

1-1-2003

## Interview with Peter Smith

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Peter Smith

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### Recommended Citation

Hido, Todd and Smith, Peter (2003) "Interview with Peter Smith," *Oz*: Vol. 25. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2378-5853.1385>

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## Interview

*Photographs by Todd Hido*  
*Interview with Peter Smith of Tokion Magazine*





*How would you describe your work?*

With my images of homes I am interested in portraying some kind of domestic narrative...standing outside looking in...the lights come on and the inside seeps to the outside...that's something I often say when I am talking about my work. As an artist I have always felt that my task is not to create meaning but only to charge the air so that meaning can occur.

*How long have you worked in this mode?*

For about five years.

*What about your process? Looking at your work there is a single, very solitary image, but obviously you are on the other side of the camera. How do you find your subjects and could you describe a shoot?*

Well I should start out by saying that I never stage my photographs of the houses at night—I'm often asked if I do—most likely because there is such a trend of “constructed” imagery being shown currently. I prefer to take pictures of what I find.

I almost always shoot at night—it often looks like dusk but the images are made when it is dark—after the street lights come on. I usually start by going to an area and literally driving around for hours—on most nights that I go out, I'm out for five to six hours and if I stop to make a few exposures, I feel as though I have had a good night. I wander around more than anything—always in my car—my tripod and sandbags are too heavy to carry (I use sandbags to keep the tripod still—because of the wind and six to ten minute exposures, I need to make sure everything is perfectly still). It is hard to find just the right place to shoot. Ninety-nine percent of the time it is a certain light on in a home that gets my attention. But there are other considerations too, such as whether there are parked cars blocking the scene or issues of my safety standing out on the street.

Since I use only available light—and since it is night, the light is







limited. That makes the exposure pretty long—it ranges from six to ten minutes. It is definitely not a “decisive moment.”

When I print the pictures they really change—often they look nothing like the initial contact sheet. The camera sees more than I do. It has taken years to be able to look at a contact sheet and pick out an image that can become something, although it might look just O.K. On the proof, I am looking at formal issues. Although I don’t construct the scene, I do give myself complete liberty to adjust the colors when I print. My process would never work if I didn’t print my own photographs.

I read “gloomy, solitary, voyeuristic, predatorily.” I guess I want to ask you how you feel about your subject matter and what capturing it on film does for you? (Does it transform something despicable into something else.)

These places are not despicable to me. They are just very interesting. This point is important to note because I try not to make any judgements in my photos.

One thing my friend said to me—about why my work might be so unsettling—is the fact that these places are real—they exist—this fact is what often makes them feel gloomy—it is hard to turn away from what is real.

And yes, I think the fact that I am out there at night stalking the suburbs with my camera adds to this feeling of being unsettled—just like the solitary voyeur you recognize from my work. The viewer knows that I am just on the other side of each particular scene.

I often wonder if the people inside can feel me looking—it’s sort of menacing to be out there at night with a camera and I do get scared that I’m going to cross the line sometimes—but my desire to make interesting pictures overrides my fear and my hesitation. One thing that a critic wrote about my process was that I was, “...A benign but creepy surveillance aficionado, a private eye of domestic disarray...”



How do I feel about my subject matter?—I refer to a quote I have tacked on my studio wall: “Indeed there is nothing that imprints a thing so vividly on our memory as the desire to forget it. —Montaigne”

*Have you lived in suburbia before?*

Yes, I was born in Kent, Ohio and lived at 1283 Denise Drive most of my childhood. We had street carnivals, my neighbor, named Marilyn Monroe, was my afternoon babysitter when my mom was at work, we ate Dunkin’ Donuts for breakfast. It was the real deal.

*Do you enjoy being in the midst of these houses?*

You know, in a funny way, I really do—it makes me feel very comfortable.

*Do you have plans to work outside of houses? Can you capture a related feeling in say buildings or people or urban scenes or is that a totally different setting?*

Yes, I do work outside the “suburban” realm. My next exhibit of new work will be mostly apartment buildings—not high rises but two-story, low-rent types of structures that I have found on the outskirts of most major metropolitan areas. With the apartments—I think I might be moving away from zeroing in on the family and shifting to more of a singular isolation—more urban—more about what happens without relationships developing—people living “together-alone” as my wife remarked looking at a new photo. Although the physical proximity is closer, the personal distance is further. In one new picture of an apartment house there were no lights on in the whole building, except two...right on top of each other...in a way you just knew that their shared ceiling was the only common ground.

Also, I have always done portraiture and landscapes and to continue to work on both.







The funny thing, I am thirty-three now, and looking back at my pictures over the last ten years—they all have the same feeling. There is a familiar thread, a pretty big thread, even though the subjects change. I guess I have set a tone that doesn't vary.

*What about the people that inhabited these houses? I know your work doesn't venture into that realm, but it must be hard not to think about them.*

I do think about the people in the homes quite a bit—it often seems as if a one-act play unfolds in the house as I make my exposure. Lights get turned on and off, I can hear the TV blaring, or sometimes bits of a conversation.

What so many people have told me about their experience of looking at my work, is the feeling that a certain house could have been his or her house, or a street they remember on their drive to school each day—I prefer that my photos be a vehicle for memories, not a complete story with all of the parts already cast.











