REVIEWS

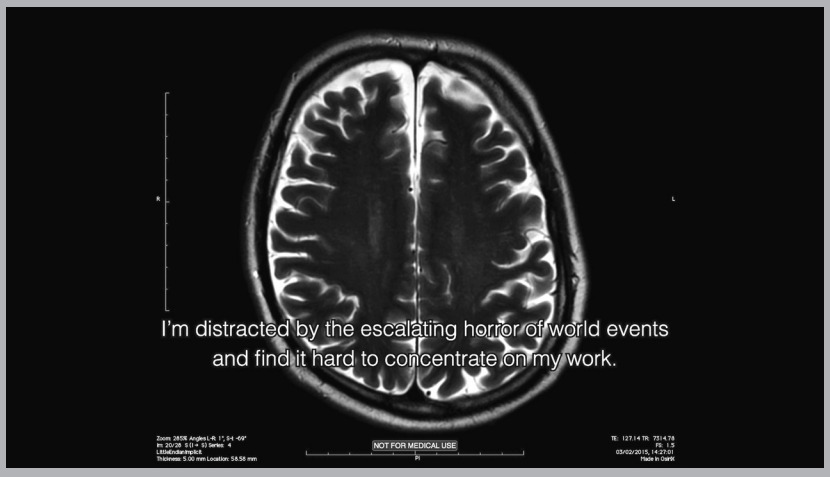

Figure 3: Being John Smith (Dir: John Smith, 2024): Photo (film still), HD digital video.

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Being John Smith, John Smith, Kate MacGarry, London, 18 January–15 February 2025 and Secession, Vienna, curated by Jeanette Pacher, 12 September–16 November 2025

Reviewed by Michael Mazière

Introduction

After 50 years of film practice, John Smith has developed a unique body of work and garnered a following beyond the experimental film world he started in. He currently exhibits in a variety of contexts within the film and art world internationally; through both the film festival circuit and the gallery system. Smith's work is distributed by the Lux, Light Cone, Video Data Bank and Canyon Cinema and he is represented by two commercial galleries: Kate MacGarry and Tanya Leighton.

It is difficult to evaluate Smith's large and diverse body of work. Very few of the film-makers who, like Smith, came from the avant-garde practice of the London Film-makers Co-op (LFMC) equal his significant track record of 60 films in 50 years. I first encountered Smith's work in the early 1980s at the LFMC and subsequently wrote and published an article on his films, as even then, he had a significant body of work (Maziere 1983: 40–44). At that time, he tended to move between two concerns – the visual and the textual – as can be illustrated in some of his early works. For example, Smith describes his visual intentions for his film *Leading Light* (1975) clearly:

> The film is not intended as an academic exercise – I wanted to make a film of light cast by the sun largely because I found it beautiful. At the same time, I did not want to make an illusionistic film about the sun moving around a room, but instead to employ these events within an essentially filmic construction.
>
> (Smith in cited Curtis and Dusinberre 1978: 81)

In his subsequent film, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), it is the interplay between voice and image which is the focus. As Smith explains, 'The film draws attention to the cinematic codes and illusions it incorporates by denying their existence, treating representation as absolute reality' (1976: n.pag.).

In *Being John Smith* (2024) he has managed to blend these interests into a distinct and coherent whole. Although Smith's work never

embraced the anti-narrative and anti-illusionist project of structural film it nevertheless incorporates some of its formal strategies – an attention to duration, formal rigour and medium specificity. One could consider Smith's creative journey as quite singular; he never fought against content and representation but instead engaged with subverting these tropes through humour and language.

Context

Born and bred in East London, Smith has developed his own iconography, often using his immediate surroundings as a source of inspiration. In a recent interview, he emphasized this point: 'I'm fascinated by the way in which these films, which are always to do with the present, over a period of 50 years, turn into a chronology, into historical documentation' (Lewis 2024: n.pag.).

This chronicle has allowed him – as a witness to the transformation of this vast and traditionally working-class area – to document social and political changes in his work. The gentrification of East London accelerated when artists, searching for affordable studio and living space, started moving into Shoreditch in the mid-1990s. Many Young British Artists (YBAs) made East London their home, and both the LFMC and London Video Arts (LVA) moved there in 1997 closely followed by major arts organizations and commercial galleries relocating from Central to East London. Prior to this, East London had been a cultural outpost, and one would never have imagined such a tectonic geographical and social shift in the art world. In many ways, the contemporary visual art world moved into Smith's territory.

