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Uncanny Bodies in Sacred Settings:
Creating the Divine in
Rodney Smith’s
Photography

Rebecca Leigh Langham

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Uncanny Bodies in Sacred Settings:
Creating the Divine in
Rodney Smith’s
Photography

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Master of Arts

The photographer Rodney Smith shows us images of real things and people, but real things and people that aren’t positioned in real ways and places people would actually be. Instead, he uses something very familiar to each of us—the human body—and consistently puts it in very unfamiliar situations. By using something so intimately familiar to each of us as the body in weird ways, he automatically jars our own experienced sensations. And this jarring of familiar sensations, this defamiliarization of something so familiar to us, is what typically results in what literary critics term the feeling of the uncanny. What the uncanny does, in its defamiliarizing of the familiar, is to jar viewers from their sense of the familiar. It displaces them from where they normally are. In Rodney Smith’s photographs, our bodies, unfamiliar with the bodily experiences of his subjects, are dislodged from where they are.

Yet the feeling produced by Smith’s photography is not uncanny; rather, it has a sort of reverent, almost sacred, effect. His background as a graduate of the Yale School of Divinity makes him deeply interested in truth beneath the surface, and so he uses photography to get at that sort of truth through his use of the body in ways that would typically produce an uncanny effect, yet don’t. The settings in which he places bodies, as well as the way he uses the bodies themselves, help to shift the feeling of the uncanny into the feeling of the divine or sacred.

His ability to do so is highly contingent upon his use of bodies: because we, the viewers, all have bodies, our bodies resonate with those we see in his photography. We are connected to the subjects of his works in a fundamental and profound way because of our embodiedness. And using this connection, Rodney Smith takes our now displaced bodies and transports them with his bodies to somewhere beyond the surface, somewhere sacred. Through his use of techniques typical of the uncanny, he shifts the effects of the uncanny from simple displacement of the self to meaningful replacement of the self within the greater context of our unique and, in his eyes, beautiful world we live in.

Keywords: Rodney Smith, photography, the uncanny, Freud, bodies, embodied knowledge, divine, sacred
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Introduction

Most scholars in the field of art history discuss the photographer Rodney Smith in terms of Surrealism. This is certainly justified and valuable as his photography includes many elements that echo the tenants of Surrealism, such as his use of subjects in unusual and startling ways, and their ability to point to a higher truth, one above and beyond reality—a surreality. For example, in life, we do not have experiences such as soaring through the air over hay bales, standing on the edge of a downtown building poised to jump, or standing picturesquely in a canoe gliding through a watery forest. Yet these are exactly the experiences depicted in Rodney Smith’s photography (figures 1, 2, and 3, respectively, see appendix). As our own experiences can attest, these moments are not realistic; some scholars may thus say it is surrealistic. In addition to placing his subjects in slightly odd or unexpected ways, Smith is also interested in getting at truth in his photography, though he may seek a truth deeper than what we can simply see, as he says: “I am interested in the substructure, the mechanics, the enduring essence that holds something together. I am interested in its psychological underpinnings and emotions. I want to uncover hidden mysteries. This is what my life and photography are all about” (Oswald 61). In other words, his photography—his life, as he says—is meant to “uncover hidden mysteries,” and find meaning behind difficult questions regarding the nature of our very existence.

However, looking at his work, and even these specific aspects of his work, through the lens of Surrealism is not the only way to look at them. It is a valuable way, but there are other ways just as valid and just as useful in helping viewers uncover even more meaning in his photography. His choice to use bodies (the subjects of his photographs) in the unusual means already discussed, as well as other ways, is significant in terms of critical theory surrounding the interpretation of art, specifically, theories of embodied knowledge. Combining those theories
regarding embodied knowledge with others, specifically, theories of the uncanny and theories regarding the divine/sacred, can create a particularly unique lens through which to view Smith’s photography. So, although scholars typically speak about Rodney Smith within the context of Surrealism, looking at him in relation to these other specific categories of literary theory is a useful—and very neglected—addition to the scholarship surrounding Smith. These theories combine in a unique way: because of our embodied knowledge, Smith’s photographs can use techniques associated with the uncanny to create a feeling of the divine/sacred within the viewer.

Combining these things, it is important to remember that one of Smith’s goals as a photographer is still to convey something about that higher, deeper truth regarding the human condition. Smith is particularly well prepared and well educated in looking at these questions. Having received a bachelor’s in religious studies from the University of Virginia, and then a graduate degree from the Yale School of Divinity, Smith is well-versed in “existential questions about who we are and how we relate to the cosmos,” and his desire as a photographer is “to say something significant about us as human beings and about how we relate to the world around us” (Frascella 98; Stevens 73). Yet, as established above, the people in his photographs don’t actually relate to the world around us as we relate to the world around us, physically. He uses the bodies of his subjects in odd and curious ways—their bodies don’t do what our bodies do. They don’t have the same experiences our bodies have.

The act of taking the body as his subject speaks to these notions of embodied knowledge, that is, of theories surrounding our experiences with the arts as being deeply rooted within our status as embodied beings. We are all familiar with the human body on an intimate and inescapable level, simply because we all have one. And, as Anne Hoffman says, “the body … figures as an archive of unconscious meanings” (5). That is, there is information and meaning
stored in our bodies, but Hoffman also explains that “the body cannot be separated from …
techniques of perception” (12). So the information storied in our bodies is often meaning and
experience we don’t even think about because our bodies are just so naturally there, so naturally
the means through which we experience the world, that we don’t always take note of that. But
our bodies are our means of knowing anything; Craig Lucas points out that “[y]our body will
always tell you what’s going on, if you know how to ask it. The body can live without a brain,
but the brain dies without the body” (qtd. in Drukman 20). In other words, our bodies are the
means through which our brains know things—our brains need our bodies—and our bodies
themselves unconsciously store meaning too.

This relationship between ourselves and our bodies is what connects us to Smith’s
photographs and to the kinds of existential questions he is interested in. Tim Miller says that
“finding a way to be more present in our bodies and open to the narratives we carry in our flesh
and blood is the quickest route to the revelatory material about what it means to be human” (qtd.
in Drukman 22). Being present in our bodies, then, is a way to look at these questions about
“who we are and how we relate to the cosmos.” According to theories of embodied knowledge,
the unconscious meaning stored in our bodies is tapped into when we look at a work of art,
especially works that so obviously feature bodies, as Smith’s do. Our bodies unconsciously react
to his bodies; bodies, then, because of their intimate and unconscious familiarity, connect us to
his works, and allow us to find meaning in and interpret them in unique ways.

The specific ways in which he uses bodies coincide with many of Freud’s theories about
what he termed the “unheimlich,” or uncanny. The act of taking the ever-familiar body and
making it do unfamiliar things is a quintessential example of the “uncanny,” an experience
achieved in art through the troubling of boundaries between the definitions of the familiar and
the unfamiliar. By using such methods as repetition, automatism, and silence, Smith’s work echoes some of the methods by which the uncanny can be produced. Though this may seem a strange way to look at Smith’s works, very different from Surrealism, Smith’s use of bodies do incorporate certain specific uncanny techniques, and so the discussion is merited. Typically the felt experience of the uncanny—the way viewers feel when they experience the uncanny—results in a sort of displacement of the self. They feel kind of uneasy; familiarity has become unfamiliar. They don’t know what they thought they knew. Since in Smith’s work the uncanniness is centered around bodies, they feel that uncanniness on a very fundamental level. The unconscious meaning stored in bodies is tapped into when viewers look at his photographs and the feeling of unfamiliarity pushes them out of a normalcy of self.

Yet the felt experience of the viewer engaging with Smith’s photography is not what the uncanny would normally produce. Here the effect is not so much one of eeriness or displacement of the self, as is the typical result of the uncanny. Where the uncanny dislodged what viewers thought they knew, or what their bodies thought they knew, it leaves them open to something new, new information for their bodies. Instead of simply the feeling of the uncanny, his emphasis on the sacred and the divine that he brings to his work from his personal background combines with the uncanny in a way unique to critical art theory. The sacred or the divine, meaning the kind of transcendental truth that responds to Smith’s “existential questions about who we are and how we relate to the cosmos,” can fill in the gap created by the uncanny. Here again Smith’s use of bodies is critical: where the specific ways bodies are used and appear in his photographs creates the uncanny feeling, the surroundings, settings or staging of the bodies create that sense of the divine.
The combination of the uncanny and the divine in Smith’s use of bodies helps viewers find meaning in and interpret Smith’s works in relation to questions about the self and how one relate to the cosmos and the world around them. Whether or not Smith consciously intended this kind of specific interpretation, we know he was interested in these kinds of specific questions, and viewers are able to find meaning in his photographs because of the collision of the uncanny and the divine. Instead of a simple displacement of self that typically results from the uncanny, Smith’s work produces a stronger sense of transcendence (the divine) and a replacement of self in terms of the world we live in—the world we experience through our bodies.

