

An Interview with Steven B. Smith

Christopher Sims, a prize-winning photographer as well as the Web content manager at the Center for Documentary Studies, interviewed Steven B. Smith about his photography and winning the Center for Documentary Studies /Honickman First Book Prize in Photography in August 2005.

Winning the Prize and Working on the Book

Sims: Steve, before you received the Center for Documentary Studies Honickman First Book Prize, you were honored for your photographic work with a number of distinguished awards, including a Guggenheim fellowship. Having a book published is an even greater milestone in a photographer's career. I know you were on press a couple weeks ago. Tell me what it means to see your photographs come together as a book.

Smith: It's been my goal, as well as my dream, to get this work published. I knew that I was trying to make the best individual picture every time I set up my camera, but I also knew that I was trying to get them, as a group, to speak to some larger ideas. Putting the book together has been an important process—when it comes down to the actual editing and sequencing, the project changes a bit, becomes more succinct. It's interesting what you have to edit in . . . or edit out. And then seeing it fit together in a book—the first time I saw it all, I don't know, it made me pause. [Laughs.] It was kind of scary, and yet a really great thing, an amazing gift.

Sims: I know when I'm putting together a show, I'm not sure that the final product is *it*. How do you know when the project is done?

Smith: I've put together smaller groups of images for exhibitions—but never sixty to eighty images, as in the book. I had the feeling, as I was photographing, probably about two or three years ago, that it was time to stop and move on. Get the pictures published. But right at the tail end of that period, I stumbled upon an idea that rekindled my desire to keep working. So I had a lot of fun shooting the last two or three years, but it was a bit difficult to edit some of the later pictures in with the pictures from the previous six, seven years.

Sims: What was the subject of this last chapter, as you photographed it?

Smith: I started getting a little closer to individual yards, and I started trying to make the images more animated, a little bit more humorous. I had been afraid to make things too funny, for fear of the work not being serious and direct enough. When I let go of that, it allowed me to see new things.

Sims: When people look at your book, do you think it will be clear to the viewer what your thoughts are?

Smith: I've tried to make as rich a statement as I can, somewhat pointed, maybe somewhat didactic, yet make pictures that are not closed off by what I'm trying to communicate. I don't want these issues to overwhelm the form and content of the physical photograph. The politics is in there, but I'm trying to take a tone that isn't accusatory. There aren't any easy answers. Sometimes it's scary, and beautiful, because the land is all torn up and being completely reconfigured. But once the landscaping grows in, it looks like a pretty decent, well-managed, well-thought-out place. And then there are examples that are not nearly so nice. I'm trying to show the complexity of what is out there, what these water and soil control systems do to the

land. One of my main issues, that I've tried to point out directly, is how water is used and channeled, and how water in these areas is imported. Water is a highly guarded resource—in L.A. it's even recycled—but at the same time, the land needs to be guarded against excess water during the building process.

When I moved to Los Angeles I was fascinated with the constant flooding and the landslides, but I deigned to photograph them—John Humble has photographed them a lot, and I felt that was his territory, but when I show water in my pictures, I'm alluding to those kinds of events. Everyone knows about floods and fires and landslides in Los Angeles. . . . what I wanted to show were the ways people try to keep nature at bay, for this brief moment, while they tack buildings on top of a hill.

Photographing the Suburban West

Sims: You mentioned Humble—I'm wondering about your other influences. Robert Adams and Richard Misrach came immediately to mind when I saw your work. Adams takes a somewhat overt political stance, while Misrach is perhaps more poetic, but they both show us ugliness alongside beauty. How is what you're doing different from the photographers you admire, or who have worked in a similar landscape?

Smith: In the earlier part of my career, I mostly photographed people. I was very interested in landscape, but the main thrust of my work was photographing people—candid of people out in the world or formal portrait work. Then I moved to Los Angeles, and some of the narrative ideas I had been working with in my pictures of people, domestic tableaux I had been doing, seemed to translate to these systems of water and soil control. An idea popped into my head that I could create a body of work in which these physical elements of control became a visual vocabulary, a language I could

use to comment on what was being done to the land. So I switched abruptly—I really got excited about the landscape.