Many of Smith's most significant films were rooted and shot in East London and can now also be viewed as documents of a personal and intimate history of the area. In August 2025, the *Film-Architecture Forum* presented a programme called 'John Smith's London' of his East London film, including *Citadel* (2020), *Steve Hates Fish* (2015), *Dad's Stick* (2012), *Blight* (1994–96), *The Black Tower* (1985–87) and *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) with an online Q&A, examining his works in relation to the architecture and transformation of the area.[1]

Exhibition

Being John Smith has been shown in cinemas internationally as a single-screen film projection and also presented in galleries as an installation work. In 2025, I saw the work in two gallery exhibitions – first at Kate MacGarry in Shoreditch, London, and subsequently at Secession, Vienna, as part of a larger exhibition which included two of Smith's earlier films, *Dad's Stick* and *The Black Tower* (aforementioned) accompanied by related sculptures and prints. Situated in the heart of the city, near Vienna's State Opera and Academy of Fine Arts, Secession, founded in 1897, occupies an iconic Art Nouveau-style building. Today it is a large artist-run institution with a significant international programme of contemporary art exhibitions and related education projects, talks and lectures. In addition to John Smith: *Being John Smith* the Viennese exhibition included two other artists, each with their own dedicated space: June Crespo's *Danzante* and Atelier Bow-Wow's *Suturing Together*.

In the London exhibition, outside of the black box of the screening room, you are presented with coffee tables made from coffee-table books (a sculptural pun mirroring Smith's film work), a large photograph of Smith's great-grandfather in his own wood workshop making what appear to be coat hangers, and numerous archival giclée prints of

1. *Film-Architecture Forum* is an ongoing series examining spatial practices across moving image curated by Marko Milovanovic (2025) at the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) in London.

stills and documents taken from the film, including family photographs, school reports and brain scans. The coffee tables and portrait, which relate to Smith's discovery of several generations of artisanal woodworkers in his family seem difficult to connect to the film at the smaller Kate MacGarry gallery. Nevertheless, they are successfully expanded and reconfigured at Secession, working as enigmatic puns and disrupting connections, matching the strategies present in the film. As Alex Hull describes:

> 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, offered without explanation. Later, a photograph of Smith's great-grandfather mirrors the artist's own pose. He too is in his studio, making those same curious sticks shown in the first gallery.
>
> (2025: n.pag.) (see Figure)

Although the boundaries between the white cube of the gallery and the black box of cinema have become more fluid, the need to address the gallery space and cultural context is vital for film and video artists. This has led artists to fill the gallery space with multi-screens, drawings, artefacts, stills and other objects. It is sometimes difficult to see if these artefacts are produced as commodities for art market sales derived from their moving-image work or actual artworks in themselves, which can stand independently. Smith is well aware of this challenge and addresses it in the catalogue interview with the curator Jeanette Pacher:

> The perfect cinema space is a cinema. I'm more interested in making use of the gallery in terms of there being a kind of narrative where the pieces are put together. When I'm planning a show, I always see travelling through the exhibition as a journey for the viewer, so that as they move through, things get revealed.
>
> (Pacher and Smith 2025: 42)

I remain unsure of how necessary or effective these artworks and artefacts are next to such powerful single-screen films, but Smith states their intention is to provide further paths into the work for audiences: 'They do exist independently – they certainly aren't just film props. But their meaning is enhanced by the context of the films. And I hope there are cumulative meanings that come from experiencing the exhibition as a whole' (Pacher and Smith 2025: 49).

Film

As Smith's voice-over implies, the significance of our names is often underestimated, as they are potent forces in shaping identity, social interactions and personal perceptions. Names are far more than simple labels; they are a fundamental part of our self-conception and how we navigate the world. The central motivation in *Being John Smith* is the filmmaker's struggle with having the most widespread name in the English language. He states that: '[…] my parents had cursed me with the most common name in the English-speaking world' (*Being John Smith* 2024). In the film, he asks the existential question, 'Who am I?' and while there are no straightforward answers, the archaeological journey through his past weaves deadpan humour and personal history to striking effect.

Being John Smith begins with title captions against a black background and the sounds of a baby crying, soon followed by a voice-over detailing how Smith's name was a burden for

the filmmaker throughout his childhood and remains so. This is illustrated by images of the filmmaker as a child, his schoolfriends and his school reports (see Figure 2). But just under four minutes in, the captions read: 'I'm starting to worry that this film is going to be too conventional, just a voiceover accompanied by illustrative images. I'm worried that it might lack the idiosyncratic wit and formal inventiveness of my earlier work' (*Being John Smith* 2024).

