

MEDIUMFORMAT

A person is seated in a wooden chair, wearing a large, wide-brimmed red hat and a red dress. A white cloth is draped over their lap. The background is dark and moody, with warm lighting highlighting the person and the chair.

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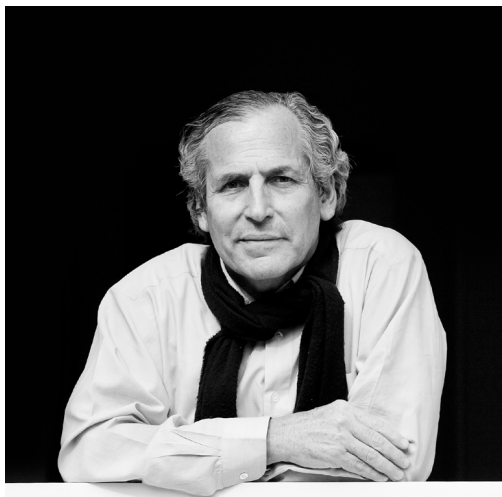
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THE INCREDIBLE WORLD OF RODNEY LEWIS SMITH

LESLIE SMOLAN
PATRICIA BARRETT

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RODNEY LEWIS SMITH





An Interview with Leslie Smolan and Patricia Barrett – Creative Partners of Rodney Smith

Olaf Sztaba

If there was the time when the world needed Rodney Smith and his imagery, it would be now. Where else could we find such an exquisite balance of beauty and elegance, humour and wit. In Rodney's work "things are not always what they seem" as if we were looking at a mirror of our own existence, a life of laughter and sadness, deep contemplation and magic.

With the kind help of his creative director and wife Leslie Smolan and archivist Patricia Barrett, we would like to showcase the incredible life work of Rodney Smith and tell the story of this remarkable man.

Rodney Lewis Smith (1947-2016) was a prominent New York-based photographer whose work teased out the ideas of surrealist painter Rene Magritte. Smith admired the great photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson and Ansel Adams and declared, “I am a product of an earlier era.” His compositions were created in-camera, perfect as they were.

For many years, he was known for his iconic black and white images in portraiture, landscape and later, fashion. Smith created enchanted worlds full of subtle contradictions and surprises. He changed the way CEOs were photographed. With Leslie he wrote iconic *The Hat Book*. In 2002 he began to embrace colour as a way of emphasizing contrast and exaggerating his playfulness. Just with film and light, Rodney achieved all he wanted and felt no need to retouch his otherworldly images. In the same way, he preferred natural light although he sometimes used continuous lighting.

In 2011, Rodney explained, “I do not have any preconceived or preordained ideas. The location is the key in which I compose in. Once I find the location, everything sort of falls into place for me. It’s the location that drives all the pictures. One of the things that is interesting, and I think people are always intrigued by this, is that though my pictures seem so composed, they are extremely spontaneous; 95% of the pictures I take, I didn’t even know I was going to take them a few minutes before.”

Rodney used a 35 mm Leica M4 before he took up a 120/6x6 Hasselblad with an 80 mm lens. His work is described as classic, minimalistic, surrealistic and whimsical.

“Great art has always been saying a giant ‘yes’ to life” – Rodney Smith

Leslie and Patricia,

You both knew Rodney as a photographer. What he was like when you first met him?

Patricia: I first met Rodney when I came out to Snedens Landing to visit him and start photo assisting for him. He was distracted by construction happening on his property and was in and out for a while but when we finally sat down to talk, he was focused on deep and deeply personal questions. Rodney wasn't a small talker. He wanted to get right to the heart.

Leslie: I met Rodney in 1987. I was the cofounder of Carbone Smolan Agency, a design and branding studio in NYC and he showed me his work. He had just finished shooting portraits of the CEOs of the Heinz companies, and was being discovered by the advertising and design industry. His journalistic portraits were unlike every other photographer in the business at that time, so his work quickly became recognized and sought after. He was happy and confident which, in hindsight, was unusual for him. After struggling for so many years, this validation of his talent had emboldened him.

