



# A vision for fashion

Rodney Smith's photography was elegant, surreal and meticulously crafted. His often-overlooked work deserves greater acclaim, photographic historian and curator Anne Morin tells **David Clark**

If one thinks of major fashion photographers of the 1980s and '90s, leading figures such as Annie Leibovitz, Helmut Newton, Nick Knight and others come to mind. Rodney Smith may not, despite his distinctively surreal, whimsical work for high-profile brands such as Ralph Lauren and magazines including the *New York Times* and *Vanity Fair*.

Why isn't he more famous? 'I think

history makes many mistakes,' answers Anne Morin, editor and curator of a new Rodney Smith career retrospective book and exhibition. 'Smith wasn't just a fashion photographer commissioned by big brands, he was a really visionary man, an artist who put photography at the service of his vision. He has been really undervalued and I think the new book and exhibitions put him in the place he deserves to be.

'His photography is not just a simple wink towards the surreal world – behind it is a huge ability in terms of taking pictures. Everything is real, there's nothing retouched, and however he makes you believe the illusion, he never lies. He uses photography as an artist and there's a huge moral integrity in terms of the way he uses it.'

Smith's work is often described as dreamlike and



**Left: Caroline at the Top of Circular Staircase Charleston, South Carolina 2000**

**Right: James in Innertube with Duck Lake Placid, New York 2006**





timeless. It also undoubtedly includes an element of playfulness and humour. Influenced by artists such as René Magritte, writers including Lewis Carroll and filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock, his images have a slightly unreal appearance and people are shown in all kinds of unusual, mysterious and intriguing situations. His elegant, well-dressed models may be shown jumping over a hay bale, doing a cartwheel on a sea wall or almost entirely covered by a giant top hat. Equally they may be shown standing on a boat in a flooded forest or posing like the hands on a giant clock.

Smith himself said of his work, 'Today, a great deal of Western culture seems rooted in remoteness, anger, alienation, and squalor. I want people to see the beauty and whimsy in life, not its ugliness. I feel the need to reach out for its soul, its depth, and its underlying beauty. I represent a world that is possible if people act their best. It's a world that's slightly beyond reach, beyond everyday experience, but it's definitely not impossible.'

#### Life and career

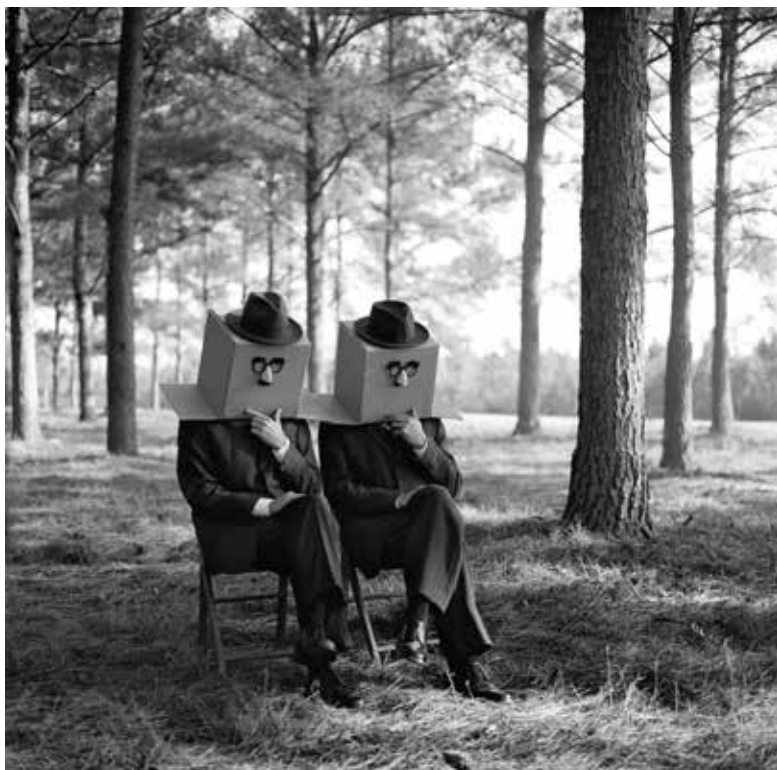
Smith was born into a prosperous family on Long Island, New York, in 1947. He was the son of Sanford Smith, the owner of a successful fashion company, Modelia Inc. Fashion was an everyday part of Smith's early life and models often spent time at his home. However, he rejected the career in the industry his father had envisaged and instead went on to study for a Masters in Theology at Yale University, while also studying photography under the tutelage of the acclaimed photojournalist Walker Evans. His early work included a series of portraits of the people of Israel, later published as *In the Land of Light*, and travel portraits and landscapes in other countries including Wales, Haiti and the American South.

