

Michael Smith: A Visual Journey

Bill Jay

The following "interview" is a pastiche of opinions, comments and statements, made by Michael A. Smith over a period of several years, gleaned from exhibition announcements, newsletters, transcripts of lectures, responses to questions, dialogues with students, private letters and notes, as well as personal conversations during the many years of our friendship.

It was written in order to coincide with the opening of his major retrospective exhibition of photographs at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Michael A. Smith: A Visual Journey, 5 June - 13 September 1992, and the publication of an accompanying monograph, Michael A. Smith: Twenty-five Years. A Visual Journey, self-published, June 1992.

Bill Jay: If there is one remark that I have heard you repeat more than any other, especially when young photographers question your motives, it is: "I just try to make the best pictures I can." That is admirably succinct, but may need a little elaboration

Michael A. Smith: What I mean is that the final image, the picture, is a new experience (for me, as well as the viewer) as opposed to being a mere transcript of the subject or a recording of a personal response to it. When reading the sentence you quoted, place the stress on "pictures" and that will make the point clearer.

B.J.: So how does this work in practice, when you are traveling around looking for these pictures?

M.S.: I'm not looking for anything, I'm just looking. Obviously, I must have an emotional response to something "out there" otherwise I would not bother to unload and set up all that heavy equipment. I focus on what first caught my eye, but that is only the starting point. As I move the camera around, to the left and to the right, and up and down, relationships on the ground glass assume a life of their own. And, more often than not, the final image will not be the same scene which first caused me to set up the camera. The image is different from the actuality. In other words, I cannot recreate my original feeling or even the experience of the event. My initial response was probably heavily influenced by the reality of deep space, the colors, the sounds and the smells, my memories, thoughts and dreams, and a host of other factors, as well as with my visual concerns. It is impossible to recreate all these complexities of experience in a two-dimensional black and white photograph. The emphasis has shifted to making the best

possible picture. Ultimately, I hope that my photograph will create a new experience for the viewer - an experience of the photograph - which may or may not have anything to do with the scene or my own experience while photographing. The prints do not function as personal memory-joggers (although, sometimes, I can conjure up, with effort, what the light was like and what I felt in that situation, but they do not automatically provide those memories) or act as transmitters of the scene to the viewer through the proxy of the print. The picture is its own, new experience.

B.J.: Given that “reality” is merely the starting point, the trigger, for making a picture, it seems that your images could be made anywhere, within a mile of your home, yet you are traveling vast distances in your quest for pictures. Is this a contradiction?

M.S.: It is not a contradiction because the issues are so disparate. I travel because it is exciting to do so. Also, when I am away from home, I have left behind all the mundane cares and worries. I do not see the bills . . . Out of sight, out of mind. So I am free from the worries of everydayness and free to respond visually with a fresher, more wide-awake spirit. On the other hand, I do not believe you have to go anywhere to make good pictures. It is not necessary. Minor White said: “If he [the photographer] were to walk a block in a state of sensitized sympathy to everything to be seen, he would be exhausted before the block was up and out of film long before that” (“The Camera Mind and Eye,” Magazine of Art, Vol. 45, No. 1, pp. 16-19). I believe that, absolutely. No, I do not need to travel. Things to photograph are all around you, everywhere. In fact, in the immediate future I intend to concentrate on a project which has interested me for a long time - stay here [Ottsville, Pennsylvania] most of the year and photograph the local area. I’m looking forward to that as a change of pace.

B.J. Let us talk for a while about how you reached this point in your life. Most readers may not know that you have no formal training in photography, you do not teach in order to subsidize your work and, in fact, you make a living solely on the sale of prints to collectors and museums. Indeed, you seemed to have “ploughed your own furrow” to an amazing, and enviable, degree. Have you always had such assurance in your own abilities?

M.S.: I have always believed that a commitment to personal passion, and hard-work, would reward me - emotionally, if not financially. I am not interested in convincing others of anything; I am not a proselytizer. I live my life as best I can, for me, and let others lead theirs. But most people are uncomfortable with individualism, in spite of their own artistic avowals, and tend to look askance or suspiciously at such single-mindedness. So, I do not teach and I have no “safety-net.” I’m on my own, and always have been.

B.J.: Give me some examples . . .

M.S.: After getting a pre-law degree, in 1963, I wound up teaching emotionally disturbed children in a psychiatric hospital. Meanwhile, I started to look for something

which really interested me - I tried being a writer, resumed clarinet lessons with a view to being a musician, did some acting, dabbled with ceramics and painting. I should emphasize that I tried these activities not with the idea that the chosen one would be a hobby or side interest, but with the notion that it would be my life's work. Then I saw a few minutes of a public television program on Edward Weston. His images, and the quotations from his Day Books, stuck in my mind and would not be shaken off. I began to see the world as if I had a camera to my eye. That feeling persisted and was so strong that I determined I would be a photographer.

B.J.: Did you have any prior experience of photography?

