

# HUMOR

by STUART I. FROLICK

# IN ART



“The world is so unsettled, so unresolved and lost in so many 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. Humor is an escape hatch; it can turn pain into the pleasure of a laugh.

Humor in photography is particularly difficult to achieve and very few artists have succeeded at it. 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 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.”<sup>†</sup> 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.

<sup>†</sup> 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 see as surreal—but mostly I think 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 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 elastic, like dancers. The success of his carefully designed pictures depended entirely upon Smith’s ideas, his fertile imagination; his ability to direct, and his technical expertise.



Smith’s models play characters without personalities. He wants us to pay attention to the action, not the actor. He used common household items as props; clocks, ladders, umbrellas, and hats. Binoculars and magnifying glasses were often employed in comical comments about vision and sight. Smith carefully considered and chose each item in his constructs.

It’s perhaps worth noting what Smith’s humor is not. It isn’t snarky or sarcastic; it isn’t ironic or particularly hip. It isn’t dark and doesn’t put anyone down. Instead, it is clever and witty; puzzling; surprising and wonderful. Whether a man is leaning against a bale of rolled hay, or a woman standing with an oversized lampshade on her head, Smith’s photographs often play with 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 Smith’s tastes and sensibilities; the tenor and tone of his images, have a look all their own.

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.

\* Watch Rodney Smith’s thoughts on humor [here](#).

