Smith's concerns about the work's conventional structure. To disrupt this anticipated linearity, Smith intersperses the narrative with unexplained images of tarpaulin-covered buildings undergoing renovation – structures increasingly seen near his home in Walthamstow, an area affected by rising gentrification. These images also evoke the ominous architectural structure that haunts Smith's protagonist in *The Black Tower* FIG.4, the third and final film in the exhibition, suggesting that this iconography of his own making is starting to haunt the artist himself.

The film's irony – and Smith's commitment to its deception – lies in its title. It is about Smith, but it is also not; it also speaks to broader questions of identity and purpose. Who are we as individuals? What is the point of art when the world is burning down? Throughout his career, Smith has also woven humour into his films. Successful comedy operates by a kind of alchemy, often surprising the audience with an unconscious truth that produces the pure release of laughter. In a conversation before the exhibition opened, Smith revealed that as a child he made bombs in his back garden, mixing together whatever he could get his hands on until an explosion occurred.[1] This impulse is mirrored in his editing techniques. By playing with unexpected combinations of sounds and images, he hones his comic timing until the punchline lands. A John Smith's Bitter beer mat, for example, wryly reflects the artist's feelings when he tells the viewer that Tate declined to acquire *The Black Tower* because it was too expensive. A newspaper sandwich board announces the death of John Smith, the Labour Party leader in 1994; Smith quips, 'it was a sad day for the Labour party, but a great one for my self-esteem'.

Both in the content of his films and in the exhibition space itself, Smith constructs a visual and sonic vocabulary that simultaneously invites and unsettles. With the films, photographs, prints, sculptures and ephemera carefully threaded through the galleries, he has created a network of signs that shift in meaning according to the order in which they are encountered. The precision with which his films are constructed is echoed in the presentation of the show, with each element subverting expectation and perception. At the entrance, a self-portrait of Smith working in his studio is displayed beside a cluster of wooden sculptures resembling coat hangers on sticks FIG.5, offered without explanation. Later, a photograph of Smith's great-grandfather mirrors the artist's own pose FIG.6. He too is in his studio, making those same curious sticks shown in the first gallery.

The whipping sound that cracks as Smith recounts being beaten by a schoolteacher in *Being John Smith* FIG.7 echoes the noise that bookends *Dad's Stick* FIG.8, a film centred on the stick his father used to stir paint when decorating the house. Over the years, layers of colour built up on its surface, which were later revealed when his father decided to cut it in half – exposing a cross-section that resembles the age rings of a tree. The physical stick, which is also included in the exhibition, carries decades of family history and memory, serving as a loving homage to Smith's father. In *The Black Tower*, shown in the following gallery, an unseen narrator tells a strange story of being followed by a black tower around London, which ultimately drives him to madness. It is among Smith's most visually abstract films: planes of black, yellow, blue and red fill much of the frame. Thus, the recurring architectural structures that pursue Smith throughout *Being John Smith* are revealed to us again here, closing the circle of imagery.

In the penultimate sequence of *Being John Smith*, footage shows a crowd in Finsbury Park singing and dancing to Pulp's 'Common People' (1995), captured by Smith from a VIP stand – another black tower. Smith, who taught the band's frontman Jarvis Cocker at Central Saint Martins, London, reveals that there are 30,000 people called John Smith in Great Britain, a number that roughly matches the crowd below. At the end, an oversized stick seems to rise above the audience, as a fan hoists a comically large stack of cups. These moments, affirming the power of art to spark collectivity and communion, distil the generous spirit of Smith's practice and his commitment to a politics that demands a more equitable future for everyone. While his most recent film is tinged with anxieties about the role of art amid global crises – from the genocide in Gaza to the looming environmental catastrophe – its closing passages pulse with optimism and the belief that art can still reach and connect people. Smith's observational acuity extends beyond this exhibition, bestowing the viewer with a desire to locate patterns and correspondences in the wider world. Like the disarmingly straightforward title *Being John Smith*, the exhibition offers a generous, humorous meditation on a universal question: what does it mean to be alive today?

## Exhibition details

John Smith: Being John Smith
Secession, Vienna
12th September–16th November 2025

## Catalogue


**Being John Smith**
By Erika Balsom, Jeanette Pacher and John Smith
Secession, Vienna, 2025
ISBN 978-3-7533-0800-5

Order book

## About the author

**Alex Hull**
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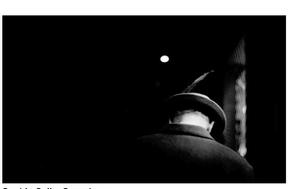
## Footnotes

1 John Smith, in conversation with the present author, 11th September 2025.

## See also

**15th Kaunas Biennial: Life After Life**
09.10.2025 • Reviews / Exhibition



**Sophie Calle: Overshare**
04.02.2025 • Reviews / Exhibition