

John Smith
Sala Diaz
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John Smith, *The Black Tower*, 1985–7; 16mm film, color, sound; 24 minutes



Gargantuan, 1992; 16mm film, color, sound; 1 minute; images courtesy Sala Diaz, San Antonio

Instilled with a Eurocentric knowledge of art history, I have always prided myself on being able to place a piece within its cultural time and place. Pinning a work of art as late Baroque or 1990s lowbrow has always given me a sense of pride by deriding these works for their self-dating tendencies. I have always longed for works that can transcend this detrimental fate. The same goes for John Smith's films. After watching the first ninety-minute installment of a four-and-a-half hour marathon of Smith's collected works (dating from the mid seventies to 1990), I had come to the conclusion that: 1) Smith makes funny films using dry, English wit and sleight-of-hand irony 2) these early works illicit a romantic longing for the 16mm days of freedom and exploration (by virtue of my birth in the early eighties, I have projected a mentality of forward thinking and joyous extolling of emotion on these times). Simultaneously, I thought these films were good, but I wasn't sure I could take another three hours. I just saw *Associations* (1975), *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) and *The Black Tower* (1985–87). I thought I had it figured out, I thought I knew the jokes would keep coming and I thought I would start getting really bored. I was right and wrong.

The second installment spans the 1990s. I watched in horror as a lily gets smashed into a plate of glass in *The Kiss* (1999)—horror at the telltale signs of an aesthetic I instantly recognized as a wholly post-Pop, over-illuminated and highly focused juxtaposition of beauty and destruction. I quipped, "How 1990s!" As the second installment continued, I thought about the ways in which these films date themselves as such, and how the previous round was so different in its feel and mood. Gone was the wry humor and open optimism; instead, delirium, loss and destruction mark Smith's work at the end of the century. I recognized the shift, and I expected another.

The third program of films features the "Hotel Diaries" series Smith has been making since 2001. Without a doubt, these videos stand in stark contrast to earlier works. Humor is found in Smith's ridiculous surroundings and circumstances. The pedantic tone of these pieces is indicative of our collective incoherence. The straightforward, journalistic approach in these videos reiterates our embrace of a false sense of transparency.

In essence, Smith has managed to capture and preserve the voice and mentality of the times in which he has lived. I was right: things get dated and lose their historical grandeur. But I was also wrong: this is not an altogether bad thing. Taken as a whole, Smith's works act as a barometer of the times in which they were made, an accurate one, which sheds an illuminating perspective on our current mindset—one in which nothing is witty and every choice is a political one.

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