Embodied Knowledge

As Richard Schechner so aptly and succinctly put it, “Everybody alive ‘has’ a body” (Drukman 21). This irrefutable and simple truth defines our existence, our experience, in every way. We experience everyday life, our normal activities and interactions, as embodied beings; and we interact with the arts in aesthetic experiences as, again, embodied human beings. Jean Roberston and Craig McDaniel, in their analysis of contemporary art, explain that “[w]e experience the world through our bodies. Our bodies’ sensory apparatus allows us to gain knowledge about the world and to seek pleasure and feel pain. People are tactile, physical, visceral beings” (87). Or, more simply put, “Our bodies function like a prism though which we see the world” (77). In other words, bodies are the mechanisms through which we experience everything; we feel, hear, taste, smell, touch, and see through physical, bodily functions. Even more than that, though, our interpretation of the world is seen from and through this “prism” of our bodies; as Mark Johnson explains, “Our capacity for making sense of anything emerges from felt patterns of bodily perception and movement” (89). That is, we do not just gain facts and senses through the mechanism of our bodies, but also the meaning our minds find behind those
facts and sensations is rooted in our bodies: “all our meaning, all our creativity, all our knowledge are grounded in our bodily engagement with our environment,” as Johnson puts it (91). Thus the very fact of being embodied, so fully, irrevocably rooted in this bodily experience, creates the fundamental lens through which we view the world—through which we view everything.

Being embodied, therefore, shapes our experience with the arts as well, and not just daily experiences and interactions. Many paintings and photographs and films depict bodies, and even the ones that don’t directly show a body were still certainly created by a body, by some body. This is sometimes easy to forget when talking about the arts in an academic setting (particularly when talking about these photographs that don’t directly depict human bodies): “The body’s human-ness tends to disappear into abstraction when explained away in scholarly jargon,” as Steven Drukman explains (20). When we stand and look intently at a photograph in an art gallery, for example, we engage with that work on what we typically think of as an intellectual level. As Stephanie Springgay explains, “In the West” we have inherited “the Cartesian legacy,” which has “incised the mind and the body as distinct and separate. This separation poses thought outside of the body and as the nexus of existence and conscious reason” (34, 36). In other words, when Rene Descartes made his famous statement, “I think, therefore I am,” he separated the mind and the body as two distinct entities. In that statement, it is the mind that is the true essence of us, of who we are. Western thought has absorbed this concept on a subconscious level, so that we tend to think of our true self as being what is inside our minds, not our bodies. Yet our minds can’t have any information, can’t access anything, any experience, feeling, etc., without the body. Instead of being separate, the mind and body are invariably connected; they work together to make the self.
This is why our bodies are so critically important when looking at a work of art. When we engage with a work of art on that intellectual level, we are not thinking about our bodies, and perhaps we do not often consider our own bodies—the fact that we have one—as a factor in the way we interpret and experience that particular work. Yet the body, as “the threshold of experience,” does, in fact, impact our interpretation of a work of art, especially works of art which directly incorporate bodies (37). As Johnson reinforces, it is “embodied understanding” which “provides the basis for all of our imaginative acts of abstract thought and creativity,” as well as the basis for more mundane, clearly-embodied acts (89). That is to say, although we may, as Sally O’Reilly explains, “take the mind to be the seat of intellect,” and thus assume it is our mind interacting with the art, nevertheless “the body is our interface with the world, and our senses its line of communication, so that even the most dematerialized, conceptual work must take the body into account in some way” (7). She goes on to point out that, furthermore, “the visceral and vulnerable body is now a potent signifier of lived experience as well as a medium of formal and aesthetic inquiry” (8). In other words, we live in our bodies, in every way, and this bodily experience is so fundamental and so integral to our experience of the world that it becomes likewise the fundamental aspect of our experience with art as well.

It is deeply significant, then, that Rodney Smith routinely incorporates bodies into his works. It means, in many ways, that he routinely incorporates our bodies, our bodily experiences, into his works, because our embodied nature makes it difficult—impossible, even—to separate that from our experience with his photography. Hoffman explains the difficulty of trying to experience any work of art without passing through the lens of the body: “[O]ur status as embodied subjects, deeply caught up in the experiences and sensations of our bodies, raises questions about our ability to know the body, to treat it as a separable object, and to use it as a
source of information” (6). We are so caught up in our own bodily sensations and experiences that it is difficult to separate ourselves from the bodies in these photographs. Springgay further clarifies that this impossibility of separating ourselves from our bodies means that we are always and inherently “thinking through the body as opposed to about particular bodies” (35, emphasis in original).¹ In the case of Smith’s photography, we see that that body is not ours, is the body of some other, distinct individual, but as a being embodied ourselves, the bodily sensation in the photograph resonates with our own bodily experience on an instinctive, visceral level, and we become caught up in that resonance such that we experience his photography on that fundamental level of our bodies. In essence, when looking at Smith’s photographs, we—or rather, our bodies—can’t help but wonder how awesome (or scary, for some people) it would be to fly over that hay bale, or how terrifying it would be to be standing on that beam at the edge of that building. To some extent, our bodies don’t just wonder but actually experience those experiences, on an unconscious level, adding to that “archive of unconscious meanings” Hoffman talked about. Essentially, our bodies react on a primary level we may not even be aware of, but that reaction influences our interpretation of and experience with Smith’s photographs.

The Uncanny and Bodies

It has been said that, as embodied beings, our bodies resonate with the bodies in his photographs, but it may be more accurate to say that, in these cases, our bodies don’t resonate, because these aren’t experiences our bodies have had, or even that anybody’s bodies we know of have had, either. So it is significant that Rodney Smith not only routinely incorporates bodies

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¹If at this point we require still further confirmation of the fact that our bodies essentially create and thus are our very perception of all we experience, Elaine Scarry’s The Body in Pain demonstrates this quite well, though from the angle of physical pain as an undeniable and separating reality.
into his works, but that he does so in ways that may seem a little unusual: people don’t normally sail gracefully through the air over hay bales (figure 1); or stand at the waterfront’s edge with a serving tray balanced on one’s head (figure 4); or pose on teeter-totters on the edges of cliffs (figure 5). Yet in his photographs, people do all of these things. As a viewer with a body, these bodies we see in his photographs seem inherently odd, because our bodies feel the unusualness of these bodies, the unusualness of their clothes for their environment, of their curious actions and positions.

This, in fact, is the triumph of Rodney Smith’s work: by using something so intimately familiar as the body as a subject of his photographs, he automatically jars our own experienced sensations to accomplish his purposes of looking at some deeper truth. This jarring of familiar sensations, this defamiliarization of something so familiar, is what typically results in what Freud termed “the uncanny.” As he defines it, “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (195). In this case, the thing that is “old and long familiar” would be the body. He further explains, “the uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does not know one’s way about in. The better oriented in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it” (195). In Smith’s photographs, the bodies are distinctly disorienting and disoriented; they are not in normal places or normal poses or doing normal things. The unconscious information stored in our bodies does not know its way around in these photographs, because the bodily information being presented is disorienting and unusual, and, thus, uncanny.

Though this claim may seem initially strange, as the actual feeling many viewers get from his photography may not be an uncanny feeling, the tactics he uses still emulate the process
of creating the uncanny as described by Freud. Challenging certainty lies at the heart of the
uncanny. That’s what it means to “not know one’s way about” in the “old and long familiar.”
This disorientation challenges what a person knows about something, how they define that thing.
What they are seeing and experiencing is not what they have always seen and experienced
before. Essentially, then, when something someone feels they know well suddenly isn’t quite
what they thought they knew, or when something that would normally be strange to them feels
normal, they experience the uncanny—they are disoriented. Their definition is challenged.
Certainty is not certain anymore, and that is befuddling and destabilizing.

If there is anything one feels they know well, that has been familiar for a long time, it is
the body, so basic and elementary to one’s experiences. When a person’s certainty about their
own bodily experiences is challenged, it is very disorienting, because the body is so fundamental.
Suddenly they don’t know their way around in their own bodies anymore. To put this challenge
to certainty on the very basic level of the body, the seat of all experience, seems to be the
ultimate challenge of what one thinks they can feel and experience. It destabilizes–disorients–the
most basic sensations, the unnoticed habits and familiarities one may not even be aware of.

This is what Smith does when he takes bodies and makes them just a little odd in his
photographs. We experience these photographs as embodied beings, and on some fundamental
level our bodies feel the unusualness of the bodies we see in his photos. Thus his use of bodies
destabilizes our sense of our own bodies; our bodies feel uncertainty and disorientation because
of looking at sensations they have not felt, and our sense of normalcy and equilibrium can be
disturbed. Everything the subjects of Smith’s photographs do defies rationality and logic, from
magically soaring through the sky over the hay, to spectacularly balancing a tray on one’s head.
By giving the bodies in his photographs these logic-defying, unnatural, unusual experiences,
Smith displaces our own bodily sense of normalcy; he disorients us, disorients our bodies on that primary, unconscious level, thus tapping very directly into the uncanny.