I was aware of these other photographers, but as soon as I started photographing the landscape again, I spent a lot of time reviewing their work. I didn't want to, you know, step on their turf. I'm a big fan of Robert Adams, and a really big fan of Lewis Baltz, especially his book *New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California*. Baltz, Carleton Watkins, Jan Groover, and Garry Winogrand are some of my biggest influences. That's a strange mix, but they are the people who were kicking around in the back of my head.

When I first saw *New Industrial Parks*, I thought, wow, this is one of the smartest examples of making something beautiful out of something ugly and having it really work. Those simple, formal elements start to speak with a much larger voice. He borrowed a form—it seems to me that he borrowed a lot from minimalist painters—and used it as a scheme to hang beauty on, while making social and political comments about the places he was photographing. The photographs are beautiful art objects, but they carry a loaded social meaning because of the reductive quality of the beauty.

The idea I had of using conservation methods as my language helped me step up to the plate and work with a subject matter that had been explored a lot, and well. While I felt a little nervous about photographing in a similar vein, I also felt there was something more that needed to be said. The landscape continues to evolve. The technology for restraining the land, as well as bringing in water, has changed dramatically in the past ten years—in fact, it changes every couple of years.

Sims: I know you grew up in Utah. Did you grow up in a subdivision? Is this work a reaction to your upbringing, or to what you saw in Los Angeles when you lived there?

Smith: I was raised in Springville and Alpine, Utah. Two small towns along the foothills of the Wasatch Mountains. At the time they were small towns, surrounded by farming fields. So when I got to California, yeah, I changed my idea about what a subdivision was. More specifically I started paying attention to how subdivisions grew, where they started, how they branched out, how they filled up a valley. A subdivision would usually start up toward the top ridge of a valley and then work its way down. People would want to secure the lots with the best views. And the town was down in the center of the valley. The second and third stages of suburban development would fill in below the view levels. There was a strange hierarchical order to the construction.

Sims: How did you start photographing these construction sites and neighborhoods?

Smith: I was living in Los Angeles, and I started visiting a dozen or so housing developments under construction, places I was interested in watching as they changed. I would take trips and visit all of them. They were a collection of landscapes or still-lives that nature and man worked and reworked over time. And I would re-photograph these places as they changed. Or I would think, oh, this place would look great at dusk, or at night, or on an overcast day, or on a contrasty day, or on a bright sunny day, with the light coming from a particular direction.

I started trying to use the landscape as a still-life. I remember reading about how Walker Evans would go on scouting trips during the summer and winter, because he didn't like the light those times of year—he was very particular about the kind of light that he wanted. He would make these elaborate maps of places that he wanted to come back and revisit. I borrowed

a page out of his book. I started thinking of these places as still-lives that I could manipulate into the landscapes I wanted.

Sims: And it's largely, if not entirely, a landscape without people. Why did you chose not to photograph the people in these environments?

Smith: One of the reasons I chose not to include people was that I trying to make a portrait of the culture, of the values of certain middle- and upper-middle-class people in the West. I wanted to do that by showing the process of how they changed the land, making it into something they thought was valuable. Specifically, these developments where the land is dramatically changed but in a way that supposedly takes the local environment into consideration—you know, the manmade reflecting and paying homage to the existing landscape. I was mostly interested in the systems that people use to restrain the land and route water, these elaborate systems of short-term control. The few people in the pictures are hidden. I occasionally used them to give the viewer a better idea of scale in some of the more abstract and structural landscapes.

Sims: What sort of interactions did you have when you were going around, visiting these sites? Did people ask you what you were doing?

Smith: Getting access to these places was sometimes difficult, sometimes not. During the early part of this project I worked as a contractor, and a lot of the places were near where I worked. I drove around in a truck, and I would always wear my contracting clothes, or something resembling contracting clothes, when I was photographing. I knew how to talk to contractors, so I would say, "Oh, yeah, I'm over here at blah-blah-blah jobsite, and I'm just taking a look." And people usually wouldn't hassle me. Sometimes, for

insurance reasons, people would want to kick me out, so I always acted with authority, like I was supposed to be there, and pretended to be doing something.

