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Remembering an Outsider Artist

I'd noticed him at least a year before I actually met him, the white-haired man walking up Merriewood or down Taurus or one or another of the winding streets in the Oakland Hills where I lived. *Nobody did that*. The streets were narrow and steep and without sidewalks, or often even shoulders. You had to be alert. A Beemer might come busting around a turn at any moment with some management type in a hurry. I say nobody walked these twisting streets, but there was a second, a young man I'll call Henry. His walking had nothing to do with pleasure. One saw that immediately. He walked with a purpose.

There was something unconventional about both of these men. Later, when I'd met Henry, I saw there must have been developmental issues. He lived with his parents, I guessed, and earned money doing odd jobs. My conversations with him always went straight to the point. Did I have dirt to shovel, weeds to clear, a fence to paint? Talking with Henry was like his walking: focused.

The old man, Smith, was another story. For one thing, he possessed style. His hair, combed straight back, fell toward his shoulders. His straw hat was rakish. Smith was lean and cut a figure, and his walking, as was plain to see, was done for pleasure; he took things in, savored them. I'd see him, with his blaze of white hair, walking up the hill, wooden staff in hand, stopping to gaze into the trees above, or off across the bay, an expression of transport on his face. His walking was always a passage through places of unexpected beauty and surprise.

As I said, I noticed Smith long before I met him, a solitary pedestrian daring to claim an edge of the asphalt runways for the Beemers and SUVs of the upscale residents of the hills. Didn't he know he was too old for such things? That he should be sitting on a couch somewhere in front of a TV?

It might have been the day he walked down my long driveway with his ten-dollar camera in hand that we finally met. "It's beautiful!" he said, looking out across the bay. Like Henry, Smith came to the point.

Perennial Philosophy as Applied to Art

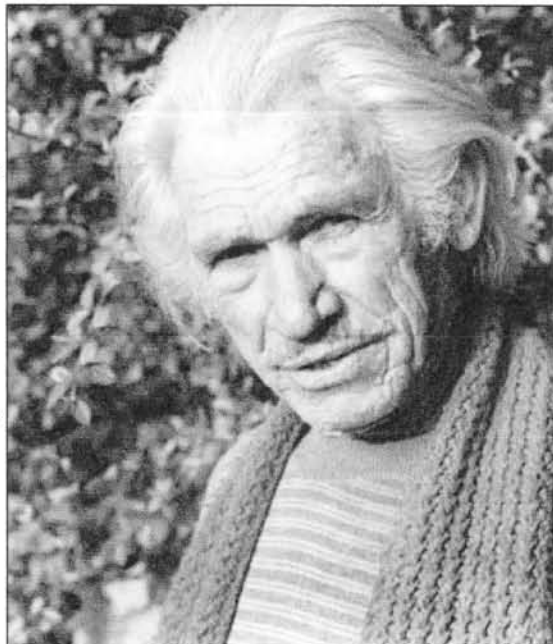
Photography is something I feel close to and I couldn't resist observing, "I see you've got a camera there."

"Look at that sunset!" Smith exclaimed. "I've got to get a picture of that! Just a couple of days ago, there was a great one and I missed it! Did you see it?" He paused to look at me with genuine hopefulness. Smith's speech was declamatory and amped-up a notch or two as if to penetrate some invisible barrier. There was so much beauty around! The views across the bay! The fog! The trees and flowers! A hawk! A dog! The light! A feast! And only so much time to enjoy it. Not enough, likely, and whatever the impropriety of walking down a stranger's driveway to capture such a moment, it was worth any disturbance it might stir up.

Smith's Name

When we got to introductions I remember his: "Smith." It was given with a note of finality.

"And what's your first name?" I asked, unwilling to accept that closed door. "You can call me Leslie,



but Smith is fine." There must have been other words said, too, mumbled perhaps, or run together. He cast a little spell around his name, because later, each time I ran into him, I found myself stumbling and wasn't even sure his name was Smith. I must have persisted about his name because months later, as I recall, he increased my confusion by revealing that his first name was really William. I never got to the bottom of it, but the point was that *Smith* was his name. Smith! And why hadn't I just accepted that in the first place?

The Life of The Artist

During the eight or nine years I lived in the hills, I ran into Smith pretty regularly and we got to know a little about each other. Smith had been a bus driver for the city of Oakland, and was now retired. *Bus driver?* I could not have imagined that, but the information sat there and after awhile, yes, I could see Smith as a bus driver. Certainly—and a good one, too. But when I'd first seen the old man walking the hills with the vitality of a young man and the authentic air of some misfit visionary, I'd imagined him a bohemian from the old country, Italy perhaps, or Bucharest! He was obviously an artist, a passionate artist, and he must have lived the life one imagines of an artist, LIFE!

There is a word in French—I've forgotten it— which means "having the habitual attitude of being inwardly inclined to welcome the moment in its infinite potential to surprise or reveal." It was as if this invisible quality was made visible in Smith. And then my thinking had to be stretched when Smith revealed to me a former life as a bus driver. After the adjustment had settled into place I realized such incidentals were of no import. This matter of being a true artist, after all, it's something you can't help when you've got it. Perhaps it can lie submerged under life's accidents, but still, when it's there, it's there.

But it's easier to tell a few facts about Smith than to wrestle with such deep questions. He was married. He lived with his wife in a wood frame house under the shade of the Monterey Pines common throughout the Oakland/Berkeley Hills. They'd reconciled, he told me. At least to some extent, after an earlier split. Smith was clear about that. Still, when he wasn't traveling abroad the hills on foot, he spent most of his time downstairs in what amounted to a separate apartment. He told me how his wife had thrown him out once a few years before I'd met him, tired, no doubt, as I imagined, of the obstinance of Smith's passion.