However, in the mid-1980s his work took a different direction when he began to be commissioned by magazines and art directors to shoot portraits of prominent business leaders around the world. He broke new ground by photographing them in informal, everyday situations rather than formal workplace environments.

This work, in turn, led to fashion



**Above: Twins in Tree  
Snedens Landing,  
New York  
1999**



**Left: Men with Boxes on Head  
Brunswick,  
Georgia  
2001**

**Right: Caroline with Opera Glasses No. 2  
Charleston, South Carolina  
2000**



**Below: Danielle in Boat  
Beaufort, South Carolina  
1996**



assignments for magazines, luxury brands and retailers, and to books including *The Hat Book* (1993). He quickly established his distinctive style and method of working, one that remained largely unchanged for the rest of his career.

For the rest of his life, he continued with his fashion-related commercial and editorial work, ultimately for hundreds of clients, plus assignments such as the cover shot for Cindy Lauper's album *At Last*. He continued working for several years after being diagnosed with leukaemia in 2000, but died suddenly in 2016, aged 68.

A selection of Smith's work, including some previously unseen images, is currently on show at the Palazzo Roverella, Rovigo, Italy and the Museo Franz Mayer in Mexico City, as well as in the monograph *Rodney Smith: Photography between Real and Surreal*. The book and exhibitions focus particularly on his black & white fine-art fashion work rather than the earlier travel and portrait work or the later colour work. 'He was not really a colourist,' Anne Morin says. 'He didn't need it.'

She believes that although Smith rejected his family's lifestyle and the drive to be a wealthy businessman, his upbringing ultimately had a significant influence on his career and the way he worked. 'I think he was born into that context of discipline, the search for perfection and elegance, and a certain social status that he projected on his work,' she tells me.

However, fashion itself was never his main interest when creating his images. In a rare talk about his work for B&H Photo shortly before he died, Smith said: 'The models are not the subject, they are part of the story, playing a game with me and telling a story, but they are not the reason the picture exists... the clothes are not the most important thing in my pictures. It's the picture.'

#### Working methods

Smith worked predominantly in black & white. He was strongly focused on achieving everything he wanted in-camera at the time of shooting and didn't crop his images or use digital manipulation at the printing stage. 'Photoshop is no fun to me,' he said. 'The fun is the actual shooting of the picture in the real world.'





**Don Jumping over Hay Roll No. 1  
Monkton,  
Maryland  
1999**

➤ He shot his images with a Leica in the early part of his career, but from 1988 onwards he primarily worked with medium-format film cameras: a Hasselblad and a Mamiya 67. He didn't use digital cameras, though shot with colour film from 2002.

He was highly sensitive to the way objects and locations appeared in different types of natural light and almost entirely used daylight to shoot his images. He never shot with flash, but occasionally supplemented natural light with continuous lighting.

Even though Smith was meticulous in setting up his images, the actual shots were usually taken quickly. 'He created his pictures like a magician,' says Anne Morin.

'Although his pictures are extremely well-balanced, with everything in the right place, they were done in a very short time. He might have been working for eight hours trying hard to get the image he wanted, then the chance appeared.'

Smith's way of working – the combination of craftsmanship and serendipity – is illustrated by the story behind his best-known picture (used for the book cover). It was shot for the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* and shows five models holding umbrellas with the Manhattan skyline in the background. Due to rainfall on the day, the shoot was going to be cancelled until Smith had the idea of incorporating the umbrellas into the image.

'In that picture, everything is in the perfect place, everything is aligned, it's just a joy,' comments Morin. 'If anything was in a different place, such as the umbrellas or the way the models are standing, the magic would disappear. Smith was an artist, he had that really sensitive capacity to know exactly the right moment to take the picture.'

'He would have taken a long time to pose the models exactly as he wanted them before taking the shot. You can see that from the contact sheets from that shoot, which are like little films because there's almost no variation between the images he took. He was polishing his work like a diamond. And when it was perfectly brilliant, it was done.'



*Rodney Smith: Photography Between Real and Surreal* is published by Silvana Editoriale, RRP £32. His work is on show in exhibitions at the Palazzo Roverella, Rovigo, Italy, until 1 February 2026 and at the Franz Mayer Museum, Mexico City, until March 2026.