The Uncanny in Smith’s Work

Beyond just this general sense of the uncanny, however, Smith’s photography exhibits some very specific traits characteristic of the uncanny. In his essay “The ‘Uncanny,’” Freud discusses a number of ways in which the uncanny can exhibit itself, a few of which are present in Smith’s photography. Some of the more prominent of these in Smith’s work are repetition, automatism, and silence.²

Repetition

Repetition may not initially seem like something that would be uncanny. It is something that occurs often enough in our every-day lives; it is not necessarily something out of the ordinary. It is also a characteristic of surrealist photography, as Rosalind Krauss explains: “As we observe the various technical options explored by surrealist photography … there is the constant preoccupation with doubling” (31). Yet when Freud tries to overtly examine “those themes of uncanniness which are most prominent,” he identifies “the phenomenon of the ‘double’” as something with which “these themes are all concerned” as well (210). Both critical lenses use or look at repetition or doubling as something important. Surrealism may be the way in which Smith is most often examined, but in trying to look at it through the theory of the uncanny we can add an additional layer of meaning to his photography, and more specifically to the presence of doubling or repetition in his photography.

²Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle summarize thirteen of the ways Freud suggests the uncanny may appear in the arts: repetition; odd, almost fated, coincidences; animism; anthropomorphism; automatism; an intense and pervasive uncertainty about sexual identity; a fear of being buried alive; silence; telepathy; death; the death drive (as defined by Freud); ghosts; and language (36-40).
Focusing on the uncanny, then, it is important to understand repetition in that venue. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle clarify why “repetition is a key aspect of the uncanny,” explaining that it is because “the uncanny is not simply a matter of the mysterious, bizarre, or frightening: as we have tried to suggest, it involves a kind of *duplicit*y (both doubling and deception) within the familiar” (41). That is to say, the definition of the uncanny inherently points to a doubling, or repetition: when the uncanny occurs, the familiar is made unfamiliar and thus appears as a double, as both the familiar and the unfamiliar simultaneously. It is this “strange repetition of a feeling, situation, event or character” that makes repetition potentially uncanny (36).

In Rodney Smith’s photography, this repetition and doubling are found most clearly in the routinely-featured men dressed similarly, in old-fashioned suits with bowler hats. There is a repetition throughout the photographs of this character, this image. Perhaps two particular photographs capture this repetition particularly well—figures 5 and 6 feature clear instances of doubling. In the first we have two men of the same height, build, and, apparently, weight (they would have to weigh the same to even out that scale, in theory, and even in appearance they look to be approximately the same size). They are even posed in exactly the same position, just facing opposite directions. Freud states that in art “we have characters who are to be considered identical because they look alike,” and that is clearly the case here (210). These two men look alike and thus are identical, unmistakably doubles of each other. This doubling feels unnatural; it is a “strange repetition of a … character” who doesn’t physically (bodily) fit into the world as we do. This strange repetition carries over into figure 6, where here again we have two men who appear to be approximately the same body type and build, and dressed the same. And here these two men are not just doubles or repetitions of each other, but also of the characters in other
photographs taken by Smith. Here all four men are repetitions; within each photo there is a
doubling, and the two photos could be seen as a double of each other by the repetition of the
character. This repetition is further echoed throughout his work, as we can see in figures 7, 8,
and 9 as well. This same sort of character appears over and over again in Smith’s work, both in
all the photos referenced and included here, as well as in many others not included here. Thus
repetition, and doubling, abound in his work.

What makes Smith’s doubling uncanny, though? As Freud explains, when there is a
double, “the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his
self is, or substitutes the extraneous self [the double] for his own” (210). Remembering that the
uncanny involves not knowing one’s way around in something, this kind of confusion of the
self—the subject asking himself which of the characters is really him—harks back to the
foundations of what makes something uncanny. Bennett and Royle further explain how a subject
identifies with its double, or, in other words, how the subject may think about the double, beyond
just the vague notion that he isn’t sure which he is. They explain that “the double is
paradoxically both a promise of immortality (look, there’s my double, I can be reproduced, I can
live forever) and a harbinger of death (look, there I am, no longer me here, but there: I am about
to die, or else I must be dead already)” (41). The self sees the double, is unsure of which he is,
and even thinks of the double as both a symbol of immortality and death simultaneously.
Because of this confusion, “the notion of the double undermines the very logic of identity” (41).
Repetition and doubling steal identity by taking away the possibility of the individual.

We can, perhaps, see this most clearly in figure 6, where these two doubled men gaze
upon each other, the one looking down on the other from his perch in a tree and the other looking
back up at him from the ground. Here these two men look so similar that they could be each
other’s double—each other’s doppelganger, even, and that is the point. Their poses and looks at each other seem almost quizzical, as if they could be identifying each other, reflecting on the thoughts posed by Bennett and Royle, each thinking “look, there’s my double.” And this doubling of character does, in fact, undermine the very logic of identity: Freud explains that when there is this kind of repetition of a character, “there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self” that goes along with the subject not being able to identify which self is himself (210). Rosalind Krauss adds that the “double destroys the pure singularity of the first” (28). We can’t even tell which of the figures came first, or even if one of the figures came first in the first place—the repetition, the doubling, of the character destroys its ability to be a character in and of itself. All of this—an uncertainty of which is the self; the “doubling, dividing, and interchanging of the self”; the questioning of both immortality and death; the destruction of a figure’s singularity—results in a feeling that the character in the photograph has no personal identity: neither man seems to us to be a real person with a real identity, and this is largely because each is clearly just a repetition of each other. They are also a repetition of a character in Smith’s photography generally, leaving the characters in many of Smith’s photographs without any sense of personal identity, which feels uncanny: without identity, none of these figures know their way about. There is nowhere to even try to know one’s way about in the first place without that individual identity which has been destroyed by the doubling.

Again this can be connected back to ideas of embodied knowledge: the doubles these characters (and viewers) face are literal embodiments of themselves repeated. It’s not just some solely mental process (e.g. “look—there’s a person who thinks like me), but is very directly a bodily process (“look—there’s a person who looks like me, has my body”). The body loses its way around in this situation, with its deep uncertainty of identity. For viewers, that undermining
of identity through physical appearance brings this uncanny technique back onto the level of the body, including the unconscious knowledge stored in the body that they react to whether they realize it or not, on at least that unconscious level.

Thus this repetition, typically characteristic of the uncanny, abounds in Smith’s work. It undermines identity in Smith’s work as a bodily repetition, a character repeated in a physical manner, leaving viewers with that connection to his work intact.

**Autotmatism**

The undermining of identity created by repetition points to another aspect of the uncanny which is also present in Rodney Smith’s photography: automatism. The word automatism is one with which every scholar of Surrealism will be familiar. The founder of Surrealism, Andre Breton, considered automatism to be “central to the definition of Surrealism” (Grant 78). However, his use of the word automatism is very different than the use of that word in the context of the uncanny. In Surrealism, automatism refers to a sort of free-form writing, where the writer simply writes what they are thinking without trying to focus on something specific and without some endpoint in mind. It is a psychological outpouring of the mind. In theories of the uncanny, on the other hand, automatism refers more to a machine-like (automatic) or abnormal human action. Freud explains that there is an uncanny effect when “the spectator” gets “the impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity” (201-2). In automatism in the uncanny sense, human identity is again compromised because the human figure we see is automatic and mechanical, not human. That is, viewers see a human body that looks familiar because it is a human body, but at the same time this familiar thing becomes unfamiliar when the body stops acting human, and starts acting like an automaton. Freud also quotes Jentsch saying that “one of the most successful devices for easily creating
uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton” (202). Here again the issues of intellectual uncertainty, of the familiar becoming the unfamiliar, and of getting caught in something one does not know one’s way around in are raised, indicating that the automaton can certainly be uncanny.

There are certainly more specific instances of the automaton in Smith’s work. Bennett and Royle clarify some more specific cases of automatism that can then be found in Smith’s work: “[Automatism] is a term that can be used when what is human is perceived as merely mechanical: examples of this would be sleepwalking, epileptic fits, trance-states and madness” (37). Obviously his subjects are not having epileptic fits, and there are not any visible signs of madness, but in some cases they do seem to be in trance-like states, though perhaps toned down to merely daydreaming states, such as in figures 10, 4, and 3. In each of these photographs, the subjects seem simply there, perhaps only there physically, but mentally they may seem entranced or daydreaming away. The woman in figure 10, for example, seems clearly to be daydreaming, entranced with something beyond the boat where she sits. In figure 4, although we cannot see his face, the feeling of a trance-like or daydreaming, far-away state seems true of this man here as well—his sort of whimsical posture and direction of gazing across the wide and open sea before him indicate his entranced state. The woman gliding smoothly through the swamp in figure 3 definitely exhibits traits of a sort of magical trance-state. There are many instances, then, of bodies displaying this particular instance of automatism in Smith’s work.