Rodney's family was deeply involved in the fashion industry but Rodney reached a point when he wanted to separate himself from the family business. Could you please tell us more about this period? Did Rodney ever talk about it with you, Leslie?

Leslie: Rodney always felt that his father didn't want him in the fashion business. He, in turn, felt that his parent's lives were superficial and lacking spirituality. In order to understand the human spirit, he got a master's in theology while minoring in photography at Yale, under Walker Evans. Rodney's early work was photographing workers and farmers in Haiti and Wales, and religious pilgrims in the Middle East. In contrast to his parents, these people had very little in terms of worldly goods, but he felt they were much richer as humans.



Rodney had the ability to use humour in his visual work. It is very rare and difficult to achieve. Why do you think he was so successful in creating not only strong, visually rich imagery but with a clever dose of humour?

Leslie: Rodney's early work taught him to notice body language. He would often say that it was the bow of someone's head or a gesture that allowed him to know them. When his later work became more narrative, this same ability to note and use human gesture created humour and whimsy in his work. It introduces both a note of spontaneity and action that tells a story.



Where did he find his inspiration? What was one thing that motivated him the most?

Patricia: Rodney found his inspiration from a location. That was the most important thing to him. If he found a place that appealed to him, that was motivation enough. He could rest easily, knowing he could make photographs.



Leslie: The other thing that motivated Rodney was light. He felt that light was what illuminated the world and made each moment different from the next. He'd say, "Even if you were standing in the same spot that Ansel Adams made one of his famous photographs, you could never take the same picture again, as the light, clouds, sky and wind would all be different."

When scouting a location, he was searching for a place that would inspire him, a place where he knew he could make good pictures. It would need the right light and the right structural elements. Then he'd literally run away, not wanting to spoil the experience of the actual day of shooting. He never took Polaroids. He wasn't mapping out the photograph beforehand. For him, there was nothing as exciting as the experience of making the photograph, being in the moment with his "actors" and assistants, playing and creating.





What is reflected in all his work is elegance and class. There is no retouching or any sort of digital manipulation. Why do you think it was so important to Rodney?

Patricia: Rodney mentioned to me several times that he didn't become a photographer to be tethered to a computer or a studio. He wanted to interact with the world around him. To get close to people, to tell a story – these were things that got him excited. Retouching and manipulating an image felt artificial to him. That felt more like illustration and creating something a different way with different tools.

Could you please give us a sense of how a typical photo session went? How long did he prepare? How extensive was the process? What was his rhythm when behind the camera?

Patricia: If Rodney was shooting with a client, there was usually a theme to the story. The most important thing to begin exploring the assignment was to scout locations. He was very particular about where he felt inspired to create. Once he found a location, he would cast the models. Rodney shot men and women differently. "Can you do a cartwheel or handstand?" "Are you afraid of heights?" used to be typical questions he asked male models. He always wanted to have a good relationship with the models and used them again if they opened up to him. Once he found his models, he would then consult with his stylist, Renate Lindlar. She was an incredible stylist who understood his aesthetic! She would bring a variety of clothes and props to the shoot. Once the day of the shoot arrived, Rodney could be spontaneous on location because he had all the elements of success. He explored the location on the morning of the shoot while the models were getting dressed so he had a good idea of where to begin but he never knew the exact photograph he would take until moments before the shutter clicked.

Rodney worked with natural light. Why was he dedicated to natural light?

Patricia: Didn't want to be trapped in studio or tethered to lights. See above.





Rodney was a master of mixing the real world with the surreal. Why do you think it was so important for him to combine both and why he was so successful doing this?

Patricia: Rodney was always seeking perfection. He was creating a world the way he wanted it to be: playful, whimsical, beautiful, symmetrical (mostly), and full of unanswered questions.

Leslie: The quest for perfection came from his upbringing. His way of coping with his family's success was to maintain everything he was given perfectly. The artefact, the "thing" was paramount. But he lacked love and emotional support. The surreal aspect of his pictures is the story of human longing and aspiration.



Leslie, you said, “The great irony about Rodney is that his pictures look exactly the opposite of how he felt.” Could you please expand on this?