Sims: Wearing a hardhat must help.

Smith: Well, I hate wearing a hardhat. I never wear one [laughs]. But I always wore work jeans and boots, and I usually had tools in the back of my truck, or I'd pretend like I did.

Sims: What was it like to talk to developers—were they ever critical of what they were doing?

Smith: When I encountered developers or other construction people, they tended to be pretty conservative, and they'd let me know my views weren't really appreciated. [Laughs.] But I tried to avoid asking them what they thought—politically, I'm not in favor of this massive expansion and development. I haven't got any answers, and some of the areas are more ecologically respectful and sensitive than others.

The Working Life

Sims: So you were a contractor and a photographer. You didn't become a teacher until years later. How did you go about building a career in photography?

Smith: Well, [laughs] I've been very bad at building my career! I mean, that's somewhat true, and not at the same time. When I went to graduate school, I was lucky enough, upon graduation, to be given a part-time teaching job at Yale. And teaching was what I wanted to do, but after the job Yale

ended, I had a really difficult time finding another job that I was interested in. And I made a crazy decision. I was tired of the East Coast, so I moved to Los Angeles to become a contractor-artist-bum. The contracting I did was wall covering and painting—a bizarre trade where you can make decent money.

Sims: Had you worked in that trade before?

Smith: Yeah. I'd done it ever since I was in high school. I put myself through college hanging wallpaper. So I went back to it to pay off my student loans. I knew that the only way I was going to get a teaching job I liked was to work on my photography. At the time it was 1991, and I was the wrong commodity, being male and white and all of that stuff. So I knew the teaching job I was after wasn't going to happen unless I made something exceptional happen with my work. I finally got the fulltime teaching job and though I find it harder to make as much work, it's a much more satisfying job.

Sims: When you were in L.A. and separated from a ready-made art community, how did you sustain yourself? How did you know that you were making progress?

Smith: I had a lot of doubts. At the beginning, I thought I was out of my mind. It was 1993 or '94, and I wanted to make black-and-white straight landscape photos. I thought, why don't you just kill yourself? Why do you insist on doing something that will never sell or be popular? And then the Germans started becoming popular. All of a sudden it was okay to do landscape, landscape was really hot. And then it was okay to do black and white. Photographers like Toshio Shibata were doing great. It was weird. I started out thinking that I was out in the wilderness, and then slowly it became okay to do what I was doing; I lucked into it.

As for an artistic community, I felt like I had to rely on my own judgment. But I also sought out friends and colleagues from school, and I would show my work to curators occasionally. Every two or three months, making sure that I had new work, I'd go around and bother people. That's a piece of advice I give my students: Make sure that you bother the best people you can, and keep after them.

Sims: What is it about teaching that you find so satisfying? Do you still think going to graduate school is a good idea, given the story you've just told me? What sort of advice do you give your students?

Smith: Yeah, it's kind of a crazy idea. I remember when there were just a handful of institutions that offered an MFA in photography—now it seems like if you throw a rock, you'll hit an MFA program. I think it's a good thing, that people are going to grad school.

There's a weird sense of guilt and responsibility that comes with teaching. I'm trying to get these students to love what I love—I'm sharing my passion as well as my knowledge. But you also have to smell the coffee and say, gosh, what are we selling here? What are these students going to do? And I don't know. I'll tell them about my contracting period, maybe unfortunately for them, and say that there are many different ways to reach their goals. Not everyone is going to graduate, get a college-level teaching job, and have a gallery representing them within a year or two. It takes a lot of disciplined work and sacrifice. I tell them to learn whatever the hot new skills are—it's a good idea to be able to do something else besides photography to make money. The best advice I can give is to face the reality that you're going to have to finance your art career as well as the rest of your life. It's a tough time to be a young person and an artist, but I think it's an exciting time as well.

Discovering Photography and the View Camera

Sims: Steven, to go back to your own education for a moment, I understand that you started out as a painter. At what point did you discover photography, and the view camera?

