## HUMU)R Ne. AR



ways, that it doesn't need anybody telling people how hateful or vulgar it is. What people need is to find a way out."-RODNEY SMITH Whether it's political conflict, climate change or the economy, the world feels out of whack.

"The world is so unsettled, so

unresolved and lost in so many

Those best known, such as Lartigue, Doisneau, Elliott Erwitt, Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander —all found and shot subjects as they were out observing human behavior—for what is witty often means finding poetry in the prosaic, or magic in the mundane. It's the things we

Humor in photography is particularly difficult to achieve and very few artists have succeeded at it.

Humor is an escape hatch; it can turn pain into the pleasure of a laugh.

understand made strange. Rodney Smith was an artist that looked at the human condition, and to our benefit, had a great deal of fun with it. For decades, Museums rejected all photography as art, labeling it "a utilitarian medium, a bastard of the arts.†" Consider that the Photography Department at The MET only began in 1928; MoMA's Photography Department in 1940; and the J. Paul Getty Museum's collection in 1984. Many of these early works' subjects were architecture, portraits, landscapes and still lifes. Few

photographers in the medium's relatively short history have even attempted humor as a subject.

It's no surprise then, that humor in art photography is still struggling to find its place within

important museum collections. With the recent acquisition of Rodney Smith's original prints by the J. Paul Getty Museum, The Portland Museum of Art, Portland Maine, and the Princeton University Museum of Art, Princeton, New Jersey, this is about to change. † Philip Gefter, Wagstaff Before and After Mapplethorpe, p. xvi

"I perceive my pictures as playing with time and space—this is the quality that most people

my pictures are funny. The influences on Rodney Smith's original images are many. There are certainly elements of Dada and Surrealism in his whimsical works, but Keaton's Stoneface and Harold Lloyd's dandy, are there, too. W.C. Fields called Chaplin a "ballet dancer" and physicality is an essential element of

Smith's photographs, too. His signature style is characterized by idyllic natural settings populated

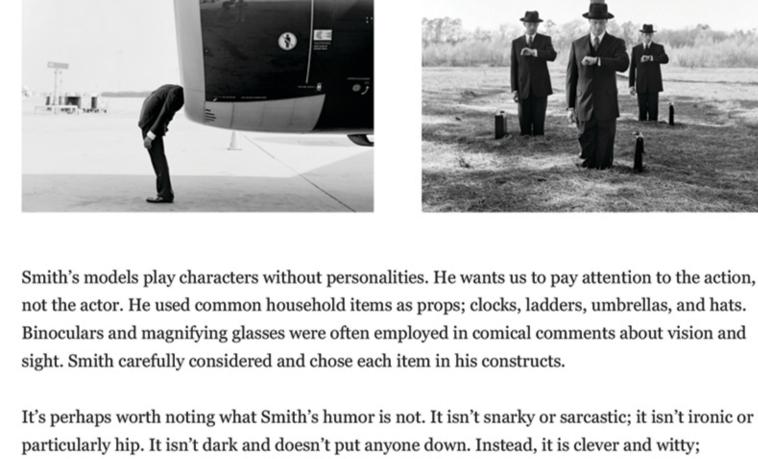
elastic, like dancers. The success of his carefully designed pictures depended entirely upon Smith's

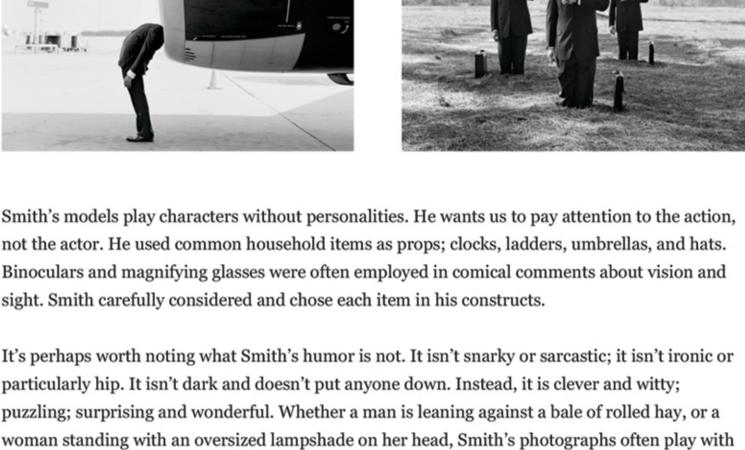
by models challenged in a wide variety of ways. Agility, grace, and elegance were important to

Smith, even if he was depicting a dimension of the absurd. His models were athletic, lithe and

ideas, his fertile imagination; his ability to direct, and his technical expertise.

see as surreal—but mostly I think





challenges to human bodies in space. Smith's is a sophisticated, subtle and cultured sense of humor. His funny pictures are full of references to history, literature, music, poetry and film. He doesn't put you on the floor in hysterics, nor was he trying to. More than telling us, he's asking, philosophically, "What's going on here?" The models, locations, and comical situations all change from picture to picture, but

Stuart Frolick is an artist and contributing editor for Black & White magazine. His profile, "Rodney

Smith: Elegance and Humor" appeared in the December, 2017 issue.

Smith's tastes and sensibilities; the tenor and tone of his images, have a look all their own.