Another instance Bennett and Royle offer as an example of automatism is sleepwalking. While none of his figures seem to be actually sleepwalking, their movements would seem to be an almost inhuman gliding, similar to how a sleepwalker or ghost (incidentally, another of Freud’s ways the uncanny can exhibit itself in art) would glide about. Obviously these figures are
frozen in the moment in time captured by the photograph (as is the inherent nature of photography), but the tone and composition of each photograph gives us a sense of what movement these figures are in. This is most clearly evident in the image of the woman in figure 3, perhaps, as she gracefully and enchantingly glides through the photograph on her boat. Though the shot is obviously still, we can feel from the composition and positioning of the body that this is the type of movement the woman must be experiencing in this moment. The man in figure 4, too, must be gliding, smoothly balanced, for that tray to stay so perfectly atop his head, and this type of smooth gliding harkens back to the uncanny techniques of the way a sleepwalker would move so smoothly or the way a ghost would glide about. Here again we see bodies acting in ways ours typically don’t, creating that sense of the uncanny, and the connection to that unconscious knowledge in our bodies is made.

Automatism in art can also be created by a mechanical feeling. In other words, the human figures don’t feel quite human, but rather like objects, acting in some fixed or mechanical way, posed. Rodney Smith’s figures consistently display this quality. The doubles in figure 5 are, again, a prime example of this, as are many of the other doubles, who feel mechanical in their doubling stances. In figure 5, in fact, not only does the doubling feel posed and mechanical, but the subjects in the photo are literally standing on a machine of sorts—a balancing scale that weighs them against each other, determining if they are of the same weight. Here these figures are arranged in such a way that they can feel more mechanical than human, and they are literally acting as part of a machine. Figures 7 and 11 give off this feeling of artificial, mechanical poses as well. In figure 7 we have men posed as if in motion, but the posing makes it feel like the motion is forced, not natural, but man-made, like a machine. In figure 11 here, again, the posing is part of what makes it feel mechanical. They are performing an unusual action in standing
exactly as they are, so stiffly—it’s something the average person’s body doesn’t typically experience. It feels, again, unnatural. The mechanical feeling of these figures, as Freud pointed out, can create an uncanny feeling: the human body we are familiar with is behaving in an unfamiliar (and even uncomfortable) way.

The result of all these characteristics displayed in all these photographs—the trance-like states; the sleepwalking-like gliding movements; the mechanical, artificial quality of the bodies and their poses—is a feeling that these humans are not quite human. They can give off this sense of automatism, which is indeed an uncanny thing: the human is not quite human, is both clearly a familiar embodied being as one like ourselves (simply because what we are seeing is, in fact, a human body, no matter how oddly it behaves) and an unfamiliar embodied being in its automatism, again connecting to our bodies on a primary level.

*Silence*

One last manifestation of the uncanny which seems particularly potent in Smith’s photography is silence. Freud says that “the uncanny effect of silence” can be quite strong (223). There are certainly uncomfortable silences, which may sometimes be humorous, but can also sometimes feel a little eerie or disturbing, depending on the circumstances. These sorts of silences are examples of the uncanny in personal experience.

Interestingly, Smith’s photographs do display a sense of profound silence. Obviously photographs have inherently no noise, but the way his figures are positioned, the settings they are in, and the tone of the composition as a whole make the viewer feel like the thing is silent. If you were put there, it would be a silent place you were put, a place with no noise. And this, too, can be uncanny. Take, for example, figures 6, 2, and 10. In figure 6, the two men are frozen in the forest. The old paradox feels particularly potent here: If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there
to hear it, does it make a sound? Though of course there are these two men there, and a sound could theoretically be made in that forest, the feeling, the tone, of the photograph is one of profound silence. Where are the birds one would expect to hear chirping away in the forest? Even the sound of the breeze rustling the leaves seems to be absent, with the visual evidence indicating no motion.³

Figures 2 and 10 are particularly potent in their sense of silence because each of these situations is one which seems like it would not be a silent place—the man on the beam about to jump, for example, is clearly in a city, while the woman in the boat seems to be in a location that could be rich with sound (sounds of the water, the creaking of the canoe, her companion in the boat, etc.), yet in both photographs the tone conveyed to viewers is still one of silence. In figure 2, for example, the man is posed in a high location, on a beam far above the city streets. Even if there are city noises in the city he’s in, Smith has placed him in a location above all of that, suggesting a sense of distance from the noise of the city. Viewers cannot see anything that would normally make noise in a city, leading them to feel like this man is not engaged in city noise; this man is far above it, experiencing a detachment or remoteness from the noise. His experience is silent, even if a city isn’t usually silent. Viewers can feel this sense of silence—they do not think about the city noises, instead they see and think about this man’s position, what his body is doing and what he must resultantly be thinking.

³ While there is a clear correlation here between stillness and silence, there is still some differentiation between the two. Stillness (like in this example, with the stillness of the leaves and branches) can indicate silence, but the feeling of silence in a photograph involves more than just stillness. It involves the overall tone of the photograph, as well as looking at the context of any one of Smith’s photographs in terms of Smith’s overall body of work. And with enough photographs that express that feeling of peace and silence, determining the tone of others as silent seems a reasonable conclusion.
Figure 10 shows its silence by conveying a more reflective mood, especially within the context of the rest of Smith’s body of work. The woman in the boat is still, gazing off into the distance, and there is another out-of-focus person behind her. Boats normally rock up and down, and we can hear the sound of the water against the side of the boat, but in this photograph the mood feels distanced from that space. The woman’s gaze and pose make her feel disconnected from that typical atmosphere—even the other person is not in focus, not connected to her reality in this moment. Even he, another person who could speak or who could rock up and down in a boat, is not a part of what she is thinking, feeling and experiencing right now. The deliberateness of the posing, the reflective atmosphere, and the context of the rest of Smith’s works suggest that in this photograph too we have a sense of silence.

Freud points out that silence is uncanny because of our personal experiences with it (like the example mentioned above of an uncomfortable silence that becomes even eerie). He says that “the factors of silence, solitude and darkness … are actually elements in the production of … anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free” (229). In other words, silence can be uncanny simply because we sometimes experience anxiety as a result of silence, and this anxiety can take silence and make it something we are not comfortable with, something we do not know our way around in—something uncanny. So when the atmosphere of silence is created in Smith’s work, that silence, as well as the combination of that silence with these other uncanny techniques we’ve discussed (repetition and automatism) can further perpetuate uncanny techniques in Smith’s work, techniques which, again, we first connect to through our bodies, as our bodies are our first means of experiencing any work of art.
The Divine

However, the uncanny is not just a list of techniques present in a work. Rather, it is the feeling a viewer gets from a work, or “what is experienced as uncanny” (224), as Freud puts it. Bennett and Royle further explain this:

The uncanny, then, is an experience …. It is not a theme which a writer uses or which a text possesses. The uncanny is not something simply present like an object in a painting. It is, rather, an effect. In this respect it has to do with how we read or interpret … In other words, the uncanny has to do, most of all, with effects of reading, with the experience of the reader. (42)

In understanding Smith’s photographs, then, it is the feeling the viewer gets from them, more than the techniques used in them, that matters. The viewer must notice that, despite the fact that these sorts of uncanny things—repetition and doubling, automatism, and silence—are present in Smith’s photographs, the actual feeling experienced when engaging with them is not an uncanny one. In other words, although there are many characteristics present which are usually typical of the uncanny, that is, characteristics which would usually produce a feeling of the uncanny, his photographs do not actually produce that feeling. Rather, his repetition, automatism, and silence produce a feeling of precision and balance, symmetry, beauty, and even reverence. This, then, is one thing that so unusual about Rodney Smith’s photography. He uses typically uncanny techniques to produce something that is not uncanny.

How is this effect of the divine rather than that of the uncanny created in Smith’s use of bodies? It is, in part, with Smith’s background in divinity studies and stated goal of exploring questions of a spiritual and metaphysical nature that notions of the divine and the sacred come into play. “‘As a photographer,’ Smith explains, ‘I see the world as unresolved and unclear. My
job is to provide some resolution to that world, some clarity, some insight’’ (Stevens 70). For him, this clarity and insight revolves around metaphysical, spiritual, beneath-the-surface truth.

There is a vein of thought within Surrealism that supports this idea of photography seeking spirituality. One of the major figures supporting this idea is surrealist photographer Minor White, often looked at as a sort of spiritual mystic in his personal beliefs about how photography should work. Unlike what one might typically think of when a person is labeled as a spiritual mystic, though, White did not focus on the spiritual as separate from or above the physical world. In fact, Mary Marien explains, White “did not so much reject the material realm as reconfigure it. White thought of photography as a process wherein the visual world was rediscovered as a font of spiritual illumination” (338). In other words, White believed the physical world is itself inherently spiritual in its ability to help people arrive at that sense of the sacred or divine. As part of the physical world, bodies can be the tools through which people begin to feel the divine or sacred. This is one way in which Surrealism can support the idea that Smith’s work uses bodies to achieve the feeling of the sacred.

