

the Stranger

A Show at the Frye Art Museum That Resonates in an Unintentional Way

Jasmyne Keimig

June 19, 2019

On my way out of Cauleen Smith's *Give It or Leave It* at the Frye Art Museum, a tweet I'd seen recently sprang to mind. Reflecting on something her friend had said, New York journalist and critic Jillian Steinhauer tweeted out to the world, "Just retract all my mixed reviews and replace them with 'almost kind of a commentary on something.'"

Give It or Leave It is almost, kind of a commentary on something. That doesn't mean that it's bad or unenjoyable. I enjoyed myself while ambling around the show—the colored gels over the windows, the projected tableaus, the disco balls. But there's a murkiness, a jumbledness, an obscure frame of reference that feels untethered and makes the ultimate message of the exhibition unsettled. It's an "almost, kind of" deeply touching meditation on black generosity and spirituality.

Smith's show is a vibrantly hued but messy altar. Riffing off the phrase "take it or leave it," she weaves together films, banners, multimedia pieces, and site-specific light installations from four distinct sources of inspiration: Alice Coltrane's California ashram, Bill Ray's 1966 photo at Simon Rodia's Watts Towers, Noah Purifoy's desert assemblages, and Rebecca Cox Jackson's Shaker community in Pennsylvania.

A piece called *Space Station: Two Rebeccas* gets its name from Jackson, a 19th-century black spiritualist, free woman, and founder of the first black Shaker community in the United States. *Space Station: Two Rebeccas* is a clustered planetary system of at least a dozen disco balls stationed on a plush carpet. Two of these balls furiously orbit one another.

The second Rebecca is Jackson's protégé, Rebecca Perot, who took over leading the Shaker community after Jackson's death. Smith hand-painted two abstract films dedicated to each Rebecca, which she then projects separately onto those spinning balls. It's a history and representation that refracts a thousand times over onto the custom made, lacquer-like wallpaper that covers large swaths of the gallery spaces. It's mesmerizing.

But everything is so spread out—two of the three galleries contain a short film and one other smaller piece. It is pretty, vibey, somewhat sparse, and shooting off in a thousand different directions. What makes the show a compelling visit is the way Smith's message lands within the context of the current labor struggles at the Frye.

The day *Give It or Leave It* officially opened, the newly formed Art Workers Union—composed of the museum's security staff—announced their desire to be voluntarily recognized by Frye CEO Joseph Rosa and the board of directors. The workers cited insufficient wages, lack of benefits, and not enough hours as the motivating factors that pushed them toward unionization.

This request was snubbed by museum leadership, who opted instead to hold an election overseen by the National Labor Relations Board to decide whether the majority of employees want to form a union. It appears to be a stalling tactic to slow the roll of whatever progress a union could make, while also trying to scare up opposition to said union.

When news of this came out, I immediately thought of a banner hanging inside *Give It or Leave It* that features Paul Thek's now famous phrase: "Afflict the comfortable, comfort the afflicted." Hey, do you think Frye management has seen it?