

The Seattle Times

With disco balls and gorgeously cinematic installations, this artist is creating deeply subversive work at the Frye

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June 7, 2019

At first glance, there's something soft and dreamy, almost sweetly and subtly psychedelic about Cauleen Smith's film-heavy work: lenses that linger over vibrant daisies at a Shaker settlement, sometimes overlaid in a pleasantly disorienting double exposure, or handheld shots of the Watts Towers (once a DIY art project, now a California state park), the sun lending light flares like a groovy, early-'70s album cover.

In another room, reflections from 19 illuminated disco balls, two mounted on a revolving turntable, glimmer and flash across the dark ceiling like a sped-up cosmo-scape. That installation, "Space Station: Two Rebeccas," rests on a generous stretch of soft, green shag carpeting. You're invited to recline and stargaze to an ecstatic, otherworldly composition by Alice Coltrane.

But don't be lulled into a sense of hypnotic apathy. Linger long enough and you'll find "Give It or Leave It," Smith's multiroom installation at the Frye Art Museum, on view through Sept. 1, is doing complex, thorny and deeply subversive work.

"There's always a lot of cynicism in talking about utopias," Smith said on the show's opening weekend earlier this month, having flown in from her home base in California. "They're easy to criticize, easy to dismiss. But cynicism does not produce alternate ways of thinking. I wanted to study utopian experiments that succeeded for a time on a shared principle of generosity. If the future is based on coercion, 'take it or leave it,' I wanted to look at 'give it or leave it,' a collective form of resistance against the idea of defining ourselves by accumulation – what we gather and keep."

One of the first things the viewer sees in "Give It or Leave It" is a bold, colorful banner, floating crisply near the ceiling, as if frozen in midair during a street procession. It proclaims: "I appreciate you in advance."

That might sound hippie-dippy but, Smith said, she heard the phrase from older black women in Chicago, used to preface some request for a younger person to do something, or shape up. "It's like, 'I'm not going to thank you later, because I already know you're going to do what I say,'" Smith explained, smiling. "So I appreciate you in advance."

Behind it, a film travelogue plays a kind of moving-postcard show of Smith's sojourns to three of the four places that informed "Give It or Leave It," all experiments in building something, then opening it, like a gift, to all comers: a New York state Shaker settlement important to Eldress Rebecca Cox Jackson, who led a 19th-century black Shaker community in Philadelphia; the California ashram of swamini and jazz musician Turiyasangitananda (aka Alice Coltrane, widow of John); and the gloriously weird Watts Towers, built by Italian immigrant Simon Rodia between 1921 and 1954.

In another room, a poignant, 23-minute film showcases elegantly dressed, young black women who assemble at Smith's fourth big influence for "Give It or Leave It": the Outdoor Desert Art Museum of Assemblage Sculpture, Noah Purifoy's arid, 10-acre spread of sculpture mostly

made from found materials (scrap wood, toilets, baking sheets, dilapidated skis, old beer kegs, you name it) and cobbled into improbable shapes, as if Antoni Gaudí and a trash-picker got together to design some ghost town for a spaghetti Western.

Smith's four inspirations (Shakers, ashram, Watts Towers, Purifoy) are like four points in a circuit, sharing unexpected currents. Before his work in Joshua Tree, Purifoy used detritus from the Watts riot/rebellion of 1965 to make assemblages, and cofounded the Watts Towers Art Center in 1970. While studying Shaker "gift drawings," made by 19th-century girls inspired by divine visions, Smith found images of mysterious self-playing instruments, often featuring birds and potted plants – which echo the "celestial instruments" Coltrane detailed in her writing about astral travels, which "can be played without the use of hands or without any physical contact whatsoever."

Smith is a filmmaker by training – her early, transfixing 1998 film "Drylongso" (shot in cozy, warm 16mm) orbits around a pensive and headstrong young college student who is supposed to be taking 35mm photographs for an art class, but instead makes Polaroids of young black men in her Oakland neighborhood because, as she explains flatly, they're "America's most endangered species."

"Give It or Leave It" shows the influence in its quietly, gorgeously cinematic installations.

One room features a large, round table with seemingly mundane objects set in front of screens playing video feeds (an erupting volcano, crows flying against the wind, a view from a train rolling along lush landscapes). The objects, like everything else in the show, are visually light but symbolically heavy: houseplants, shells, plastic dolls of girls and dark wood African sculptures of female forms, but some wearing C-clamps like shackles on their feet, or encased in white plaster near oversized bars of Ivory soap. "I've used Ivory soap in projects before," Smith said. "It's just fascinating to me as this metaphorical object of 'pure whiteness' – but it's made with animal fat, pork fat, so it's very unstable and changes."

And what's with all the houseplants?

"They're in the Shaker 'gift drawings' of musical instruments," Smith said. "But the other thing is when you put a living thing in a sterile environment like an art museum, it asks another level of care and attention." The plants require watering and some time near windows when the museum is closed and go home with museum employees once a show closes.

Houseplants are also a rich symbol of colonialism. "They're almost all from South America, and that 17th-century craze for houseplants was part of the colonial acquisition craze," Smith said. "They're creatures totally out of context, taken and forced to thrive in adverse conditions – which you could say about some human populations, too."

More than anything, Smith seems interested in life – both the utopian and its negative image, the suffering and struggles that make people dream and design something different, something better.

What's her next line of inquiry?

"Black people and communism," she said. "I've only recently learned about a lot of black people being card-carrying members of the Communist Party – a history that's been suppressed in favor of the Judeo-Christian, capitalist, aspirational model for black people. But I'm interested in these more radical ideas."

No kidding. And if "Give It or Leave It" is any indication, the results will be unsettlingly lovely.