White would call the photographer who achieves this kind of feeling and communicates it through photography not just a photographer, but a poet-photographer. Smith achieves this status when he uses bodies to achieve the effect of the divine, rather than that of the uncanny. White believed the poet-photographer is one who communicates meaning or truth through his photographs. Smith sets up viewers for this type of interaction with his work—an interactive search for this meaning or beneath-the-surface truth, whether intentionally or not. The search for truth, for meaning, is inherently theological. Bennett and Royle explain, “the idea of God is inescapably linked to ideas of truth, presence, revelation and meaning in general” (190). They further clarify exactly why:
The intimate linkage between ‘God’ and ‘meaning’ is implicit in the Bible, in the opening sentences of the Gospel according to St John: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (John 1:1). The original Greek for ‘Word’ here is ‘logos’, which means not only ‘word’ but also ‘sense’ or ‘meaning.’ (190-1)

For Smith, then, intimately familiar with the Bible and things theological, searching for meaning is always connected with God. Even for a viewer who is not intimately familiar with things theological, God is so strongly connected with the search for meaning in one of the foundational texts of Western thought that the connection between the search for meaning and the divine (even if not identified as the Christian God himself) will still be somewhere a part of their fundamental paradigm, whether they know it or not.

In many ways the very existence of Smith’s photographs, as works of art, presupposes some sort of meaning, or search for meaning. The connection between the divine and meaning becomes a critical part of our interaction with Smith’s work. Art, including Smith’s photography, is often seen as a form of communication, a form of trying to convey some sort of meaning to its audience, like White believed the poet-photographer should do. George Steiner connects the arts as communication with the tie between God and meaning this way: “Any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God’s presence. … the experience of aesthetic meaning in particular, that of literature, of the arts, of musical form, infers the necessary possibility of this ‘real presence’” (3). This is because, he explains,

the wager on the meaning of meaning … is a wager on transcendence. … This wager … predicates the presence of a realness, of a ‘substantiation’ (the theological reach of this word is obvious) within language and form. It supposes a passage, beyond the fictive or
the purely pragmatic, from meaning to meaningfulness. The conjecture is that ‘God’ is …

that grammar lives and generates worlds because there is the wager on God. (4)

In other words, in order to explain the power behind human communication, there must be some assumption of meaning within communication. And any assumption of meaning must “be underwritten by the assumption of God’s presence,” that is, meaning and communication of that meaning indicates an underlying sense of God’s presence. More specifically than just establishing a connection between the notion of “meaning” and the notion of “God” (or divinity or the sacred in general), though, is his assertion that then within the communication of meaning—especially communication of meaning through the arts—there is a sense of God’s presence. That is, when meaning is being communicated through Smith’s photography, we have a sense of God, of the sacred and divine, within that experience. The very fact that Smith’s photography seems to mean something helps create the effect of the divine rather than the uncanny within the viewer. As viewers search for meaning within Smith’s photography, some sense of the divine will be present because of this strong connection between God and meaning in Western thought.

It is true that the typical viewer, looking at one of these photographs, will indeed have the urge to construct meaning, thus basically importing those feelings of the divine into their experience. Sally Despenser explains that viewers have “the urge to give identity and narrative to these unknown subjects” when they look at a photograph, a “longing for a story to explain” (90). People (including, of course, viewers of Smith’s photography) inherently want to discover meaning in things; we want to see the meaning behind Smith’s photographs when we look at them. The fact that they are photographs, rather than some other medium, intensifies the sense that there must be some sort of reality and truth to them: “A photograph is traditionally perceived
as an unmediated transcription from object to image, a neutral re-presentation of the object that
allows access to a reality that is temporally or spatially removed,” Geoffrey Wright points out
(58). Krauss clarifies that photography has a “special status with regard to the real” (31). She
explains,

Photography is an imprint or transfer of the real; it is a photochemically processed trace
causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a way parallel to that of
fingerprints or footprints or the rings of water that cold glasses leave on tables. The
photograph is thus genetically distinct from painting or sculpture or drawing. (31)

Essentially, then, Wright and Krauss are saying that people are trained to think of photographs as
‘the truth,’ as ‘reality.’

Of course viewers are aware, as John Berger points out, that “photographs are not, as is
often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however
slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights” (qtd. in
Wright 58-9). They know that photographs are not, in fact, some neutral re-presentation of
reality; they know that the photographs they are looking at are a form of art, not strict
documentation. Yet, as Misha Gordin puts it, viewers still have “the belief engraved in [their]
subconscious that what was captured by camera has to exist” (78). Like the effect of unconscious
awareness of bodies, and unconscious awareness of the connection between the divine and the
search for meaning, this foundation in the way people have learned to look at photographs will
affect their drive to search for reality, for meaning, for truth, within them. Lois Greenfield says,
“Their veracity as documents gives the photographs their mystery” (41), and it is a mystery
viewers want to unravel, to get to the bottom of. As the viewer searches for meaning when
looking at Smith’s photographs, this interaction that Smith has set up between viewer and
photograph will help create the effect of the divine that he is interested in. The action “of reading and doing criticism [is] … a ‘theological’ activity,” Bennett and Royle explain (191). The very action of searching for meaning, then, creates the effect of the divine, rather than that of the uncanny. Here, because of the innate connection viewers’ bodies feel to his photographs, this search for meaning and resultant sense of the divine is, like the uncanny, placed on that level of the ever-so-intimately familiar body.

**Divine Composition**

Consequently, in part from the sense of a search for meaning, the feeling the viewer gets from Rodney Smith’s photography is not the one usually experienced with such uncanny techniques, but rather, one of the divine. In addition to the action of searching for meaning that Smith establishes, there are some more specific characteristics of these photographs that take the uncanny techniques and turn them towards the divine. Rodney Smith’s uncanny use of bodies combines with the overall composition of his photographs to create this effect. He uses precise composition and carefully chosen settings to accomplish this. His photography incorporates strong senses of balance, symmetry, and order; it incorporates centeredness, stability, groundedness; it incorporates stillness. His photographs tend to be clean, and formal. These kinds of settings in which Rodney Smith places these uncanny bodies removes the bodily reaction of the viewer from the effect of the uncanny and makes it into a feeling of peace, reverence, sacredness, and divinity.

**Symmetry**

Balance and symmetry often have strong connections to notions of spiritual wholeness and order and, therefore, to the divine. Oswald tells us, “Smith’s photographs are renowned for their classical composition, order and symmetry. … [N]othing is out of place” (61). Joseph
Rossbach tells us that “photography really is the practice of creating order out of chaos” (26). In Smith’s photographs, symmetry and balance are a way to do that, giving us a sense of order, creating something out of chaos. Wassily Kandinsky, in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, words this another way: “To harmonize the whole is the task of art” (3). Smith himself acknowledges this sense of harmony, or order, in his methodology behind his photography as well:

‘An art critic once told me that everything in my photos is always perfectly arranged,’ Smith explains. ‘Well, I’m somewhat conscious of that when I’m shooting, but very slightly. What’s conscious to me is the feeling that something belongs. I’m conscious of the emotions it evokes when expressed in a certain manner. In that way, photography is like painting to me. It is a compositional expression: a way of giving form to feeling. That’s the heart of what I’m after.’ (Oswald 61)

Smith looks for a sense of belonging, and tries to express that through the composition of his photographs and the settings in which he puts his uncanny bodies. He creates belonging, a place for things—as Kandinsky put it, Smith tries to harmonize the whole of what he sees, of what he’s presenting, in his photographs. He does this through careful, deliberate composition, unlike Surrealism, which is more focused on a free-flowing sense of capturing the moment. For Smith, symmetry and balance is one of the primary ways his deliberate composition is expressed in his photography.

This symmetry appears in many different forms in many of his photographs. Look, for example, at figures 11, 8 and 12. There is clearly in each of these a strong sense of deliberate and careful compositional arrangement on the part of Rodney Smith. In figure 8, for example, much of the setting of the photograph comes from simply natural or found materials, things Rodney
Smith himself did not create or arrange—he didn’t plant that path of hedges leading off into the background there, for instance. But it is very clear he is taking advantage of that carefully and deliberately. He chose exactly this angle and this view to set up the surroundings for his subjects. His subjects, the two doubles leaning against each other, is something he could and did carefully set up and arrange himself. Their costumes are chosen to match, right down to the bowties. Their gaze at the camera is steady and purposeful. Most significantly, the point where their bodies meet, by design, is right along the central line of the photograph; the line drawn from that point up through and above their upper bodies and down to the ground and the frame of the photograph vertically divides the photograph into two symmetrical halves. Their evenly matching poses, their bodies, mirror each other on either side of the line, as do the two rows of hedges steadily moving along the side edges of the frame, creating lines converging in the distant background right in the center, equal to each other. As Smith acknowledged, deliberate compositional expression is important to him, and we see him doing this in this photograph.

