

A Humane Architecture: Photographs of Edwin Smith

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Moray Art Centre, Findhorn, until 2 July 2011

SUPPORTED by Moray Estates, The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and The Fry Gallery, Moray Art Centre's latest exhibition celebrates the work of Edwin Smith in a rare juxtaposition of drawings, paintings and photographs. Declaring himself; "an architect by training, a painter by inclination and a photographer by necessity", Smith seems to have suffered from an attitude still prevalent in the UK today; that architecture and photography are somehow lesser Arts.

A Humane Architecture reveals the eye of the architectural draughtsman, the painter and the photographer as essential disciplines in defining his vision as an artist. Famed for his photographic images of the British countryside and historic architecture, Smith's images reflect an essential relationship between man and the environment and a rural way of life that has since passed.



Tithe Barn, Great Coxwell

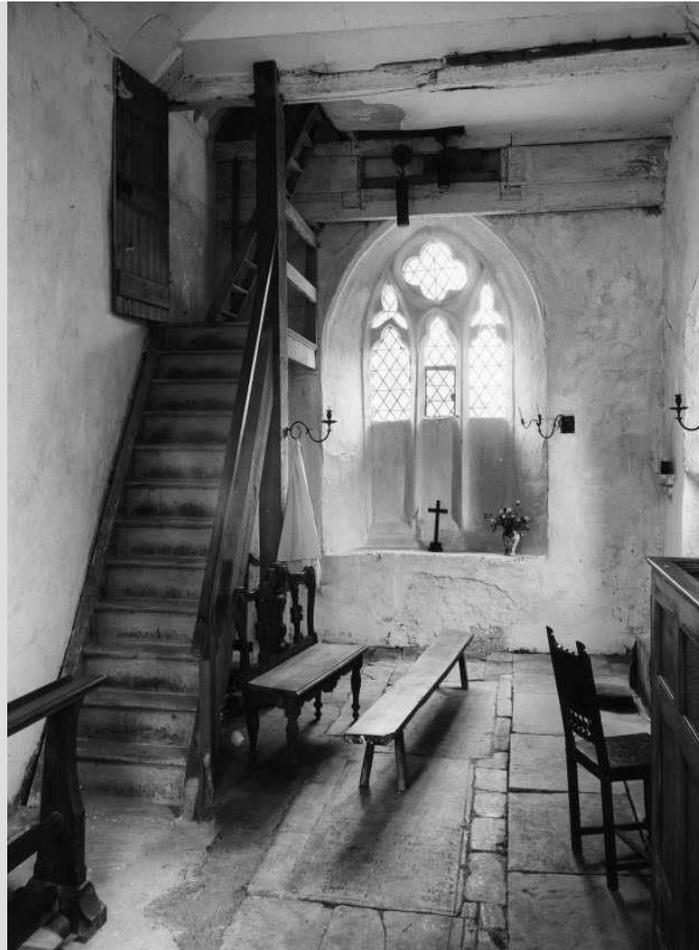
Edwin Smith's preoccupation with early English architecture and the integrity of man-made structures, traditional building methods and materials might seem purely documentary at first glance; however, his engagement with photographic techniques and the humane architecture of his compositions inspire multiple readings of his work. The fifteen photographic works selected and printed from RIBA's visual archive exhibited here reveal a pursuit of beauty in simplicity. Smith's camera is directed by his unfaltering eye throughout, depicting functional man-made structures and village streets in a way that renders them both timeless and vulnerable.

'Lower Brockhampton House' (Silver gelatin print on archival paper from original photographic negative 1966), an image of a timber-framed gatehouse constructed in the 1390's, is an excellent example of the artist's cross disciplinary skills as draughtsman, painter and photographer. Here the composition is bisected diagonally with architectural symmetry, the heritage building reflected in the changeable element of water. Like an upside-down tarot card with a double face, the fate of the built structure feels precarious.

