

from the RODNEY SMITH *archive*



Caroline Painting, Deerfield Massachusetts, 2002, 20" x 20", Archival Print

Not Just Smoke & Mirrors

Janet Froelich, creative director for *The New York Times Magazine*, introduces us to one of Rodney's most important collaborators — the fog machine.

I knew Rodney's work before I met him. I kept his work in my archive of things to look at for inspiration, before I called him to work on the 2001 *New York Times Magazine* Special Issue "A Year in Ideas."

There were a hundred topics and each one was a kind of invention, or of a thought process that had come to the fore in 2001. And these photos had a certain level of freedom to them, because they were intended to be playful and nod to the story, but not tell the story.

For instance, "Blind People Can Draw". There was new technology about how the brain processes information, and how people who were blind from birth understood some things about perspective, form and shape, and even light. It was remarkable given the fact that they'd never seen the real world. And Rodney did not choose to illustrate that in itself. He chose to come up with a concept that would make you startled when you looked at it.

The picture is beautifully lit, and the model has a kind of 18th century look, like an Inge portrait. Then you see she's painting the back of her own head. And that in itself just makes you want to know more. That's his little twist.

It was a magical subject and magical for Rodney because, as the cover title explains, this special issue was "An encyclopedia of innovations, conceptual leaps, harebrained schemes, cultural tremors and hindsight reckonings." Which kind of describes Rodney — harebrained schemes.

I mean, every shot was a harebrained scheme.

For this assignment, he wanted to shoot one of those 19th century environments

and alighted upon the Union Theological Seminary in Deerfield, Massachusetts. It was a beautiful old building, but it was decrepit and not something you wanted to see in sharp focus.

So Rodney decided to transform the space using the fog machine. The curator from the village didn't want him to. They were worried about fire. And he used it anyway.

The fog machine set off the smoke alarms and the fire department was called. Two big fire trucks came. They didn't have to put out any fire, and there was no problem, but they charged us per truck anyway.

And I think about this all the time in terms of Rodney, because that was what he did. He figured out a way around the rules.

He'd come with a kind of troupe, like an improv troupe of people who made costumes and props and sets.

And the fog machine was an ever-present player. It was part of how he controlled the light in an ordinary environment. Like an artist laying out his colors, it was a tool in his paint box.

A SMALL
PART *of a*
LONG
STORY

A collection of oral histories from the Rodney Smith archive