Similarly, he does this very simply in figure 12. Here there is a photograph with very few elements—there is the subject herself, one building the subject is standing on, and another building in the background. The other photograph contains many visual elements; here there are few, and Smith uses them carefully and sets up symmetry in this photograph as well. Here again the person is right along the central line, and the foreground (the roof of the building she is standing on) mirrors itself perfectly on either side of the vertical line drawn by her body. He has even tried to pose her such that the building in the background is as symmetrically placed as possible. With found elements and only one element he could control—the woman—he is still very deliberate in his composition.
This use of very deliberate compositional arrangement on the part of Rodney Smith appears perhaps most strongly in figure 11. Here again we have two halves on either side of a vertical line set up by one of the subject’s bodies—in this case the man on the ladder. The people are positioned for careful symmetry. The two women standing tall on either side of the man on the ladder, while not in exactly the same pose, are both posed in a manner that shows a strong sense of attitude, and then beside them are two figures lowered. While these two figures are not posed in some similar manner, the horizontal line we can draw between their umbrellas is nearly on the same level. They too mirror each other. Each pose, each person, each costume is clearly chosen and placed with great care. Symmetry is not an accident in Smith’s photography—he sets up his photographs, and often the bodies in them, that way frequently and deliberately.

As in these photographs, Smith’s symmetry is most often set up around a vertical line in the center of his photographs drawn by the body of some person that is the subject of the photograph. This is evident in figures 1, 2, 14 and 12. In figures 1 and 14, bodies are positioned upright in natural outdoor settings. Smith is using these bodies to create a sense of two distinct halves in each photograph. In the same way, upright bodies are used in figures 2 and 12 to create a sense of two halves in these similar urban settings. Even the body is positioned in such a way that one half mirrors the other. These are very strong vertical lines splitting the photographs in two.

These clear vertical lines in these specific places create a precise sort of energy connecting these photographs, and the bodies that create these lines, with the sacred or divine. Rossbach points out that “vertical lines pose much more energy than horizontal lines and are strong design elements for creating powerful and exciting compositions” (28-9). But Smith is using these lines to create a sense of symmetry, supporting the feeling of peace and calm that
would be associated with the divine. Rossbach also explains that if you “put a vertical line directly in the center of the composition … it will split the frame 50/50 and not be nearly as visually dynamic” (29). So, Smith’s vertical lines are “strong design elements,” aiding in creating a strong sense of symmetry, but because they are right down the middle of the photograph they aren’t quite as “dynamic,” or energetic, as many vertical lines in compositions are. He uses them to set up the feeling of symmetry strongly (or perhaps clearly may be a more accurate word), but in a gentler, calmer way that doesn’t create quite as much “dynamic” energy. These vertical lines drawn by his subjects’ bodies craft strong symmetry, while still generating an almost peaceful, simple kind of energy for the viewer.

Symmetry creates a sense of balance and order in Smith’s photography. Balance and order are critical in creating an atmosphere of the sacred and divine within the viewer. This balance and order within symmetry can feel like a pattern of sorts, with its careful systemization of a photograph. Roberston and McDaniel explain how this helps create a connection between photographer and the sacred: “The incorporation of ritual, ceremony, and other forms of highly patterned behavior into the practice of art can bestow on the artist the role of high priest or shaman” (332). Smith isn’t practicing any actual rituals, of course, but the highly patterned nature of his photographs, created by the symmetry he sets up, gives off the same sort of feeling that ritual does, in a way. Robertson and McDaniel’s claim that this can, in some ways, liken artist with priest or shaman further strengthens the connection between Smith’s photography and the divine, in a similar way the title of poet-photographer bestowed by White does. These sorts of connections between Smith as photographer and Smith as poet-photographer and between Smith as photographer and Smith as priest or shaman strengthen the sense of the divine in his photography; the artist that is larger and greater than just a person in a spiritual way increases the
sense of spirituality and the divine in the photographer. And in this particular case, the connection is between Smith as photographer and Smith as priest or shaman because of the “highly patterned behavior” in his photographs—by creating patterns with his symmetry, Smith becomes an artist creating something that is highly patterned, something that projects a sense of the sacred.

As with the techniques that create the uncanny, Smith in many cases uses bodies to create this pattern, symmetry, and balance. The deliberateness of the way he positions bodies adds to the sense of balance and pattern. The bodies of his subjects are what create the vertical lines down the center of each photograph, putting the body at the center of the symmetry. Here again, the bodies of viewers will connect with those in his photographs, changing what could have been uncanny (e.g. the deliberate nature in which he positions the bodies could remind us of the concept of automatism) into something calmer, more balanced, more along the lines of the transcendent or sacred. Thus his use of bodies makes the viewer’s experience with his work not a feeling of the uncanny, but a feeling of the divine and the sacred instead.

Centeredness

In addition to symmetry, there are also strong senses of centeredness and groundedness in Smith’s photography. Both of these feelings, too, are often associated with a sort of spiritual harmony and wholeness that helps create the atmosphere of the divine in Smith’s photography. Gordin tells us that “the power of a good image comes from its soul” (79), and Rossbach adds the idea that “photography is the essence of the image” (26). The “soul” or the “essence” of something is often considered as what’s at the heart of the thing, at the center of its being. In a spiritual activity such as meditation, for example, center and focus are key concepts. In Smith’s photography, where the feeling of artist-as-shaman can be strong, having such strong
centeredness only increases the divine atmosphere surrounding his photographs, as the search for meaning becomes connected with ideas of “essence” or “soul” and activities like meditation (an activity which, incidentally, involves a strong sense of bodily awareness and control). All of this combines to create that sense of spiritual focus, wellness, wholeness and harmony, helping to create a kind of sacred experience for the viewer.

The center of a visual image is its focal point, the point the eyes are drawn to when looking at the image. In Smith’s photography, that point is often at the literal center of the image, which is significant in creating the kind of centeredness that adds to the sense of the sacred. Look, for example, at figures 8 and 13. In figure 8, the eyes are drawn by diagonal lines that point almost arrow-like to the point where the two bodies meet, which is indeed at the actual center of the photograph. This is the point where the most physical tension exists in the photograph, with the bodies pushing against each other. It is also the point, however, where balance is created with that same physical tension, with each person leaning on the other for support, each requiring the other to stay upright. Here the two figures are working in harmony to keep each other from falling. The central point of this photograph is also its visual focal point, and is the point of balance and harmony within the photo. Similarly, in figure 13 the eyes are drawn by the sharp contrast in tone to the considerably darker mass in the center, surrounded by a much lighter surrounding space. The contrast between light and dark helps it stand out, drawing the viewer’s attention. It, too, is at the literal center of the photograph, increasing the visual draw for the viewer and the sense of centeredness that it provides. This is also the object in the photograph with the heaviest weight, literally, being heavier and weightier than either the person on top of it or the sea all around it. Here, again, the center is the focal point and the point of balance, where the woman stands upright. These centers at centers (visual centers at literal
centers) create within the viewer a double-strong sense of focus, and harmony, helping to create a spiritual atmosphere.

Even if it is not always at the center of the photograph, Smith uses visual focal points to create a sense of centeredness. For example, look at figure 10. In this photograph there is a clear visual focal point, a visual center, though it does not lie at the literal center of the photograph. In figure 10, the woman’s face is a clear visual focal point, with a strong contrast between the out-of-focus background and sharply in-focus subject. This visual center is off both the vertical and horizontal central lines, yet is still a distinct visual focal point. It, too, creates strong feelings of focus and control. These feelings may perhaps be amplified by the power of the woman’s wistful gaze, allowing yet again for Smith’s use of a human body to create a specific feeling within the photograph.

While the overall composition of the photographs is a large part of what creates the feeling of centeredness—that is, by putting the center of focus in the center of the photograph or by using contrast to create a focal center even off the literal center—his use of bodies here, too, is significant. In the photographs discussed (figures 8, 13, and 10), bodies are as important as the overall composition. In the first two discussed, figures 8 and 13, the center of the photograph is also the point at which the bodies in the photographs are balanced. The two people in figure 8 lean on each other and achieve balance at that central point. The woman in figure 13 is standing on the rock that is the center point; that’s where she is balanced as well. Here viewers’ bodily connection with these bodies will increase the feeling of centeredness and balance as a result both of the overall composition of the photograph and the use of bodies within it. In figure 10, where the visual center is not located at the literal center of the photograph, the body of the subject is the primary way the visual center is highlighted. In figure 10, the visual focal point is
the woman’s face. A part of her body, not just where her body is balanced, but her actual body, is the visual center of the photograph. All of these ways of using bodies helps underscore and highlight the central points of each photograph, and viewers’ connection with these bodies will make that sense of centeredness stronger within them as well.

*Groundedness*

Often, feelings of centeredness and groundedness interact in Smith’s photographs to create the divine. Again, the connection between feeling grounded and the divine may be etched into Western thought inherently, expressed in the Bible: “continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel” (Colossians 1:23). Smith, of course, is intimately familiar with the Bible—this idea would by no means be simply a byproduct of the subconscious paradigm of Western thinking for him, though it may be for the average viewer. A sense of groundedness, of steady stability, of being firmly attached to something larger, of balance and roots, creates feelings of peace and calm within the viewer. The peace and calm of being grounded, particularly in contrast to feelings of vast open spaces or of precarious balance, helps create a feeling of the divine in Smith’s photography.