M.S. None at all. I did not own a camera or even know that f-stops existed. But I had a friend who knew about photography and he loaned me books, so I was familiar with the images of Edward Weston, Cartier-Bresson, Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Walker Evans, W. Eugene Smith, Dorothea Lange, etc. long before I bought a camera. You asked about a sense of assurance . . . I borrowed money from my younger brother, who was saving up to go to college, to buy darkroom equipment and a camera, a Pentax H1-A. I told him that someday I would dedicate my first book to him. I was nothing if not immodest. But it happened. [Landscapes 1975-79, a self-published, two-volume work received the Best Photographic Book of the Year award at the 1981 International Festival of Photography in Arles, France. It was dedicated to his brother "Who was there at the beginning."]

B.J.: Can you see any consistency in your photographs, from those first images to now?

M.S.: Right from the very beginning, there was a rigor in seeing. There are images on the very first strip of six frames which I would not be ashamed or shy to exhibit in a retrospective show. They were close-ups, abstractions . . .

B.J.: But what is the consistent factor?

M.S.: The first two photographic books I read were the Day Books and the Decisive Moment, in which Cartier-Bresson said: "Cropping is an admission of failure to see creatively." Weston agreed. And that idea of seeing the photograph whole and complete at the time of exposure is what captured my heart about photography. The intensity of that moment. Right from the first exposures I ever made, I was very careful about framing. It is still my golden rule. When I lecture to young photographers I tell them, basically, only one thing: pay attention to the corners; pay attention to the edges.

B.J.: How soon was it, from your first photographs, that you realized you wanted to make a living by selling original prints?

M.S.: I started photographing in June 1966. By October I knew my prints should be exhibited. But where? There were no galleries showing photographs. So I learned how to dry mount, printed like crazy for a couple of months, cleaned out my darkroom apartment, built panels and tacked up the prints and had a show. Sixty prints - and I sold 40 prints at \$10 a piece. And I thought: Ah, hah! This is how I want to make my living. I had been taking photographs for only 6 months . . .

B.J.: But you were still teaching emotionally disturbed kids at this time and shooting 35 mm images in your spare time.

M.S.: Yes. The following Spring, 1967, I bought an old 8 x 10 inch view camera and from that time I have never used a 35 mm. I knew this was my life's work, so at the end of the semester, I quit my job and decided to go West. On my way, I stopped at the Art Institute in Chicago and the curator of the Museum bought four prints, made with the Pentax! That was a big boost. Then, when I arrived back in Philadelphia, I sold seven more prints within two days to the Museum of Art and the Free Library. It confirmed that someday I could support myself by just doing my art. That's what Weston always talked about wanting to do, and he was my great inspiration. Until that time came, I had to earn a living. I knew I had been a good teacher of kids and I had taught myself photography so decided to teach private photography workshops. That is how I earned my living from 1967 through the end of 1974.

Another trip in 1975 was a big turning-point. I traveled out West again, this time for eight months, visiting with photographers whom I admired, like Ansel Adams, Wynn Bullock and, especially, Brett Weston - and photographing. I had the idea that I could sell prints to collectors and museums as I traveled around. Now there were not many collectors in 1975! I barely survived, but it set the pattern for what I have been doing since then. I travel around for months, living in my truck [an old fire engine from Kingwood Township Volunteer Fire Company, converted into mobile living space with specially constructed cupboards and drawers for equipment and prints], making photographs, stopping in various cities to sell prints from previous trips, and keeping going. Back home in Pennsylvania I do all the processing and printing. I'm living the life I want to live, making photographs and selling them.

B.J.: But they are not all landscapes . . . Because of the success of your previous book (Landscapes 1975-1979) and the various exhibitions in which your images have been seen, there is a perception that you are primarily a photographer of the Grand View. Are you anxious to change that perception with your recent City scapes?

M.S.: No, I am not "anxious" to change anyone's perception of me and my work! But it is true that I have completed large bodies of work in various cities, usually on a commission basis.

In 1980 I photographed extensively in Toledo, Ohio, for The Toledo Museum of Art. Then I photographed Princeton, New Jersey (1984-85) and New Orleans, Louisiana (1985). I should also point out that I completed an Art in Public Places project (for Broward County, Florida) in which portraits become the major component. So, no, I am not exclusively a landscape photographer - and never have been. In a sense I have been continuously deepening and expanding all the areas of interest that were evident in my very first pictures.

B.J.: In what way?

M.S.: My earliest images, those taken with the Pentax, were closeups, of broken windows, rocks, details devoid of context. Over the years I have been pulling back, photographing deep spaces. But the primary interest is still abstraction. This means that the scene can be specifically identified, if the viewer is familiar with the area, which, in turn, means that my photographs in cities, say, can serve an historical, documentary function as well as an aesthetic one. Always, I am doing my own work.

As a by-product, it also provides an historical record of Toledo, New Orleans, Princeton or wherever. I'm interested in that fine line, in walking that tightrope between abstraction and documentation. If the image is just an abstraction - and I still respond to pure abstraction - it can be just beautiful; if it is only a document, it can be very boring. I am interested in that fine line where the image performs both functions. For me, that is what is interesting about photographs and photography today.