Leslie: Rodney was always lonely, fearful and full of anxiety. He was a self-proclaimed hypochondriac. He was claustrophobic and avoided elevators and crowded spaces. He never felt he was good enough. He hated looking at himself in mirrors. And as he got older he became more reclusive.

His pictures, on the other hand, are bold and confident, beautiful and graceful, whimsical and funny.

Even though Rodney's imagery appears to be playful, his images ask much deeper questions about the human psyche including anxiety, fear and loneliness. Many of his beautifully crafted frames depict people with their faces covered or invisible as if he wanted to point us away from what's outside and reveal more of what's inside us. His visually rich and elegant imagery may well be the cleverest artistic endeavour concerning our human condition. Did Rodney ever talk about it with you?

Leslie: Rodney wanted to know if his anxiety was unique to him or just part of being human. So in order to know himself, he looked at others to help solve that mystery. When he met you, he wanted to know what made you tick. He'd ask about your daily rituals. How do you feel about yourself and, in particular, how do you feel about your mother and father? Rodney didn't want to be polite or superficial. To him, the only conversation worth having was about the human psyche. He'd often quote Socrates, saying, "An unexamined life is not worth living."

I don't know if it was intentional or just instinct to hide the face. He loved hats, as he felt they balanced out the figure. People just looked more balanced with a hat on their head. And with the prop, he could fool around. In some instances, the fashion client wanted to hide the model's face, because it was associated with a different clothing line. Putting a hat or a canoe over the face made the image funny. It also shows an evolution of the work. In the beginning, the models were shot as portraits, as pictures of a specific person. Later on, the models become more of the narrative, and their individual features were less important than the whole tableau.

Rodney was a big fan of using the Zone System, a technique invented by his mentor, Ansel Adams. Why?

Patricia: Rodney was a big believer in technique. You must learn the technique before you can let go and have fun. He spent years perfecting his craft, doing film tests, making sure he could create depth and density in his negatives. Once you have a good handle on the technique, it will become second nature and you don't have to think about it. You can focus on the work you're creating.

Leslie: Rodney's goal was to make the world sharper and clearer, bringing order to chaos. The Zone System helped him attain this sharpness.



Rodney worked with a 35mm Leica for many years only later to shift to 120/6x6 Hasselblad with an 80mm lens. Do you know why he made this transition?

Patricia: Rodney began shooting with a Leica and loved it for its portability and sharpness. But he started getting more and more commercial clients who needed a bigger negative to create larger advertising and he quickly adapted to the Hasselblad.

Rodney started his photographic journey with up-close and intimate portraits of regular people, workers, in contrast to the world of his powerful and influential parents. Do you think it was a form a rebellion, telling the world he could make it on his own?

Leslie: Definitely. He wanted to get as far away from the life of his parents as possible.

In many of his early portraits and later fashion work, body language and gesture play an important part. What was so important to him?

Leslie: As a keen observer of people, body language told him a lot about someone. Were they shy, confident, joyful, arrogant, proud, happy, etc.? He was always curious about other people. He felt it would help him learn more about himself and why he was the way he was.

Would you say that the death of his parents caused a major shift in his career?

Leslie: The death of his parents made him more determined to become a successful photographer. He was going to prove them wrong. With each new phase of his work, this proved this to be the case. With the CEO portraits, he understood these men and could get them to do what he wanted. Plus they liked him. With the fashion photos, he was liberated to make the images he wanted, without his parents around to criticize.



How did Rodney interact with his corporate clients?

Leslie: My favourite story is when Rodney was hired to shoot a portrait of John Mack, the CEO of Morgan Stanley, for their annual report. Despite Rodney's efforts, John insisted on being shot in the boardroom. So on the day of the shoot, they set up a chair for him near a window. There were 25 people on set, communications people, marketing people, PR people, secretaries, photo assistants, all gathered in anticipation. John Mack showed up an hour late, and was clearly annoyed. He looked at his watch and said to Roddy, "How long is this going to take?"