"She kicked me out!" he said. "But I just moved downstairs. Then I got a girlfriend." He looked at me with a smile. "She was a young woman," he said. I tried to imagine that, Smith and a young woman. "She had some problems with sex," he told me and paused. "I decided to help her."

An outlandish proposition, I thought. But I could see that Smith was not making a joke. I had to stop for a second time and try to recalibrate my assumptions. Smith seemed content to let his words stand and, slowly, I found myself letting this picture in. Yes, why not? And suddenly I saw Smith as a loving and compassionate man, and knew it was the truth. My assumptions had been those of a frat boy.

It didn't feel right, asking for the details. It all had worked out well, he told me. He wasn't lonely. She had been grateful. And, in the light of Smith's new girlfriend, his wife must have reconsidered the situation. Perhaps kicking Smith out wasn't the best way to deal with their problems, after all. I didn't ask, didn't want to know.

Recognitions

Smith was a man I'd spotted walking the steep and inhospitable roads I drove every day. In some mysterious way, I felt some kind of recognition immediately. For one thing, he was breaking the law—or maybe convention is the word—so many of which are inscribed in hidden books without our even knowing. Smith was no sociopath, only brazen in flaunting the conventions of being old. And not only that, he made no effort to hide the joy he took in gazing upon the world around him. And there had been the young girlfriend. These things were more than enough to ponder.

One day Smith invited me over to see his place. We walked down some steps alongside the house, built on the downslope, to a door on the lower level. Stepping in, I found myself in a large room full of wind chimes hanging from the ceiling, dozens of them. There were stained glass panels, too. Many. On closer inspection I saw that the glass was painted, an inelegant device probably from the world of hobby crafts, but one that produced an effect nonetheless. No window was without several panels leaning up against the glass or hanging in front of the panes. The light in the room was thus a medley of colors illuminating this random assemblage of the bus driver's creations.

I don't know why I was surprised. Come to think, I'd seen Smith down in the village at the bottom of the hill set up along the sidewalk, incongruously, with his wind chimes for sale. He couldn't have sold a one. Not in this village. I had for reference my own art experiences there. For a brief and pathetic period, I'd tried my hand with a little gallery in town and later on, from time to time, I'd watch sympathetically as others squandered their resources on similar vain hopes.

One afternoon I happened to be standing by an empty storefront, formerly "Hair's To You" or some

such, when a stranger opened the door and stepped out and we fell into conversation. He was going to open an art gallery there, he told me. He seemed a good sort and I felt I should try to warn him off such folly. But, no, he'd thought this out. His mind was made up! By and by, the enterprise, lovingly appointed, was launched. As week followed week, I took no pleasure in noting the persistent zerotude of customers whenever I chanced past. As foreseen, the air bleeds out and finally the towel is thrown in. What leads me to such dreary thoughts here in my ruminations about Smith, I'm not sure.

Meddler On the Roof

Perhaps it has to do with this question: What is good art? Smith's was not, by any measure I know of. And that leaves me with another question: What is the place of a capacity for joy in the face of things? And equally: What is the place for the courage to follow a path of one's own? And what do all these things mean when channeled into the objects we call art, even the most humble ones? What do we make of the experience as opposed to the artwork itself?

One of the most vivid memories I have of Smith is of his telling me about a Christmas decoration he erected on his roof. Smith, who always spoke in his emphatic way, became expansive. As he talked, he became more animated than usual and, from time to time, was overcome with a particular kind of laughter, the kind that is triggered in the face of some trenchant absurdity. "Do you know the play 'Fiddler on the Roof'?" he asked.

"Zero Mostel," I said. It was all I had. But Smith was going to tell me the story anyway. "You know those Santas people put on their roofs?" He'd put such a Santa up by his chimney. "He's up there on the roof, see!" He gestured with his arms and then started laughing again. It was all quite vivid before his mind's eye, and I had to wait a while until he could talk again. "I made these big letters to put up on the roof. You know, like 'Merry Christmas'—only *that's not what I put up there, Richard!*" His neighbors weren't happy with him, he assured me. "This is what I put up there, Richard. And he spelled it out for me: M-E-D-D-L-E-R!" At this, Smith started laughing again. "Fiddler On the Roof! Do you get it, Richard? Fiddler! Meddler!"

Did I see the wicked, delicious, insidious beauty of it? Of the former bus driver's, rebuke to the spectacle of life in the village with its daily round of Beamer-driving, SUV-wheeling, TV-watching Santa-Clausing good citizens?

"*Meddler!* Richard!" I'd never seen Smith laughing quite so much before.

Thinking about it now after so many years, I see it was Smith's masterpiece, a radical step, a foray into guerrilla art arrived at without benefit of an MFA or even a subscription to *Artforum* or *Art in America*. I can't help seeing it both as Smith's declaration of independence and his complaint from living in isolation among such a community of bourgeois. Was he, in their eyes, a meddler in some way? Smith might have felt himself so. Or, looking at it another way, Santa, a socially sanctioned figure of benign intrusion could have been seized upon as the symbolic representation of all that was suffocating in conventional life under the guise of goodness. And there he was on Smith's own roof, now identified for all to see, ready to climb down the chimney to meddle in Smith's life for all he was worth. Smith's laughter would be too exquisite to explain.

Sometimes when I'd run into Smith, he'd pull out a package of 3" x 5" color prints for me to look at. I don't remember any of them, but I remember Smith. There was something unforgettable about him. Something that stood apart. I remember the unapologetic joy he took in being alive. I recognized that the first time I saw him.

--by Richard; May 18, 2008

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On May 22, 2008 *teri* wrote:

I believe the French term you are looking for is "Joie de vie." This story is absolutely wonderful. Thank you.