MOUSSE

“Being John Smith” at Secession, Vienna by Ana Teixeira Pinto

John Smith, “Being John Smith” at Secession, Vienna, 2025. Photo: Oliver Ottenschläger

In horror films, nobody believes the main character. Not being believed isolates them, as friends and authorities dismiss their terrifying experiences. Stripped of their support system, the protagonist’s distress spirals into exasperation and helplessness, often causing them to doubt their own sanity. As they are forced to fight the threat alone, the film poses a chilling question: What is the ultimate monster? Is it the alien creature, or the deep-seated horror of disconnection—the soul-crushing sense of being unseen, unsupported, or, in a word, worthless?

Being overlooked is the overarching theme of *Being John Smith*, the artist’s current retrospective at Secession, Vienna, a show that recounts Smith’s life story via works spanning several decades of his career, culminating in his most recent piece, the autobiographical *Being John Smith* (2024). The exhibition walks viewers backward—a gesture echoed by the catalogue’s cover and dust-jacket photographs of Smith as a toddler and as he looks today, in the same bathtub pose––opening with *Being John Smith* and ending with one of his most iconic works *The Black Tower* (1985–87).

The Black Tower tells a story of architectural horror through the eyes of a man convinced that a sinister structure, the titular black tower, is stalking him around London. It builds its unsettling effect not through overt shocks, but by presenting the tower matter-of-factly in different locales, overlaid with his increasingly paranoid monologue. We are drawn into his unstable reality as he describes seemingly impossible sightings, for instance noting the tower’s sudden proximity when it should be miles away, and receiving blank denial from a neighbor. His dread solidifies as the tower begins to replicate, its identical form appearing behind prison walls and on factory grounds, transforming the entire city into a landscape of psychological terror where his delusion—or the tower—is inescapable.

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Determined to solve the mystery, the narrator returns to the spot where he first saw the black tower, only to find it gone. After a fruitless search of the surrounding streets, a news agent informs him, to his relief, that the tower was demolished the previous week. But this relief is short lived, as he soon discovers that the demolished building was a different tower block in Hackney, whose destruction caused local controversy.

Soon, the tower begins to stalk him openly. While near a church, he sees it again and flees in a panic, but no matter which way he runs, the tower appears before him, its image growing larger and more dominant until it overwhelms his vision. This pursuit culminates in a psychological breakdown. Upon returning home, he feels the tower's oppressive weight even with his eyes closed. He becomes a recluse, afraid of leaving his house, and sinks into a catatonic state.

Eventually, he is hospitalized. In the sympathetic clinical environment, he comes to believe that the tower was only a delusion. Upon discharge, he retreats to the Shropshire countryside to recuperate. There, however, the tower reappears, now displaying signs of age and decay absent from his earlier visions. It no longer seems to be pursuing him, but is waiting for him. His fear turns to a grim curiosity, leading him to a clearing where the massive structure stands, revealing a previously unseen entrance. He dies, we are told. But the film does not end with his demise. Instead, it concludes with a jarring shift in perspective. A new, female narrator speaks. She is visiting the grave of the original narrator sometime after his death. As she sits by his grave, she opens her eyes and finds herself staring at the tower, surprised she hadn't noticed it before, suggesting that the haunting has been passed on.

I have shown *The Black Tower* to my students, who to my surprise find it unsettling, even intensely so. That gave me pause at first (they are desensitized to much horror and gore*)* until I realized that their unease stems from the narrator's central plight—his experiences of being dismissed by neighbors and authority figures—as a powerful metaphor for a generation grappling with the horror of institutional abandonment, a world where support systems have eroded and distress is met with dismissal. Systematically unheard and unseen, they are told the true cause of generational poverty is splurging on avocado toast, among other pearls of flippant insensitivity.

Institutional neglect and casual cruelty are topics that recur in John Smith's work, connecting films like his iconic *Blight* (1994–96), a haunting composition about an acrimonious campaign by local residents in East London to save their homes from demolition, which doubles as a chronicle of class hatred in Britain, and lesser-known works like *School report torn up by enraged student confronting furious parents in protest against cruel and unjust criticism by unsympathetic teachers* (2024), which pays silent testimony to puny inequities and the seething rage they instill.