For example, this contrast is manifest in figure 13, with a woman out in the middle of the vastness of the sea. Here, the openness around her looks almost like mist or fog, even more nebulous than water. There isn’t even the strong horizontal line of the horizon to ground or stabilize the photograph; though viewers can make out the horizon line, it is not a strong line, because the lack of contrast between the light tones of the sea and the light tones of the sky almost make it seem as though the swirling mist around her simply extends into the distance forever, surrounding her. Yet it does not feel as though she is simply floating out there or being swept away into it. She is firmly rooted, tethered to reality, by her clear attachment to the rock
beneath her. The rock is at the central point of the photograph, and is the heaviest mass in the photograph. The woman, though extending into the light haze around her, is attached–rooted–to the center of the painting. Grounded in centeredness, the two feelings combine to emphasize the calmness and peace, and stability and balance of the photograph, leaving the viewer with a sense of the sacred or spiritual.

Similarly, figures 4 and 14 likewise feature a sense of being rooted or planted, attached to the ground even while looking out over or contemplating vastness. In figure 14, though the man gazes out over wide open space, the dock is such a solid slab of heavy concrete that he feels firmly grounded. He is planted, driven into the concrete through the vertical center line along which he stands upright. In this photograph, the man is planted into the concrete through the compositional element of vertical lines, with the vertical center line, and also the two vertical lines of the edge of the dock pulling him back towards the bottom edge of the frame. He is also rooted through his body itself: his posture is stiff and firm, aiding even further in the sense of being planted, of being firmly rooted and attached to the solid ground below him.

The man in figure 4 is also gazing out over the wide open space of the sea. Yet here again the figure is very much not in that wide open space, but rather in our own, grounded space, attached again through the concrete of the dock. In this photograph, of course, the figure isn’t as balanced or attached through the vertical center line; rather, he is off-center, and his leg and neck are both slanted, and that combined with the precarious position of the tray on his head suggest that he is not in the same type of solid stance as the man in figure 14. However, this man is moved further into the foreground of the photograph, further from the open space. Being closer to the bottom, the horizontal line of the frame of the photograph makes him feel more grounded. Other strong horizontal lines increase this feeling–the edge of the dock, the horizon stretching
across the entire photograph, and even the tray on his head. He may not be in as firm a stance, but he is solidly rooted, attached to the ground, not floating away into the sea.

In either photograph, a man gazing out over the open, floating space of the sea is firmly planted to the concrete dock through the lines of the photograph, creating a sense of stability and groundedness, an attachment to something larger—and something closer to our own space than the wide open sea beyond. This connection creates a strong sense of groundedness for the viewer as well through that bodily link. The connectedness of the bodies impacts the feeling the viewer gets: in figure 14, the man’s body aids in his sense of groundedness; in figure 4, the man’s body itself may not add to the sense of his groundedness, but the fact that this less-grounded body is grounded anyway helps show the viewer the stability of even a body like this. The stability and calmness the viewer gets through both overall compositional elements and the use of the bodies adds to the feeling of the divine the viewer gets from the photographs.

Two slightly different examples of grounding, which profoundly involves the body, that Smith practices in his photographs appear in figures 3 and 2. Here, the senses of centeredness and of groundedness are closely connected as before. In figure 3, we see that the center point of the painting falls at the center of mass of the human body. It is the spot just before her upper body begins to tilt forward, away from the stability of balance. But her center of mass is still set over her feet; it is the center of her weight, still balanced over the solid horizontal surface below her; it is the part of her that holds her steady, secure and stable. Remarkably, it falls precisely at the center, the focal point, of the photograph. This is repeated in figure 2, with the man in the very precarious position at the edge of a ledge overlooking the city far down below. But, again, his center of mass, what keeps him from falling off, coincides with the center of the photograph. In these two photographs, the center of mass, the part of a person that keeps them grounded and
upright, coincides with the center of the photograph. This is significant: the notion of “center” is, again, connected to notions of focus, control, harmony, and essence. Here it is combined with the concept of “grounded,” connected to ideas of steadiness, stability, balance, attachment, and rootedness. And in these instances both are created by Smith’s use of bodies. The two combine to cultivate calm, stable peace, wholeness, oneness, unity—all things associated with the spiritual and sacred.

Stillness

One last distinctive element of Smith’s photographs that help cultivate the sense of the divine in them is a feeling of stillness in many of them. Strong connections between stillness and the sacred exist in the Bible. Psalms 46:10, for example, declares simply but clearly, “Be still, and know that I am God.” And in the book of Mark, Jesus miraculously calms the sea during a large storm: “And [Jesus] arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (Mark 4:39). In these scriptures, God and Jesus Christ align themselves with stillness. And stillness is connected to peace and calm. In many instances, stillness can feel like eternity, like contemplation, or like reverence. All of this nurtures an atmosphere of the sacred and divine, or the spiritual, in Smith’s photography.

One thing stillness in Smith’s photography can do is capture a moment, and a moment frozen in time becomes eternal. Greenfield says, “In … photographs, time is stopped, a split second becomes an eternity, and an ephemeral moment is solid as sculpture” (39). Barbara Novak’s words speaking of “past time stretched back toward infinity” seem applicable as well (142). The stillness of a moment, when captured in a photograph, becomes eternal, with time stretching backwards and forwards into infinity. The theological implications of words like “eternal,” and “infinity” are clear. This sense of a frozen moment can cultivate a sense of the
divine in Smith’s photography. Look, for example, at figures 1 and 2. In figure 1, though the man is flying over a hay bale, the picture is not blurred; this photograph conveys stillness more than it does motion, despite the fact that the man really should be in motion in this moment. This sort of suspended stillness is calming, in a way: here he is, and here he shall always be, frozen in this moment for all to see. He is outdoors, and in the air, soaring gracefully through all eternity. In figure 2 we also see a moment that we know should be in motion that is instead still. Here, too, we see no blurring that would indicate motion. The sense that time has stopped for this man makes what could be a rather frightening moment into one we can reflect on and look at endlessly, emphasizing the sense that what could be a quickly passing moment is not any longer. Because the moment never passes, nothing ever happens, ever changes. Immutability also suggests things eternal, things that last till infinity. A frozen moment, then, captured in one of Rodney Smith’s photographs through using still, frozen bodies, in many ways points to an eternal, ever-lasting moment; and thoughts of eternity and infinity are often intimately connected with thoughts of the divine.

Stillness can also convey contemplation, and in the context of the divine contemplation can often be a quiet, special, sacred moment. For example, in figure 4 we see again the man standing on the dock with a tray balanced on his head. He seems to be standing very still, staring out into the distance, looking over the vast open space of the sea. The feeling of him gazing out like that into the endless space between him and the horizon suggests calm, quiet thought. He is contemplating the wide, beautiful view ahead of him. Likewise, in figure 10 we see someone quietly gazing off into the distance. This woman seems to be sitting very still, not speaking with the man in the boat with her, silent. Her expression makes her look lost in thought. There seems again to be a moment of quiet contemplation, a woman thinking of things beyond her and where
she is right now. Both of these moments of quiet contemplation feature people thinking beyond themselves and where they are at that moment. Note that the way we have determined them as such is by examining their bodies–their postures and expressions. In the case of quiet, thoughtful moments, though these people are posed, viewers’ bodies may connect on a more familiar (though still not totally familiar) level because their bodies too have experienced these types of moments. They are the sorts of contemplative moments that can sometimes be almost spiritual in nature. These moments repeated in many of Smith’s photographs help to cultivate a sense of the divine.

Stillness in Smith’s photography may also convey reverence. It can create an atmosphere not unlike the calm and worshipful one inside a church, from the sense of reverent stillness inside a huge empty cathedral, down to that in any small church in a small town. As Linda Clemow tells us, this atmosphere inside a church “is one place where each person can experience meaning, mystery, wholeness” (15). And because stillness tends to be something we associate with the atmosphere inside a church, stillness in Smith’s photographs can convey that same sort of spiritual atmosphere. Figure 3, for example, evokes this kind of feeling. This woman is quite still in her boat. The vertical lines created from natural materials can remind viewers of those in a church that draw our eyes upward, towards the heavens. The setting in nature, too, connects us to ideas of creation and God. The stillness of her body, nature, and beauty here create a certain reverence that cultivates the divine within the photograph.

Collision of the Uncanny and the Divine

These repeated traits of symmetry and balance; centeredness and groundedness; and stillness, created by both overall compositional elements and the placement and use of bodies, work together to evoke feelings of the divine and the sacred in the viewer. Rodney Smith can use
them to help him get at the “existential questions about who we are and how we relate to the cosmos” that he wants to ask (Frascella 98). As Gordin puts it, “by translating [these] personal concepts into the language of photography,” Rodney Smith’s photographs are able to “[reflect] the possible answers to major questions of being” for his audience (77). And the combination of his uncanny use of bodies and the more divine settings he gives them in his photographs allows him, and perhaps more importantly his viewers, to do that—it allows him (and them) to ask these questions and reflect on answers to them.

