

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

art and everything after

One question – Cauleen Smith

Steve Locke

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Still from *The Fullness of Time*, 2008, MiniDV, 58 minutes. Pictured: Troi Bechet (Gigi)

SL: I rewatched *The Fullness of Time* the other night and I didn't realize how much I needed to see it in light of contemporary events. Technologies have brought the state sponsored violence meted out to black people to a larger consciousness but seeing these images of black people killed over and over again has really started to wear at my psyche. It was a balm to see the heroine of *Fullness* because she is a model of how to survive trauma. Her response to the community and the music is the moment in the film that (still) brings me to tears. It's not because it is a sign of an easy resolution, but it's more like watching Orpheus leading Eurydice out of Hell. The camera is a witness to someone returning to the world of the living. For me, that moment is an indication of how art can touch the most wounded of places and, while it may not heal them, can allow us to find our way back to ourselves. It remains one of the few films about a trauma that doesn't present the spectacle of black suffering. Which brings me to my question:

In a culture that denies or debases subjects and narratives outside of the dominant society, how do you create and sustain a practice of filmmaking informed by the idea of culture as a site of possibility and resistance?

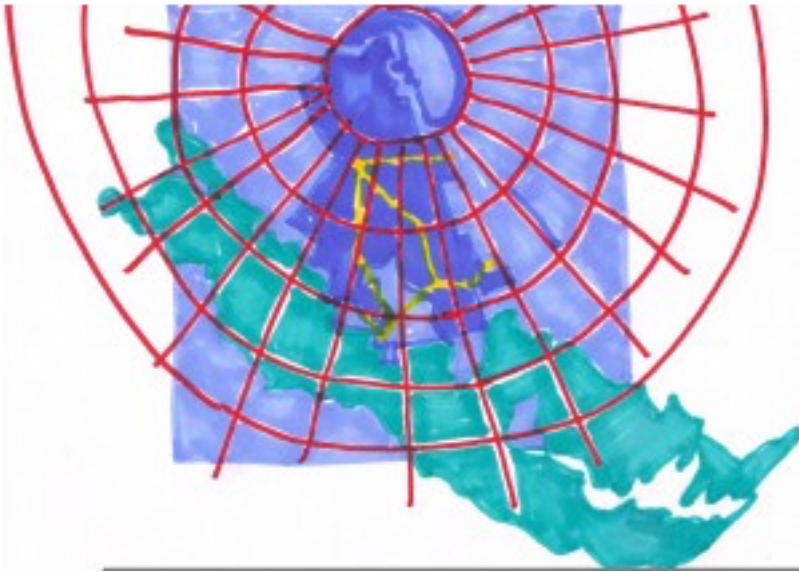
Cauleen Smith: I hope this is ok. This film is hard for me to talk about.

The images in our heads that populate our imaginations and inform the way we experience the world come from some-where. Therefore, to my way of thinking, making images is a way to combat and revise the debased narrative subjectivity that you describe. So what that means is that my work is made with the understanding that it is rooted outside of the narratives of dominant society. In the margins of cultural production sustainability is a luxurious concern. Survival is the thing at stake. Now, I'm not crying, "Poor me.

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I'm on the margins." I'm saying that the ground of the ideas in my films rest on the power and agency from that which is underneath and along the edges.



Cauleen Smith, Drawing for The Fullness of Time, ink on paper, 2007

I may have never told you about how I wrote the script for *The Fullness of Time*. Basically, I just listened. Eighty percent of the dialog you hear in that video is out of the mouths of friends and strangers. People just attempting to describe the experience of the cognitive estrangement one feels when you return to a place to find it there-but-not-there, familiar and yet totally alien. The disorientation is itself a wound. I felt that woundedness while I was there— in the people, in myself, in the land still recovering from “the waters.” Orpheus and Eurydice is such an apt metaphor, Steve. For one thing, it’s my favorite myth. And until now, I failed to recognize that I’d finally done my own adaptation! So thank you for that. Gigi finds herself at the bottom of the waters, sheltering herself in a hurricane-shattered swimming atrium. But she wanders and walks and constantly returns to the site of her loss until she is found, until she finds herself again.

Thomas Hirschhorn wisely eschews anecdotes relating to the production of his site-specific installations, but I offer this as an exhibit of the ways in which the margins are my main artery of material content and form. You know that scene in the church? We shot that completely off the cuff. I had not even met with my crew. I landed on a Saturday night, Paul (Chan) called me to share the news that a pastor that he’d been working with was planning to do a Sunday morning sermon on (Samuel) Beckett’s *Waiting For Godot*. So I called my crew, called Troi Bechet, the actor, and we all met for the first time in front of the church. My direction to Troi was something around the lines of, “Ok, this is the scene where you finally come home. You’ve been adrift, you’ve literally lost your mind, but now your mind is returning to you. Troi said, “Got it.”

My camerawomen claimed their respective corners of the church (competing for real estate with a French film crew!) and the Pastor began. You can see that he is an accomplished orator. He slowly and carefully escalates the passion and urgency of his compassionate message. And the message, remarkably intersects abiding faith with speculative predictions. The Pastor and his choir sing: “I change for you, you change for me, watch God change things...I see you in the future..and you look better...Be blessed!” I’m not a practicing Christian (in fact I’m always shocked, at upon entering a church, that I don’t burst into flames) but this moment, then and now, moves me has me in communion with the people in that church. The Pastor’s message projects us forward in time, past our contemporary suffering, into a future where we look better. I love that: You look better. Assigning dignity and love to the process of healing wounds is no small thing. This is what I learned from Pastor that day.

On a formal level, the music in the video is fused with three different spiritual/secular/social practices. The first sonic-psychic healing encounter is with the Uptown Mardi Gras Indians. They are terrestrial phantoms, grounded and real while accessing sounds and rhythms so old as to now only be known through our bodies. They gently rock her, console her, and then leave her with her grief, reshaped into something that she can now carry. Music does this for us all the time, right? This is the reason that my films are moving more closely towards imitating the procedures applied by improvisational musicians and away from those of filmmakers. In music are powerful structures and procedures that require no translation for the one who listens. I’m operating on faith and deed that the same can be true of images. Next, Gigi pulls herself together, and goes home; to church, where she is welcomed and comforted. The choir is full of joy, the Pastor embodies an earthbound kind of ecstasy. “Be Blessed!” Gigi raises her hand to the heavens and receives herself. Finally she can mourn and her final guides, The legendary Hot 8 Brass Band lead her from

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the world of the dead to the world of the living.

I'm trying to make images that communicate a generative power inside of the very thing we are trained to despise: blackness. Blackness as a western concept is so very remote and low that inhabiting it boomerangs us to the other side of white supremacy – the other side of death. So thanks Steve, for finding solace in watching a woman survive the worst things that can happen to a person even while we are forced, over and over again to watch black families do that very thing at the hands of state sanctioned violence. I still believe that if the images in our heads come from some-where, then why not have some of them come from a place that makes us lose our fear, find our love.

NOTE: Cauleen will be in conversation with Rebecca Zorach and Pemon Rami on 17 November at MCA in Chicago, 6-7 pm.

Cauleen Smith is an interdisciplinary artist whose work reflects upon the everyday possibilities of the imagination. Though operating in multiple materials and arenas, Smith roots her work firmly within the discourse of mid-twentieth century experimental film. Drawing from structuralism, third world cinema, and science fiction, Smith makes things that deploy the tactics of these disciplines while offering a phenomenological experience for spectators and participants. Smith's films, objects, and installations have been featured in group exhibitions. Smith is based in Chicago and serves as faculty for the Vermont College of Fine Art low-residency MFA program.