Smith: Yeah, I went to undergraduate school to study painting. And I don't know, I think it was just fortuitous that I had a really bad painting teacher and a really good photography teacher. I fell in love with the immediacy of photography, as well as the problem of representation—that you can photograph something clearly, make it readily interpretable, and yet it remains infinitely indefinable. I just got hooked.

I have always been a big fan of Jan Groover's work. She came from a painting background. She was an abstract expressionist, a formalist—I think she would say that form *is* content. I was interested in her for that reason, but also because her pictures were so amazing. They are well considered, and yet daring. I spent a lot of time, as I started photographing the landscape, looking at her work. She uses the large-format view camera to extend and play with the way the lens draws, as well as the way that film acts as a canvas. She is one of the wildest practitioners of the view camera I've ever seen. So I borrowed, and stole, some of the things she did. She used the view camera on tabletops, and I took some of the ideas, rules, or limitations of the tabletop and transferred them to landscape.

And Walker Evans was incredibly aggressive and physical in his use of the view camera. He had little regard for the sanctity of the photographic image, and he would chop up a photograph to make his specific visual and political point. A lot of what I stole from these two people was how to use the view camera to make your point more clear, and how to control and draw space in the way you want.

Sims: How do you think about framing your photographs then?

Smith: My frames are very exact. There's a lot of work on my part to make a space look the way I want, to confine elements within the frame in a certain way. I try to be physical with the view camera as well—I use seven different lenses—and I attempt to make the landscape conform to my idea.

Sims: When I looked at your, say, tighter shots, with more recognizable forms like houses and mailboxes, it became clear how you framed things. I had a different reaction to the ones that were more abstract, of landfills, or the early stages in preparing the land for construction. I was mesmerized by shapes, the formalness of the content. How the photographs are sequenced would seem to make a big difference in how your work is seen.

Smith: Yeah, that was a big issue with sequencing the photographs, how to get the pictures to speak to each other conceptually as well as formally. Early on I tended to stand farther back and use a wider lens, a wider angle of view. I still work the same way now, it just depends on what I happen to be photographing.

I carry around a gray card, an 8x10 gray card that has a 4x5 hole cut in the center of it. I love the control I get with the view camera, the way I can redirect and control and contort space within the frame, but I hate looking at things upside down. And I hate working so slowly. I like the big negatives, but it's a cumbersome apparatus, you know. So I walk through an area and look at it a million different ways, from a million different angles, and with different focal-length lenses. If I hold the card 6 inches away from my eye and squint a little bit, that's like using a 150mm lens, and if I hold it 8 inches away, that's a 210 lens. I can be physical with the view camera by just walking around and squinting through this card. When I

set up the camera, I have a good idea where I want to go, what kind of lens I want to use, and what I want to do with the space.

Sims: I just want to clarify for people who read this and aren't photographers themselves—when you say you are physical with your view camera, you mean in terms of not relying on a single lens and moving parts of the apparatus around.

Smith: Yeah, I'm talking about moving the camera around. I shoot 4 x 5 film, but I have a 5 x 7 camera with a reducing back on it. What this allows me to do, as long as my lenses provide the proper coverage, is move these things separately, the front element, where the lens is, and the back element where the film is inserted. I can change the relationship of objects in the foreground to the midground and background, and I can shift the back of the camera in opposition to the lens, so that I can, in some instances, create the illusion of looking straight at something when I'm actually looking at it from a diagonal angle.

Printing the Photographs

Sims: You mentioned that you thought of this work as finding its final form as a book, but I know you've had exhibitions along the way. What sizes are your prints, and how do you present this work in a gallery setting?

Smith: I'm a fan of slightly smaller prints. I don't mean small and precious, but what I consider photographic-size prints, say 14x18 or 16x20 or 20x24. The pictures hold up, and start to take on a more artsy smell when they get bigger. The largest prints I've made are 40 x 60, and I enjoy seeing them big but generally I'm more interested in conveying my ideas. Larger prints cut down on the number of prints you can show, and the formal aspects of the

photographs start to take over. I try to use formalism and abstraction to comment on the content; I'm not interested in form for form's sake.

Sims: When you print at that medium size, are those digital prints?