Rodney picked up his camera, pushed the shutter once, and said, "You're done." John Mack said, "What do you mean I'm done?"

"Well," said Roddy, "you get out of it what you put into it. I took an adequate picture, which is fine for your annual report. You're done."

"OK," said John Mack and got up and left. You can just imagine the silence. Crickets. Rodney packed up his gear and was standing near the elevator when John Mack's secretary came running out and said, "Mr. Mack would like a word with you."



They went back into his office and John Mack said, "I have a house, here, here and here. "Where do you want to take my picture?"

Patricia: Another time, Rodney was hired to shoot a picture of Ricky Gervais for New York Magazine. All the prep had been done well in advance, the scouting, wardrobe, hair and make-up team. Ricky, like many celebrities, didn't agree with any of it.



One of the big differences between Rodney and most fashion photographers was that he didn't like shooting celebrities or well-known fashion models. This is probably the reason he is less famous. Rodney felt the photograph was more important than making the celebrity look good – or what they perceived to be good. The only exception was Cyndi Lauper. She trusted Rodney implicitly and the photographs of her show it. They are stunning, and great pictures.

The anonymity of the models contributes to the “everyman” quality of his photographs, which would have been impossible if he had liked shooting celebrities.







Leslie, how did you meet Rodney?

Leslie: I met Rodney when I was house hunting in Connecticut where he lived and worked. I instantly fell in love with his talent. (Falling in love with the man came later.) His photographs were remarkable, and unlike those of any other photographer I'd ever met or worked with. The photographs excited me. And inspired me. I immediately asked him if he wanted to collaborate on a self-generated project, called The Hat Book, and he said yes.

Leslie, you worked together for so many years as a creative couple. Did you find it challenging?

Leslie: If our first assignment together is any example, the answer to your question would be a resounding YES. Challenging is an understatement.

I was designing a recruiting brochure to attract young people to investment banking. To set up the shot, Rodney placed five people around a table who are pointing at a piece of paper. One of the women was not well styled. Rodney did not shoot Polaroids, so I had no idea what the image really looked like. When I asked him to remove the woman from the setup, he refused. I was convinced it was the worst photo shoot of my entire professional career. Rodney knew I was upset and did nothing to appease me.

A week later, I reluctantly met to review the images and I was stunned. The image was of a sharp-looking banker leaning against a faceted glass wall. The people around the table were out of focus, with just a gestural detail to balance the main figure. It's brilliant.

Rodney was a great artist. A stubborn perfectionist. He always said his allegiance was to the picture, not to me. That's a bit hard when you're the art director and have a certain vision to express but I quickly learned to trust Rodney completely. He used light to edit his world, transforming the mundane into something artful. To the human eye the world looks completely different from the images Rodney made with his camera.

Patricia, what was it like to work with him?

Patricia: It was exhilarating. I saw the world as I would never have seen it. I changed film backs in the front seat of a biplane, bumping along in a boat trying not to let water splash on the cameras; in front of the Eiffel Tower at 5 a.m. I crouched on the floor of restaurants lined with mirrors to avoid being in the shot; inhaled enough smoke from a fog machine for two lifetimes; and held model's hands as they balanced on topiary. I got to see the film from loading in the camera, to hand processing each roll in the darkroom, to making contact sheets, to the final museum-quality print. Rodney was frustrating to work with. Mediocrity was not allowed; he demanded quality. He pushed everyone to do their best work. I learned and honed my skills under his guidance. He was also hilarious and fun and had nicknames for everyone. He called me "my Patriciafulness." He was anxious and insecure but when he got behind the camera, he was confident and in control. He surrounded himself with the best, most talented people.



Could you please describe Rodney's most memorable and prominent photographic assignments?

Patricia:

SAORI ON SEAPLANE WING DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2010

This was an assignment for Leslie Smolan and Carbone Smolan Agency. She was creating a new resort brand for a client in the Dominican Republic. The photographs captured the spirit of the place before anything was built.

