

ALL IN THE FAMILY

De-coding art can seem a daunting task. It is something that requires the processing of visual evidence together with the evanescent imagination of the artist, an aspect of creativity that is usually unavailable to the viewer. Like free radicals, the imagination works independently from the conscious thought process, producing unanticipated content. Taken together, the combination of these elements can result in a revelation that is greater than their sum.

Strands of biography can be detected in the otherwise non-reflexive subject of artworks, like an underpainting partially revealed by pentimenti. The subconscious transferal of artistic DNA by the creative imagination onto a formal organization of ideas and images can be disputed, or denied, but it is likely that every artwork harbors some element of biography-- a word with the Greek etymology of *bio(life)graph(drawing)*.

The Hopewell Culture Historical Park is the site of preserved burial mounds of the Hopewell people, an indigenous culture that flourished from 200BC to 500AD. On first glance, these images of the Hopewell mounds by the artist Seton Smith appear neutral, indexical. Evenly lit, the photographs are framed by a uniformity of composition which accentuates the characteristic shapes of the mounds, some of several surviving examples of their kind east of the Mississippi. Taken together in the actual landscape, the burial mounds form a series of monumental yet enigmatic waves that challenge modern understanding. Associated with the male principal in most civilizations, these project skyward to meet the inverted V-shaped female principal of the heavens. In ancient culture, the point of their meeting is where life and afterlife are conjoined, hence a point of two-way passage; the intersection of life and the eternal - that which surrounds the living.

Compositionally, the repetition of a single undulating shape is reminiscent of a gesture associated with Sol LeWitt or Bridgett Reilly. Smith has formatted some of these images into diptychs and triptychs, creating an umbilical connection of continuity that extends their linearity into infinity. In her past works, the artist has re-visited any manner of subjects by deploying the formal device of the diptych and the triptych. Image reversal and repetition are prominent in her body

of work. Finding the identical in the fraternal has always been a device of this artist; herself a fraternal twin.. It is impossible to know the degree to which this informs the creative imagination, nor whether at the end it is consequential to the accomplishment of the work, but to deny it would be a kind of artistic fratricide.

How the artist has mediated this particular subject of the Hopewell mounds that makes it indisputably a work of her own signature, lies in a biography that is embedded in her practice, like her DNA.

Few are born into families of excessive native talent as this artists' family. Her father was an architect, a designer and artist. Her mother, Jane Lawrence, was a lyric soprano and an actress closely associated with Tennessee Williams. Her sister is an artist.

Seton Smith stumbled upon Hopewell, unaware that it had been a subject of fascination for her father, Tony Smith. This coincidence is worth mentioning because as a subject Hopewell is a paradigm of our shared human condition. The prehistoric artist and the architect and the builders who created this series of monumental earthworks impressed their unambiguous achievements on a re-shaped landscape. The confidence of their message to the future is a clear one: "We are who you are."

All of humankind is drawn from shared data, endlessly recombined to determine a singular identity. The data we inherit has passed from generations of clay embedded in the muck of humanity and risen to a higher consciousness. Existence as memorialized in these monumental earthworks is a chain of inherited information; receptacles of the human body, a container of lives lost and the lives yet to become. This legacy cannot be more evident than in this series by Seton Smith, which speaks of visual genetics shared within a family of artists whose works, like the Hopewell Mounds, are the evidence of their connection to the forever.

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