Like the French photographer Eugene Atget, whose images of Parisian streets and architecture inspired him, Smith favoured the use of earlier photographic equipment; his favourite camera a mahogany and brass half plate Ruby, circa 1904. The particular quality of light captured through long exposures on antiquated equipment is still sought by artists today, and Smith used this to great effect in one of his most beautiful interior images; 'Tithe Barn, Great Coxwell, Oxfordshire' (Silver gelatin print on archival paper from original photographic negative 1953).

As the only surviving building of a late 13th Century grange, built with Cotswold rubble and stonewalling with a high pitched slate roof, Smith illuminates the interior like a great cathedral via a single source of natural light through a low door to the exterior. The glow of long exposure gives definition to wooden beams and their construction within the dark interior, cleverly framing the eye's journey into the image and leading the viewer into contact with a collective past.

William Morris described Tithe Barn as "unapproachable in its dignity" and Smith humanises this sentiment, bringing the viewer to the heart of the space in his heightened use of light and architecture shot from the position of man, low to the floor. With a draughtsman's eye he illuminates the structural integrity of a historic building, ironically in a post war period of change.



St Lawrence, Didmarton, Gloucestershire

Another interior, 'St Lawrence, Didmarton, Gloucestershire' (Silver gelatin print on archival paper from original photographic negative 1961), depicting the vestry of the north transept of St Lawrence church dating from the 1200's, seems to strip the image down to bare elements of faith and human aspiration. The glow of light from the early English Gothic central window illuminates the texture and age of whitewashed walls and sets the Georgian fittings and furniture starkly against this predominantly luminous white interior. The human scale of the furniture appears remarkably small, a worn staircase and ladder leading upwards to divinity. Smith's depiction of an intimate devotional space amplifies its beauty and grandeur and his use of light heightens the sense of stillness within the image.

'The Old Cottage, Bury Green, Little Hadham, Hertfordshire' (Silver gelatin print on archival paper from original photographic negative 1950), with its compacted horizontal layers of sky, thatched roof, white washed walls, neatly trimmed hedge and grass presents a harmonious image of a man-made structure constructed from local materials using time honoured methods. It is also a successful abstract composition of tone, texture and form which highlights the curve of the thatch fitting snugly around the window and the stitched pattern along the line of the roof; organic curves derived from natural materials and the geometry of human design melded together.

These details are brought to the viewers attention as is the stone work and roofs of traditional cottages depicted in 'West Gate Street, Blakeney, Norfolk' (Silver gelatin print on archival paper from original negative 1956), where

Smith cleverly uses the curve of the road and natural sunlight to divide the composition and lead the viewer in dual contemplation of raw materials and human construction.

The display of a series of pen and ink drawings and oil paintings on canvas and board add another dimension to the main display of photographs. Smith's 'Study of Females' from the 1960's presents a fusion of forms with a delicacy of mark like that of drypoint etching. The grouping of the figures is not unlike his layered approach in the depiction of buildings and village gardens where one mass of form melds into another.

His larger Untitled ink drawing (1965) is more varied and robust in its mark with the central female figure depicted in bare, bold lines that describe her posture and attitude with economy and strength. Standing at the centre of this composite creation of land, architectural elements and birds she appears statuesque, her dignity the primary focus of our gaze.

Smith's paintings reveal both formal design together with freedom and fluidity in their paint handling. 'Storm Clouds Over Southwold' (Oil On Canvas) 1957, with its great dark mass of foreboding cloud, bleached in a deluge of bare canvas, carries an emotional weight reminiscent of Nash's treatment of landscape. Steely Prussian Blue and Burnt Umber dominate the scene, animated by broad flat brushstrokes and the energy of marks scraped into shifting pigment.

A smaller and calmer work, 'LightHouse, Going For A Walk' (Oil On Board) 1959, is no less potent, a beautiful rhythmic piece where the curvature of boats and shoreline is mirrored in a lighthouse also formed in harmonic unison. The naïve perspective and subdued palette, tempered with a shot of alizarin and a dreamy crescent of turquoise make this an exuberant painting full of energy in its form, design and vigorous execution.

It is a pleasure to see the much neglected Arts of Architecture and Photography celebrated by this exhibition, together with examples of Edwin Smith's drawings and paintings that give valuable insight into the depth and breadth of his vision of land, people and memory.

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