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The complicated exodus of art world star Cauleen Smith
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Artist and educator Cauleen Smith works on a project at the South Side Community Art Center last month. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

Cauleen Smith is moving. She's leaving Chicago in November for Los Angeles, to teach at the California Institute of the Arts. She wanted to stay and teach here but didn't get the university jobs she applied for. She hasn't been in Chicago that long – just seven years. Still, in that time, she's launched parades and wrapped the Hyde Park Art Center in handmade wallpaper; less than two years after arriving, she landed a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art that found room for jazz iconoclast Sun Ra, astrophysics, extraterrestrials and Stevie Wonder. She came here as a Sundance-certified filmmaker and will leave as a filmmaker who also makes sculptures, draws, paints, sews, presses vinyl records, creates puppets and leads marching bands through Chinatown. Her interests have stayed constant – science fiction, African-American history, technology, improvisational music, memory –but Smith is leaving as Exhibit A of the contemporary American artist who refuses to settle on a single defining art form.

Or obvious direction.

She became the interdisciplinary artist's interdisciplinary artist.

"Since moving here, Cauleen has been a definite upward trajectory kind of person," said Julie Rodrigues Widholm, director of the DePaul Art Museum and former MCA curator. "She's got prestigious grants and acclaim. She's exploded, but in a way that's uncommonly limitless, refreshingly hard to pin down – her ideas never feel appropriately contained by one medium." (Indeed, dean of CalArt's School of Art told ARTNews recently that Smith's "ever-widening repertoire" was a major reason they grabbed her.)

This year alone, Smith has had work in the Whitney Biennial, the Brooklyn Academy of Music and, through Oct. 29, a show at the Art Institute of Chicago; in the fall, for Expo Chicago, she'll have an installation at the DuSable Museum of African American History.

Chicago, you hardly knew her.

Don't feel bad: Smith said that before moving here she had no idea so many great artists – Kerry James Marshall, Dawoud Bey, Claire Pentecost, etc. – lived in Chicago. Still, she leaves weary of the infamous Second City self-esteem, "a little appalled at the way Chicago doesn't celebrate its greats until another city decides to." (New City, noting her marching bands, once named her "best Chicago artist who is not a Chicago artist.")

"I don't want to make gross generalizations," said artist Theaster Gates, a friend of Smith's, "but I wish Chicago had more space for professional artists to spread out and not feel apologetic about ambition. You get a show here and there, make one or two moves, then your work has to live outside of this city. I had to create my own platform (the "Rebuild" project on the South Side) or I'd be bored out of my mind. When we met, Cauleen and I talked about this, and what it means to have an art practice different than the practices around you. In my mind, she has a clear sense of what she was doing, even if not everybody in the Midwest recognized it. Now she's at the top of her game."

At the moment, on a sunny July morning, she's waiting for the doors to open at the Art Institute, to enter the long thin gallery in the main building that holds her show. It's called "Human_3.0 Reading List," and to hear Smith explain, the work is as simple as it looks:

"Oh, basically it's a bunch of good books you should read, in my humble opinion."

The gallery is lined on all sides by 8 1/2-by-11-inch drawings of sci-fi novels and autobiographies and graphic novels and essay collections and poetry books, by Yoko Ono and Malcolm X and Claudia Rankine and Octavia Butler and many others. There are 57 in total (all bought and gifted to the AIC by Chicago art collector Helen Zell). Several show the tips of fingers cradling frayed pages, some flipping worn paperbacks.

Of course, it's more than a series of images of books.

Another of Smith's themes is the prosaic, and the way our imaginations process the everyday. "I'm implying our temporal relationship to books," she says, walking the show. "I'm pointing to the fact you interact with a book over time and you become close with a book – and a photograph of those same things doesn't hold weight anymore. In some ways, I wanted to people to see these and to wonder why someone is drawing a book!"

She looks at the steady flow of visitors puzzling, chatting, pointing.

"This city has been good to me," she says, unscrewing her water bottle. "Things ebb and flow, artists more fabulous than me go through ups and downs, so I know I have to fizzle. Maybe I came to visual art from filmmaking too late? Maybe I spent too much time in the film industry finding my way to visual art and looking for the career that I'm –"

"Sorry, ma'am," a gallery guard interrupts. "Can't have an open water bottle."

"Oh, I was told I could carry it ..."

"But you can't open it. Can you keep it in a bag?"

"They checked my bag."

"Please keep it closed," he says. She waits until he rounds the corner, then unscrews the bottle. She never sought official permits for her marching bands. A water bottle is nothing. "Here's what I think of that," she says, takes a gulp and lets out a loud cartoon "AHHHHHH!"

Smith's studio is a fourth-floor walk-up, a block from the south branch of the Chicago River. It's an old factory alongside the highway, the pillars of which make a kind of concrete forest outside the windows. Her studio is stark and warm and cluttered, a spatter of disparate materials that speak to her ranginess. Bubble wrap and sewing machines and stacks of paperbacks and coffee tins stuffed with paintbrushes. There are props for films – pyramids, a time machine made from wood, a bird feather, a bicycle wheel and a disco ball. There's a puppet, in mid-assembly, that looks like Smith, bemused, with eyeglasses, and an open happy face. It's part of an upcoming group show in Toronto.

Smith, her white dress shirt splattered with paint, turned her puppet head in her hands. "Each of the artists (in the exhibit) chose a terrestrial metaphor," she said. "For me it was a volcano. (The puppet) will live on a volcano and wear a lava dress. Who owns North America? Native Americans. There's nowhere to go where you're not a part of a colonial project. A volcano is the only uncontested land. The volcano offers a solution. Stake out your volcano now before everyone else does. That's what my puppet does."