We got helicoptered into this remote beach for this photograph. We had two men manning a wind machine so we could have the wind blowing her dress. One had the wind machine strapped to his back and the other was holding him so he wouldn't tip over. This image was shot moments before a heavy rainfall. You can see the contact sheet. One roll of film for this capture. That's how Rodney shot. He knew when the picture felt right and didn't waste film or time. He didn't click the shutter unless it was how he wanted it.



Leslie:

SKYLINE HUDSON RIVER

NEW YORK CITY, NY 1995

In 1994, the New York Times Fashion Magazine asked Rodney to shoot a series of pictures called “The Line” – pictures with Elizabeth Stewart, now the very famous stylist to the stars. There was “Hemline” and “Airline.” “Skyline” was the last in the series. The only directive was to have the New York skyline in the picture.

He found a barge that was large enough to put the crew in the middle of the Hudson River. The day of the shoot it was raining and the art director asked him if we should reschedule for another day. Rodney always liked rain. It made things enigmatic, dimensional, and unresolved.

It took some hours to get the barge in place and by then it was raining quite hard. They got everyone dressed quickly and he found himself waiting, as the barge drifted slowly, for just the right moment, when the man’s hat came between the Twin Towers. He took a few frames and the job was done. A photograph always has a history. It captures a time and a place, and is able to halt life, if only for a second. Of all the pictures he has taken, this one is the most indelibly connected to its moment. It is a timeline as well as a skyline.



EDYTHE AND ANDREW KISSING ON TOP OF TAXI **NEW YORK CITY, NY 2008**

This was originally shot for New York Magazine in summer 2008. The original concept was to create an essential New York picture and incorporate the great New York icon, the yellow taxicab. The first challenge was location. After much searching, we found ourselves at 125th Street underneath the West Side Highway. The second challenge was logistics. It was a long and arduous process arranging to have thirty cabs at the right place at the right time, perfectly placed for a seemingly whimsical photograph.



DANIELLE IN BOAT

BEAUFORT, SOUTH CAROLINA, 1996

For Rodney, photography was all about being outside in the world and interacting with it. The key was finding the right location. To shoot the cover of “The Book,” a new magazine for Nieman Marcus, Rodney went down to Beaufort, South Carolina and spent a week with a location scout. It wasn’t until they passed a cypress grove, an hour away, that he said, “Stop, this is it.”

After getting a permit, they arrived with the model early the next morning. He’d asked for a little boat, and they’d picked up the dress, a \$17,000 gown from Milan that had to be shipped back the next day. They had to work fast. Danielle was put in the boat, and Rodney set up his Hasselblad and an 80 mm lens on another boat about 15 feet away. He’d picked this spot for the way the light cast a reflection on the water. As there were alligators and snakes, a park ranger holding a gun is in another boat just out of the frame. Rodney, who had a mischievous sense of humour, kept making the assistants jump into the water to add more fog. Rodney shot one or two rolls of Kodak Plus-X 120 film, and half an hour later, they were done.



A.J. LOOKING OVER IVY-COVERED WALL

HARRIMAN, NY, 1994

Rodney used to quote the playwright Robert Anderson (his previous father-in-law) who said, “You’re always weaving, but you never know when you’re weaving with gold.” He meant that an artist never knows when the results will be magical.

That can be said for this picture. During a lunch break for a shoot for Neiman Marcus in 1994, Rodney saw a workman walking by with a ladder. He borrowed the ladder, asked AJ to climb up and put his hands behind his back. Rodney took a few frames and they all went back to eating lunch.



Where can we find more information about Rodney's work and legacy?

- <https://rodneysmith.com/about/> (scroll down for all press articles here)
- <https://rodneysmith.com/news/> (current news – social media)
- <https://rodneysmith.com/exhibitions/> (exhibitions, museums, collections, teaching)

New York Times

www.nytimes.com/2016/12/14/arts/design/rodney-smith-dead-photographer.html?_r=0

Rodney Presentation at B+H Photo, October 2016

www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQrU_nldb5s

Rodney Smith Photographs is being re-issued in soft cover on October 13th, 2020 and it includes a frameable fine art print. You can pre-order the book on [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com).

Rodney Lewis Smith

www.rodneysmith.com

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