To explain this further, in Rodney Smith’s photography, features of the uncanny collide with the sacred in a particularly moving, truth-finding way. The sense of the divine is not created just by the sacred settings in which Smith places his uncanny bodies; the uncannyness itself helps Smith’s photography accomplish the kind of cosmic question-asking and answer-reflecting he hopes to achieve. This is because of the way the uncanny works internally on a person. We know that the uncanny is the sense of unfamiliarity within the familiar or vice versa. Timothy Beal explains how this affects us internally in terms of Freud’s original German terminology: the word unheimlich refers to the concept of “uncanny” or “unhomely,” while heimlich is its opposite:

heimlich refers to that which belongs within the four walls of the house, inspiring feelings of restfulness and security … For Freud, ‘home’ refers primarily to individual human consciousness. … That is, this heimlich feeling of security and ‘at-homeness’ may refer to one’s confidence in the meaning, integrity and well-being of oneself as a subject (the body or self as ‘house’). (4-5)

What is at stake, then, is our feeling security, of ‘at-homeness,’ within our bodies. And it is this sense of self-as-body that is threatened by the uncanny. The uncanny characteristics of his
photographs, again, disturb our sense of familiarity with our bodies on that fundamental level, and this, in turn, then, “invades one’s sense of personal, social or cosmic order and security—the feeling of being at home in oneself,” to use Beal’s words (5). So, this destabilization of our sense of bodily normalcy in turn destabilizes our sense of “cosmic order and security.” Because of this destabilization, we need to be stabilized—we need answers, as Sally Despenser pointed out above (cf. page 23 of this document): we have “the urge to give identity and narrative to these unknown subjects” when we look at a photograph, a “longing for a story to explain” (90). So the uncanny, destabilizing us, increases the natural instinct to look for meaning, for a narrative. This destabilization occurs within our bodies and destabilizes us on the level of “cosmic order and security”—the precisely transcendent (sacred, even) topics Smith is interested in. Thus the uncanny, created on the level of our bodies, makes us more predisposed to start looking at the kinds of theological questions Smith wants to answer in order to find our narrative, our story to explain to ourselves what we are feeling.

It is because the uncanny makes us start looking that it can help cause feelings of the divine within the viewer. If we aren’t looking we won’t see anything; if we aren’t asking Smith’s questions about “who we are and how we relate to the cosmos” we won’t see any answers. As Bennett and Royle explain, “the power of art to disturb, defamiliarize or shake our beliefs and assumptions [is] intimately bound up with the uncanny” (36). This is because the uncanny jars our fundamental beliefs, displacing us from where we are, what we are familiar with. Once we are a little shaken up, there is room for the message of his photography: “To think about why there should be painting or poetry or music at all … is to think about the kinds of entrance which we allow them or which they exact into the narrows of our individual existence,” Steiner explains (147). Art is made because it can enter our individual existence, he is saying, but, he
points out, it is only the entrance we allow. And the uncanny, jarring us, can make room for us to allow entrance, can put us in a state of disorientation from which we need re-orienting. Mircea Eliade tells us that “the sacred reveals absolute reality and at the same time makes orientation possible” (qtd. in Beal 9). Without disorientation first, orientation doesn’t make much sense. And that’s what the uncanny in Smiths’ photography provides--disorientation on a very fundamental, perhaps even subconscious, level. We as viewers need a story, an orientation, some kind of answer on that same fundamental, perhaps subconscious level as a result.

Conclusion: Sacred Transportation through Embodiment

Smith counters this disorientation in his works; he represents the voice of the psalmist (or high priest, or shaman, or some other spiritual guide): “In psalms of orientation, the voice of the psalmist is firmly grounded and oriented, utterly confident in the order and sense of the world and thriving within that order” (Beal 28). His photographs accomplish this through the uncanny use of bodies placed in sacred settings and compositions. Roberston and McDaniel further explore methods of invoking the sacred in art in a way that can help us understand the importance of Smith’s use of the body in capturing and conveying truth. They say that “[s]ome artists treat natural materials as invoking the transcendent in and of themselves” because there is a “close connection between nature and the sacred” (332). Smith’s photographs are located almost exclusively in some sort of outdoor setting–whether natural or manmade–which already invokes this concept of natural materials. But the most natural of all materials he could possibly use–and does use–is the body, that most universally familiar and natural thing to all of us.

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4 Even his methodology as a photographer speaks to that goal: unlike other photographers, Smith uses only available, natural light, almost never artificial light (and in general he uses very little equipment, in keeping with this same spirit). Carol Stevens, in her interview with Rodney Smith, tells us how Smith explains this connection between natural light, clarity, and truth: “‘Light is a vehicle for providing clarity and insight,’ Smith says in his best seminar voice. ‘In the Bible,
Smith’s photography is able to use, to harness, this natural material of the body to help connect us as viewers to the transcendent, to the sacred. Robertson and McDaniel help us understand how the use of something that is not inherently religious (the body) can still help make the connection between art and the divine for both the artist and the viewer:

Even when their art contains no explicit religious references, numerous artists approach art making itself as a quasi-mystical experience or a kind of awareness practice. … [T]he creative process transports the creator into another realm. Likewise for some viewers, the process of appreciating the finished artwork can be a transporting experience. Artists and viewers may both look to art for contemplative, emotional, or revelatory experiences that are similar to those provided by religion. (332)

In other words, art can transport both artist and viewer from the mundane and daily to the divine and sacred. This act of transportation in Smith’s photography is highly contingent upon his use of bodies: because we, the viewers, all have bodies, our bodies resonate with the bodies we see in his photography. We are connected to the subjects of his works in a fundamental and profound way because of our embodiedness. Because his use of bodies incorporates those techniques of repetition, automatism, and silence in a way that opens up the viewer to emotionally contemplative experiences with a more transcendent truth, our own bodies, connected to his, become connected too with that transcendent truth. What the uncanny does, in its defamiliarizing of the familiar, is to jar the viewer from their sense of the familiar. It displaces them from where they normally are. Here, in Rodney Smith’s photographs, our bodies, unfamiliar with the bodily experiences of his subjects, are indeed dislodged from where they are—but here they are

light is a metaphor for truth”” (74). Smith strives to understand and convey truth in his photography, and his techniques are intended to accomplish this goal.
dislodged not just from the normal and familiar, but from the mundane and daily. Still, instead of just simple displacement, Rodney Smith’s connection with the divine, through the settings in which he puts his bodies, takes our now displaced bodies and transports them with his bodies to somewhere beyond the surface, somewhere sacred–somewhere we can, as viewers, get answers and construct a narrative surrounding his works that makes sense to us (and to our disoriented bodies).

Rodney Smith’s unique ability to combine the uncanny and the sacred through the use of bodies gives viewers an exceptional aesthetic experience. The experience of the uncanny is meant to disturb us, unnerve us, and displace us from our normal state. But Smith’s photography uses those same techniques not to displace us, but to transport us and replace us in relation to our world in a way that provides clarity, insight, truth, and wholeness. He has a unique ability to access the sacred in his work, and thereby he gives us a chance to reevaluate our relation to our world, our existence as embodied beings in a life so deeply rooted within that fundamental embodiedness that it can sometimes be too easy to lose track of those deeper connections beneath the surface. Through his use of techniques typical of the uncanny combined with techniques that create the sense of the divine in his compositions–largely derived from the way bodies are placed, posed, and used in the photographs–he shifts the effects of the uncanny from simple displacement of the self to meaningful replacement of the self within the greater context of our unique and, in his eyes, beautiful world we live in.
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Fig. 1. Untitled, silver gelatin photograph from Rodney Smith (1999); rpt. in The Book of Books (New York: Seven Editions, 2005; print; 49).
Fig. 2. *Untitled*, silver gelatin photograph from Rodney Smith (1999); rpt. in *The Book of Books* (73).
Fig. 3. *Untitled*, silver gelatin photograph from Rodney Smith (1996); rpt. in *The Book of Books* (148).
Fig. 4. *Untitled*, silver gelatin photograph from Rodney Smith (1989); republished at *Rodney Smith* (Rodney Smith Studio, 2011; web; 3 Apr. 2016; <www.rodneysmith.com>).
Fig. 5. *Untitled*, silver gelatin photograph from Rodney Smith (2000); rpt. in *The Book of Books* (113).
Fig. 6. *Untitled*, silver gelatin photograph from Rodney Smith (1999); rpt. in *The Book of Books* (121).
Fig. 7. *Untitled*, silver gelatin photograph from Rodney Smith (2011); republished at *Rodney Smith*. 
Fig. 8. *Untitled*, silver gelatin photograph from Rodney Smith; republished at *Rodney Smith*. 
Fig. 9. *Untitled*, silver gelatin photograph from Rodney Smith; rpt. in *The Book of Books* (116).
Fig. 10. *Untitled*, silver gelatin photograph from Rodney Smith (ca. 2009); republished at *Rodney Smith*. 
Fig. 11. *Untitled*, silver gelatin photograph from Rodney Smith (1995); rpt. in *The Book of Books* (76).
Fig. 12. *Untitled*, silver gelatin photograph from Rodney Smith (1997); rpt. in *The Book of Books* (74).
Fig. 13. *Untitled*, silver gelatin photograph from Rodney Smith; rpt. in *The Book of Books* (84).
Fig. 14. *Untitled*, silver gelatin photograph from Rodney Smith; rpt. in *The Book of Books* (79).