

Remembering an Outsider Artist

by Richard Whittaker

I'd noticed him at least a year before I actually met him, the white-haired man walking up Merriewood or down Taurus or another one of the winding streets in the Oakland Hills. 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 besides the white-haired man, there was one other-- a young man I also met, eventually. Unlike the older man, 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 the younger man, I realized there was some developmental issue and guessed that he lived with his parents earning money doing odd jobs. In my conversations with him, he always went straight to the point. Did I have a job for him, dirt to shovel, weeds to clear, a fence to paint? Talking with him was like his walking: focused.

But 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. His walking, as was plain to see, was a pure 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. The same places nobody else paid much attention to.

As I said, I noticed Smith long before I met him, a solitary pedestrian daring the asphalt runways that belonged to the slick sedans and SUVs of the upscale residents of the hills. Didn't he know he was too old for such things? Shouldn't he 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.

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, ignoring my comment about his camera. "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.

Names

When we got to introductions, he spoke with a note of finality: "Smith!" "And what's your first name?" I asked, unwilling to accept that closed door. "You can call me Leslie, but Smith is fine." I don't remember much else about that first meeting. He'd cast a little spell around his name, because later, each time I ran into him, I found myself stumbling over it. It was Smith, right? 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 heard, which means "having the habitual attitude of being inwardly inclined to welcome the moment in its infinite potential to surprise or reveal." This was the invisible quality made visible in Smith. No matter if he'd been a bus driver. The thing about being a true artist is that it's something you can't help when you've got it. And eventually it has to come out. With Smith, it had come out. I'd seen him down in the little village at the foot of the hills with an improvised display of wind chimes he'd made for sale. And he always had his camera with him.

But it's easier to tell a few facts about Smith than to wrestle with the 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. [...]

Recognitions

Smith was a man I'd spotted walking the steep and inhospitable roads I drove every day. In some mysterious way, I recognized him immediately. Of course, he stood out. His walking was unconventional, but he 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. Who was this unusual man?

One day Smith invited me over to see his place. He led me down some steps alongside his 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 of them. 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—oranges, reds, blues, greens, yellow—illuminating this random assemblage of the bus driver's creations.

I don't know why I was surprised. As mentioned, 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 a reference for this conclusion. For a brief and pathetic period, I'd tried my own hand with a little gallery in town and later on, from time to time, I'd watch sympathetically as others squandered their resources trying to sell art there. Not even bad sold in the village.

One afternoon I happened to be standing by an empty storefront, formerly "Hair's To You" or some such, when a stranger stepped out the place. 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. 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 good art, 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 put up on his roof. Smith, who always spoke in his emphatic way, became more animated than usual as he told me about it 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 at Christmas time?" He had put just such a Santa on his own roof ready to go down the chimney. "He's up there on the roof, see!" Smith gestured with his arms to help me see this scene and then started laughing again. It was all quite vivid before his mind's eye. 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! THAT'S NOT WHAT IT SAYS!"

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 letter by letter: 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, subversive, delicious, insidious beauty of it? Of the former bus driver's rebuke to the bourgeois world surrounding him 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 about living in isolation in this community of conventional folks.

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 now became the representation of all that was suffocating in conventional life under the guise of goodness. There he was on Smith's roof, now identified for all to see, a meddler, ready to climb down into a house to meddle for all he was worth. Smith's laughter was 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.