

ARTIST'S STUDIO ✦

pinhole artist

IT ONLY TAKES A FEW MOMENTS OF DISCUSSING photography with Robert Lewis Smith to be taken in by the levels of thought he puts into creating each expressive image. "I work based on a dialogue — mind, eye and heart," Smith says. "For me, it's essential to have an emotional response and a visual response."

Smith, a former professor at Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, is a master of pinhole photography, or photography without a lens. Pinhole cameras can be made out of most anything, from an oatmeal container to a cardboard film box. Light passes through a small hole made in the container, and an image is formed in the camera.

Smith owns two pinhole cameras that he purchased, but says he enjoys making them, too. "There are two manufacturers of these cameras — you can either buy from them or make your own," he says.



"You can also convert a regular camera."

Smith first began experimenting with the technique as a way of teaching photography to beginning students. He was pleased with the results and decided to apply the method to shoot landscapes. After completing "Brown Field," a series of photographs showing land healing after exposure to toxic waste, Smith became inspired by an ancient, desolate place — the Burren region in western Ireland. In 1998, while teaching at the Burren College of Art for four weeks, he found the time he needed to capture the haunting landscape.

"I photographed like mad," Smith says. "So much so that my wife began to think I was having an affair."

The black and white images offer a soft and intimate look at the layers of history. "I was captivated by the countryside and realized my approach needed to be elemental and primitive," he says. "As a result, many of the photos are made with the camera in contact with the earth, on the ground."

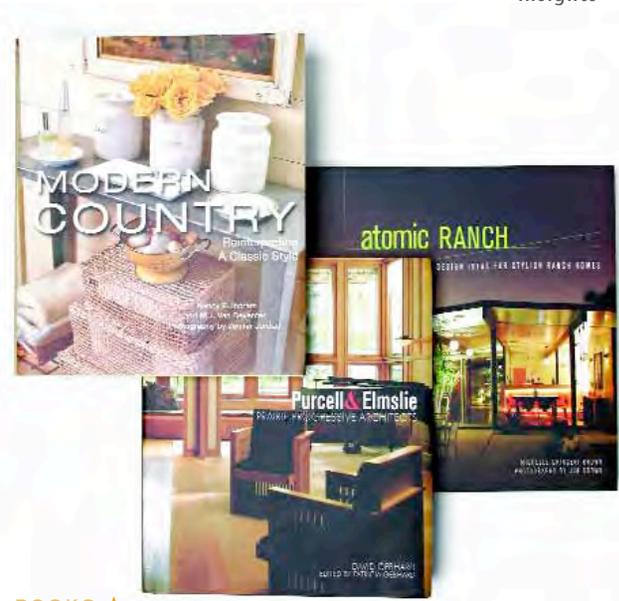
After Ireland, Smith took his art in a different, more personal direction. His collection "Mimi & Liam's World" focuses in on his children's toys.

"A couple of ideas were coming together: looking at childhood through remnants of play — like an archaeologist going through evidence — and looking at toys, wondering what kinds of messages we are sending our kids based on what we give them to play with," Smith says.

Smith's current focus is on shooting color images along the bike path from his Shorewood home, and on another pinhole landscape project in Mono Lake, Calif. He recently purchased a building in Riverwest that will house photography studios for both him and his wife, Sarah.

To learn more about Smith's photography, visit www.robertlewissmith.com.

— LORI NADOLSK



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— NICOLE PETERSEN