Smith: Yeah. I love the process that I've settled on. I shoot with 4x5 film and develop it myself. Occasionally I'll make a few silver prints, to make sure that I'm processing things correctly. But I scan my images on an Imacon scanner, which is a high-quality film scanner or a drum scanner, and then I work on the files in Photoshop. I print the photographs digitally using quadtone ink on archival cotton-rag paper.

Sims: That's with the Epson?

Smith: Yeah, with the Epson. I've been intimately involved with quadtone-ink printing since its inception, and I've suffered these last three years. The last year and a half to two years, the technology's really come into its own; it's much more stable and reliable. And it's getting better. I find that the print quality is better than anything I could produce in the darkroom.

One of the things that led me to digital printing is that I started being a little too meticulous about my darkroom prints. I started making unsharp contrast masks, and was using very elaborate dodging and burning techniques, not because I wanted to be a darkroom geek, like Ansel Adams or whomever. I was trying to get the image to match my idea of the scene, my idea of the light. When I started photographing in Los Angeles, I had a bizarre film and developer combination. I used Ilford FP4 and a modern version of the pyrogallic acid developer, which is a compensating developer. All in the name of trying to render the light in these high desert communities in the proper way. Every photograph has a component of flat,

blow-out white light as well as bright and high-contrast light. I found that using the pyro film helped me keep the highlights from getting out of control, and still preserved decent contrast throughout the image. And then, with a little tweaking in Photoshop and printing on an inkjet printer, I was able to make the places look how I wanted them to look.

That's how I got started working in digital—I was tired of the extreme lengths that I was going to in the darkroom.

Sims: Do you use a RIP?

Smith: Yes. Right now I'm using an Epson 7600, as well as John Cohen's Piezography quadtone inks, selenium color, printed on Hahnemühle photo rag. I use Roy Harrington's quadtone RIP, and it's the bomb, a lot better than the previous two generations of software that were running these same inks. I'm finally happy with how the prints look.

Sims: Do your students jump on board with you, or are there people still wedded to working in the wet darkroom? Do you have a strong opinion about how people should working?

Smith: I think people should, you know, find their own way. That's what Harry Callahan used to say [laughs]. But I think people should understand the materials and experiment. Things are changing rapidly. When I first started teaching digital photography here at RISD, I encouraged students to do their basic proofing and contact-sheet-making of color negatives in the color darkroom, and to do their fine printing and scanning of finished work with the computer, making lightjet or inkjet prints. And I find that students set up their own workflow. Some people do quick and dirty production work in the color darkroom, but most of the color photographers gravitate to the

computer. And I push them toward the computer, if they're color photographers. If you're serious about making a decent print or controlling your color, it just makes sense to do it digitally, whether you want it to look like an inkjet print or a regular color print. It's a rather nasty discipline to learn, but it's also freeing.

Only a few of my students work in black and white, and they go half-and-half with digital. Some hang on to the traditional darkroom, and there is a good handful who are even anti-digital [laughs]. But most of the students are realizing this is the future.

The Next Project

Sims: Is this body of work wrapped up? Do you have a new body of work in the hopper?

Smith: I've just started shooting an extension, let's call it, of this work. More corporate landscapes.

Sims: Is this out West, or closer to where—

Smith: Yeah, I'm in the Northeast now. It's up and down the seaboard here.

Sims: I remember a comment by Paul Shambroom—you know, he photographed the nuclear weaponry and had to get all sorts of permissions from the army and the air force to do that. And then in between that project and when he did his—

Smith: City council?

Sims: Yeah. He tried to shoot a lot of interiors and corporate offices, and he got nowhere. He said it was far easier to photograph nuclear weapons than get inside boardrooms. . . . But you're interested in exteriors?

Smith: Let's just say I've been photographing a lot on Sundays. Access is still an issue. It's getting increasingly difficult to photograph in this culture. Not only is it almost impossible to photograph people out in public without someone becoming ultra-sensitive or defensive—and I'm not saying they shouldn't be—but everything is copyrighted, protected, and under surveillance. [Laughs.] It's difficult to just go out and look around and try to investigate things.