At this point the film, shifts gear and texture as Smith starts introducing new elements and layers, which initially seem unrelated but will slowly fall into place as the film progresses. The initially chronological narrative is soon subverted by oblique observations, which appear intermittently throughout the film, as a stream of consciousness, sometimes with minimal resolution. Visually, the film is constructed using a succession of still images and static shots such as family photographs, screenshots of other John Smiths from internet searches, brain scans, brand logos and images of tarpaulin-covered houses undergoing renovation in the gentrified area of East London (see Figure 3, p. 119).

One way of understanding the film is to consider the different layers which run through it to produce a variety of connections: the voice-over, which narrates in a monotone fashion the autobiographical facts; the captions, which appear intermittently throughout and provide a running self-deprecating auto-critique; the sound effects, which punctuate different sections; and the still images and static shots. The interplay between these layers is constant and fluid, disrupting linearity and creating puzzling diversions. There are also numerous visual pauses, simply a pure black screen which leaves space for the viewer to think and reflect. As Smith has noted, 'I'm not afraid of having darkness in films because that's where the imagination works. I really love sound and darkness' (Pacher and Smith 2025: 47).

There are many digressions from the linear narrative development, such as political statements, quotes and a layered deployment of sound, text, image, voice and archives which produce a surprisingly tender, personal and political work. The slow yet intense pace allows these significant diversions, interventions and juxtapositions to operate without losing the viewer. Like Smith's other films, *Being John Smith* treads a fine line between experimentation and accessibility by offering different paths into the work:

> Because I want to reach a broad audience with my work. I don't want to be elitist, I want somebody who's not familiar with artist film at all, hopefully to be able to get something from the work. I never reference this to anything outside of the work, one doesn't need a knowledge of artist film or anything about art.
>
> (Smith and Sally 2025: n.pag.)

The film ends on a redemptive note with footage Smith captured of Pulp playing the song 'Common People' (1995) to a crowd of about 30,000 people (the same rough number of people with the name John Smith) in Finsbury Park, shot from the high vantage point of the concert VIP stand. We have been previously told that one of Smith's students at Saint Martin's School of Art was Pulp frontman Jarvis Cocker. This penultimate shot with crowds singing and clapping to 'Common People' celebrates the potential of art to unite and incite forms of unity and solidarity while simultaneously relieving the viewer of the many uncertainties and anxieties expressed in the film. But even this moment of resolution is questioned by the filmmaker, who expresses concern over the possible cliché of clapping at the end of a film. Contradictions remain pertinent as they should.

Figure 1: John Smith, *Being John Smith*, installation views, 2025, Secession, Austria. Photo: Oliver Ottenschläger.

Figure 2: John Smith, *Being John Smith*, installation view, Secession 2025, Austria. Photo: Oliver Ottenschläger.

Conclusion

Smith's latest film, *Being John Smith*, appears to be his most successful yet, both in terms of the multitude of festival screenings, prizes and glowing press reviews it has garnered internationally and as a distinct seminal work that brings together the many strands of his practice in a meticulously executed multi-layered whole. *Being John Smith* is a rigorous, economical and seemingly autobiographical film which splinters into a variety of contexts and propositions touching and questioning notions of identity, class, politics, mortality and subjectivity. It may be the summum of this filmmaker-artist's life's work in terms of the succinct complexity and precision with which he uses and reveals the complex language of cinema while subverting its narrative codes and expectations.

Being John Smith is the right film at the right time, both for its maker and for the viewer. It manages to incorporate decades of film practice with the universal subject of the meaning of an individual's name and in doing so questions the very identity we often take for granted. As a self-confessional internal monologue it offers forms of humanity and generosity through its auto-critique and calculated yet candid hesitancy. The film is far from being a hagiography, it is self-reflexiveness and auto-criticism make sure of that but it remains an emotional meditation on the self and our relationship with identity and society. Upon leaving the screening, I am reminded of works by other writers and film-makers – the struggling reminiscences of a life recorded in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and the cryptic coded confessions of Hollis Frampton in his film *Nostalgia* (1971).

John Smith's films reaffirm the connections between the personal, the political and the universal by celebrating and elevating the ordinary to the extraordinary, as J. J. Charlesworth ([2010] 2025) pointed out in his review of Smith's 2010 retrospective at the Royal College of Art. Today, when the world is in the death throes of late capitalism dominated by bullies, with many of us carrying a sense of loss, this is a work we need to see.

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