Another recurring theme is the artwork's semiotic play. In an interview about *The Black Tower*, Smith describes encountering a building that created an optical illusion of a "hole cut out of the sky" due to its nonreflective black paint. He calls it "an absence of image on top of a plinth," as if it were an effect sought by an artist working with monochrome painting.[1] In the six-minute film *Dad's Stick* (2012), the viewer, presented with what appears to be a large-scale abstract color field painting, is primed to look for artistic meaning—composition, chromatic harmonies, emotional resonance. In fact, the image is a macro photograph of a paint-encrusted wooden stick used by the artist's father to stir paint intended for the walls of the family home. The beautiful, striated layers of color on the stick are a direct physical record of its use. Each layer is a trace of a domestic chore, a moment in his father's life. The aesthetic of the Minimalist form is an accidental by-product of practical domestic activity. The shift from artistic painting to functional painting shifts the visual code of Minimalism from a description of form to a narrative about memory, labor, and the vicissitudes of the nuclear family.

As is often the case with John Smith's work, the enchanting cadence of the artist's voice is suddenly upset by a jarring flash: a swoosh followed by a loud thwack. We are informed that his father never beat him with a stick—for that, he kept a piece of electric wiring at hand. At school, rulers were used for that purpose. Family life is a tapestry woven with threads of love and resentment, so tightly bound you can't pull one without unraveling the other, because the institutions that nurture also hurt and neglect. The magic of John Smith's work is how it reveals harrowing truths with the casual ease of someone discussing the weather.

Being John Smith (2024), the film that names the exhibition, gives the artist's cancer diagnosis the same attention as his obsession with adjusting imperfectly aligned pictures. But we couldn't be further from a "stiff upper lip" or other markers of composure. *Being John Smith* is not hagiography; it is a claim that the humble and the humdrum are serious and important, and that the "good life" is not a collection of big, epic moments, but defined by frustration, exhaustion, and resignation, even when you are a John Smith—the name of a cult artist who redefined art film and the most common name in Britain, shared by more than thirty thousand individuals.

John Smith, the film tells us, thought about changing his name to something more artistic and unique, but then stuck to John Smith to spite a film critic. He would otherwise be known as John Pledger, and he is pretty sure he would be much more famous. Like John Smith, I am unhappy with my own name and thought often about changing it. Also like John Smith, "I have always been desperate for fame" but too embarrassed to chase it. Perhaps Leo Tolstoy was wrong, and we are all unhappy in the same way. Perhaps the desire for fame masks a deeper, entirely valid human need, namely to be seen without the discomfort of rejection. A spotlight can be a shield against loneliness, or at least against those awkward companionless moments at social events. One used to pretend enjoying a cigarette. Now I see a lot of people clutching small dogs. If I had to describe *Being John Smith*, I would say it's about the failure to cohere—the awkward moments, the missed connections, the sheer difficulty of alignment. The fractures that are the constant, ungainly companions to our most polished fantasies.

Sentimentality, Lauren Berlant contends, is not just "the mawkish, nostalgic, and simpleminded mode with which it's conventionally associated, where people identify with wounds of saturated longing and suffering. . . . It is a mode of relationality in which people take emotions to express something authentic about themselves that they think the world should welcome and respect; a mode constituted by affective and emotional intelligibility and a kind of generosity, recognition, and solidarity among strangers."[2] Sentimentality in John Smith's work is about avoiding Pollyannaish reassurance and deprioritizing the rhetoric of self-care while at the same time asserting that one's inner emotional world deserves a place in the social sphere.

I am personally repulsed by art that takes pain as raw material or mines trauma for content, while forcing a narrative of growth or healing onto experiences that may not fit that frame. I abhor demands for redemption, which can feel like a form of spiritual bypassing—refusing to sit with the meaninglessness, and instead insisting that pain must be alchemized into strength. *Being John Smith* was produced against the backdrop of the war on Gaza and the hourly streaming of bombardments, of images of children caked in blood and dust, of exhausted medics and grieving relatives. Watching the violence and destruction in Gaza, and feeling unable to stop it, is a form of moral distress that is being experienced by millions around the world who struggle to reconcile the horror they are seeing with the statements of their leaders or the pace of daily life continuing uninterrupted elsewhere. The resulting anxiety, hypervigilance (constantly checking the news), hopelessness, apathy, and feelings of being overwhelmed or numbed are captured in a simple caption in the film: "I am distracted by the escalating horrors of world events and find it hard to concentrate on my work." The true artist does not help the world by revealing mystic truths,[3] but by saying out loud that there is no uplifting narrative.

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