She laughed.

Smith, who turns 50 next month, grew up in Sacramento, the daughter of social workers. Her career, so far, has been somewhat divided into two acts. For the first part, she studied film, most notably at the University of California at Los Angeles. In 1998, the year she graduated, her first feature, "Drylongso," played at the Sundance Film Festival. It told the story of a young woman who takes Polaroids of black men, eager to document what she feared was an endangered species. It was well-received, and as Smith went on to make many other meditative, more experimental films, she felt gradually alienated from indies and unable to see herself in the broader studio system.

That feeling accelerated in Chicago.

She came here for a residency with Threewalls gallery, to work on a series of films and pieces inspired by jazz great Sun Ra, the man born Herman Blount who lived for a while in Chicago, honing an ethereal avant-garde reputation that, in contrast to grittier jazz traditionalists, imagined the future of Black America was out among the stars. He pioneered the subgenre of magic realism called Afro-Futurism – a genre often, wrongly, too narrowly, attached to Smith herself. Her Sun Ra pieces, drawing on speculative fiction and history, were expansive and like

many of her works, drew deeply researched, unexpected connections. The project culminated in shows at Threewalls and the MCA, that included projections, more than a dozen videos, sculptural installations, dozens of drawings and an audio assemblage of rare bits from Sun Ra. But the loudest, and most memorable, part of the project was the marching band that Smith put together.

She wanted a marching band to descend, without formal permission, on sites around Chicago and play Sun Ra – like a flash mob. In a nod to Sun Ra's fabled Arkestra, she named her band the Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band. Its members, however, were drawn mostly from the Rich South High School marching band in Richton Park. She had searched for a marching band on YouTube, contacted Rich's skeptical band director, then, after attending pre-dawn practices, won them over. "(The director) later told me the parents thought at first I was weird and that he should keep me away from the kids," she said. From 2010 to 2012, they stormed Chinatown, CTA stations, Fulton Market.

"I saw it all as a form of protest and celebration simultaneously," Smith said. "But of course, in art, many things you intend are not visible. Sometimes you just have to trust yourself to do things, and I was fascinated with the history of marching bands, why Chicago's were outstanding, how kids in these bands often get scholarships to historically black colleges in the South, creating a relationship between the South and Chicago. Then there's the history of marching bands, which came from West Africa ..."

Though Smith still calls herself a filmmaker, she has been steadily shaping her own image of how an artist creates. And it can be hard to follow. Krista Franklin, a Chicago-based poet and visual artist (and occasional collaborator with Smith), said: "I couldn't begin to tell you her plan but I know people want to put you in a box, then you live your creative life there. Most artists do different things, but Cauleen, she will live fully in that promise." Smith's works drawing on other artists, for instance – she's currently researching a project that connects the Shaker movement and pianist Alice Coltrane – are both acts of fandom and excavations, mining minutiae of artists' lives, absorbing detail and responding. "I don't think I'd understand (Sun Ra) by just listening to him," Smith said. "But what he recorded off the radio? Like Dionne Warwick? That's what feeds me."

The longer she lived in Chicago, the more she felt the art world was more receptive to ideas than the film community. Better yet, she found herself, she said, already in "happy alignment": She wasn't claiming to be a social practice artist – meaning roughly, an artist who explores the navigations between life and art – but the negotiations of a filmmaker for things like locations and access seemed similar. "And a lot of times I would be making a prop," she said, "then realize the prop was a sculpture onto itself."

Smith's main Whitney Biennial contribution (she also had films in the program) were large banners that hung from the ceiling of the main gallery as visitors entered the show. Originally they were intended for a film (which she later shot). She made them of polyester, pleather, satin and other materials, sewing in images of No. 2 pencils stuck through eyeballs and birds, along with phrases such as "We Were Never Meant to Survive" and "Rage Blooms Within Me." One banner was simply a list of comedians – Chris Rock, Wanda Sykes, etc. – whom Smith calls a "resistance and balm to our current era."

"The Biennial this time was very much about artists engaged with the world," said Christopher Lew, associate curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, which bought several of her banners, "so her work fit well. She has this humanistic quality that works with appropriation – but sincerely. She's not about playing clever games with the art system or art world. So you get work that's socially minded without being overtly works of activism. You know her drawings of books? She's inserted some of those images into real books in bookstores. I find that powerful and mysterious, all at once."

Back at the Art Institute, strolling through her show, Smith points to the face she says she can't draw right, and to the colors that don't look good. She spends a lot of time explaining who she is not and what she is not doing, but perhaps that's the pitfall of an iconoclast. "These are not works of art," she says. "Museum people like fancy paper. This is graph paper from Staples. But I think I'm clear that art that doesn't change the world is valuable. I don't think art has to prove some provable point to be worthy."

She walks, thinking.

"But I wouldn't say it's art for art's sake," she adds. "It's art for people's sake."

But it is somewhat activism? The books themselves look like a social justice reading list.

"I sometimes get tagged as activist because I pay attention to the world, but I'm not an activist. You need a certitude for that which I don't have anymore. That's for the young. Their agenda is social change and that requires power, but art is about destabilizing power. I'm all for change, but my work, it doesn't serve it. I want to undermine power."

She's getting worked up.

"Say the revolutionaries win. What happens? They become dictators and put the artists in prison, and art doesn't stop just because their side won –"

A woman interrupts.

She steps in front of Smith and waves her hand around the gallery then presses her hand to her heart and mouths the words: "You are wonderful."