

## W. EUGENE SMITH AND THE JAZZ LOFT

In 1957 W. Eugene Smith, desperate to complete his epic photographic “poem” to the city of Pittsburgh, moved into a seedy loft at 821 Sixth Avenue in New York City. He affixed some two thousand prints to the walls of his studio and down the stairwell, but “always there is the window,” he wrote to his friend Ansel Adams in 1958. “It forever seduces me away from my work in this cold water flat.”

Smith would never discover a satisfactory end to the Pittsburgh project, but he found a second life in the loft. On most nights, from about eleven P.M. until morning, 821 was host to jam sessions involving many of the midcentury’s finest jazz musicians, among them Thelonious Monk, Zoot Sims, and Bill Evans (not to mention visits by Norman Mailer, Salvador Dalí, and Diane Arbus). Of one fevered session that drummer Ronnie Free kept going for a week, Smith observed: “He was working on something, searching for something, and he kept playing until he found it.” The same might be said of Smith himself.

Smith made some forty thousand pictures during his eight years in the building—of the musicians and of the street outside his fourth-floor window. He also filled 1,740 reel-to-reel tapes with the sounds of some three hundred musicians and a random environmental sampling of radio shows, conversations, telephone calls, and street noise. (WNYC produced a fascinating ten-part series on these tapes.) Sam Stephenson sifted through twenty-two tons of Smith’s archives to assemble *The Jazz Loft Project: Photographs and Tapes of W. Eugene Smith from 821 Sixth Avenue, 1957–1965* (Abrams, 2009), which features a hefty selection of black-and-white photographs, transcribed excerpts of audio recordings, and recollections of other loft-habités.

Smith had previously produced humanist photo-essays for *Life*, but in the loft, notes his friend Robert Frank, “Gene went from a public journalist to a private artist . . . I’m sure the intensity was still the same, but there weren’t the goals of changing the world with this body of work.” Smith was galvanized by the musicians’ passion—according to Stephenson, “he gained sustenance from [them] and identified with their need to test themselves in a noncommercial setting.” He seems to have been likewise inspired by their sound; the photographs frequently suggest a kind of rhythm: there are the moody, improvisatory shots of musicians at work, but also, for instance, the syncopated beat created by a series of four images that show a woman roaming a patch of street while

trying to hail a cab. Even a bird’s-eye view of footprints in the snow imitates a diagram of dance steps.

The photographs are also patently theatrical. “My window is a proscenium arch,” Smith declared. “The street is staged with all the humors of man.” A woman pauses to rifle through the contents of her purse; a lonely fire hydrant, out of reach of the glow from a flower shop’s windows, gazes into the damp dark of the street. Elsewhere, an older man peers across the sidewalk at a young blond reading a book. The scene is bisected by the blurred jungle of a fire escape caught in the foreground and, tellingly, by an oversize pair of spectacles hanging from an optician’s sign. Smith often closed in tightly on his subjects, filling the frame with Monk’s hands moving across the piano or a woman’s leg plunging out of an open car door. From his vantage above the street, Smith pivoted and tilted in his window like a gunner, pointing his lens at 180 degrees of the world. In one image, a police car, photographed diagonally, crowds the picture plane. The white rectangle of its hood and trunk are stark counterpoints to the dark triangles of pavement on either side. Another image appears reflected in the rear window—the tiny needle of the Empire State Building, just half a dozen blocks north.

It is ironic that these vital images came into being simply as a result of Smith’s distraction from another project—one that he once compared in scope to Beethoven’s late string quartets. And yet, as photographer Harold Feinstein notes, “Gene had a sense of history. There’s always a major project in the back of his mind.”

—Nicole Rudick

Nicole Rudick is a writer based in New York.



*Chaos Manor*, experimental image with cutouts, ca. 1960.

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