B.J.: But abstraction takes precedence . . .

M.S.: Sure. When I first look at new prints I always step back and view them from a distance, about 10 feet away, to get a sense of the image's structure. If the structure does not work, I'm not interested in the picture, no matter how "useful" it might be as a record. Of course, my idea of what constitutes good "structure" has changed over the years. Initially, I emphasized simple, bold shapes; now I am more interested in greater complexity, an all-over integration of small details. I want the viewers' eye to move all over the image area. Keeping the eyes moving is automatically exciting, in a more profound sense than the words imply. I want to make photographs which cause the viewers' eyes to involuntarily move across the whole picture area so that they cannot help but look at everything in the image. If I achieve that, then I have succeeded.

B.J.: Which brings up the question of detail . . . Your concern for all-over information is, I presume, the reason for your refusal to enlarge the negatives.

M.S.: I have been told, often, that with modern materials it is possible to enlarge negatives and produce finely detailed images. Maybe so. But the point is that the very finest images, in terms of detail, are made by contact printing. And I am only interested in the best. So the equation, as far as I am concerned, goes like this: maximum detail is

produced by contact printing so, therefore, if you want a bigger print the result is a bigger negative. There's nothing mysterious or new about that fact. The 19th century photographers took it for granted. It is the same now, as then, in spite of the availability of enlarging.

I still use the 8 x 10 inch format a great deal but since 1978 I have been doing a lot of work with an 8 x 20 inch view camera which I bought from a barber who had a portrait studio in the back room of his shop. It is my medium-format camera. The large-format camera has a negative size of 18 x 22 inches, which I bought from a color laboratory in Atlanta. I do not use it as frequently as I would like for a simple logistical reason: it takes two people just to heave it onto the tripod.

But it is not only the camera format which convinces me that enlarging is not for me. It is also the paper. Contact printing paper - I use Kodak's Azo - has a depth of tone and a subtlety of scale which are impossible to achieve on any enlarging paper. Contact prints on Azo just seem to have a special glow and "presence" about them, I am not going to sacrifice that quality for the convenience of enlarging.

B.J.: 19th Century photographers were also well aware that any change in materials or equipment inevitably led to a different choice of subject matter and aesthetic. Did you discover any real change in your work when you started using different formats - for example, between the boxy format of the 8 x 10 and the "panorama" of the 8 x 20 inch format?

M.S.: When I started using the 8 x 20 inch camera, in 1978, I really did not know what to do with it. I used the camera a few times but it seemed as if the pictures were just longer versions of the same pictures I had been taking with the 8 x 10 inch camera. There did not seem to be much point in the extra problems associated with a larger, heavier camera if the images were similar. At that point I happened to stop at a National Park office in order to buy a copy of Birds of North America, just so that I could identify the birds I was seeing. But the book included hundreds of sonograms - charts of electronic recordings of bird songs. The dark marks running from left to right, showing the progression of the notes, their tones and values, were so beautiful. These horizontal graphs were so similar to the 8 x 20 inch format. Immediately, I knew what I wanted to do with this camera. My aim was to make a photograph as beautiful as a bird song. I began to make pictures of rock walls on which the shadows of clefts and fissures were sonogram like. Later the sonogram markings were not so directly translated into visual equivalents. Sometimes white lines in the subject formed the same function as the black shadows; or, as in my Cape May, New Jersey, images the human figures on the beach broke the space into vertical units. Although the sonograms are no longer self evident there in my recent work, they certainly played a major role in changing my images with the 8 x 20 inch format, even if the evidence of it is very subtle.

B.J.: We began with your photographic credo: "I just try to make the best pictures I can." What would be your personal or life credo?

M.S.: I'm trying to have a good time.

B.J.: So, elaborate again . . .

M.S.: It is the pleasure of the process that is meaningful. The point of my life is not to make pictures - they just happen to be the by-products of living the life I want for myself. Work is not the most important aspect of my existence; it is not compulsive for me. I would not, for example, sacrifice my relationship with my mate for my work. What really keeps me making photographs is the joy of the act. A friend of mine, an architect, recently took a couple of weeks of vacation time and went out West to photograph. When he arrived home and processed the film he found that half his film was fogged. He was real upset about it. My reaction was: hey, don't worry about it. It means that much less time you have to spend in the darkroom and remember the good time you had out there. As to the pictures which did not come out, learn from the experience and apply it to the next time you make pictures. So, the answer is: enjoy yourself. The fact that you have prints, and other people respond to them, is wonderful. It completes the circle. An artist essentially gives of him/herself and in order for the work to be complete there needs to be someone to receive the gift. I would not make photographs if I was alone on a desert island. As photographers we are part of the social fabric; we are not isolated. There is no contradiction in this social aspect of photography and making pictures for the pleasure to self.

Most people go out West for a week or two and call it a vacation. I can stay in the Grand Canyon and thereabouts for six months, amble around, make a couple of negatives a day (or more, if I feel like it) and - hey, what am I doing? - I'm working. I mean, can you beat it?