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A Moving Image Artist Finds Freedom After Abandoning the Film Industry

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Cauleen Smith, "Lessons in Semaphore" (2015, still) (image courtesy the artist)

Despite working in a variety of disciplines, Cauleen Smith still thinks of herself as a filmmaker. Her elaborately crafted banners titled "In the Wake," which are currently on view in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, were initially made for a procession that was to be part of a film. But they are just as powerful outside of their original context. "Sometimes I'll be conceiving a film and it requires objects or props, and in the process of building all of those things I realize that film might not be the best vehicle for the ideas," she says. "Sometimes the objects are already doing the work."



Cauleen Smith, "In the Wake" (2017), satin, poly-satin, quilted pleather, upholstery, wool felt, wool velvet, indigo-dyed silk-rayon velvet, indigo-dyed silk satin, embroidery floss, metallic thread, acrylic fabric paint, acrylic hair beads, acrylic barrettes, satin cord, polyester fringe, poly-silk tassels, plastic-coated paper, and sequins (photo by Benjamin Sutton for Hyperallergic)

Smith calls this process "ramping up production," an application of the training she received as a filmmaker. Born in Riverside, California in 1967, Smith studied film, first at San Francisco State University, and then at UCLA in the shadow of the LA Rebellion, a loose group of artists of African origin or descent – Julie Dash, Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, to name a few – who used the school's film program to make work that was outside the norms of an industry that ignored their stories. The group's legacy would have a profound impact on multiple generations of filmmakers that followed, including Smith. In 1998, she wrote and directed *drylongso* (1998), a narrative feature which was screened at the Sundance Film Festival and won an Independent Spirit Award. But the difficulty of getting another film off the ground, and the resistance within the film industry to her ideas, began to pull her away from narrative all together.

The work that followed – much of which is being shown as part of the Migrating Forms festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, beginning March 24 – combines documentary, fiction, essay, and abstraction to explore ideas about identity and the collectivity of black life. Smith's work is indebted to the legacy of Afrofuturism – a term she is

hesitant to apply to her work – and finds its energy in the connectivity of ideas that can be found through different spaces, which has led her to make work both in New Orleans and, most recently, in Chicago, where she is currently based.

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Craig Hubert: What initially drew you to moving images?

Cauleen Smith: The main thing was learning about the way cinema works on us subconsciously, the way different shots convey information nonverbally. Once I realized that was the way moving images were working on me when I was watching television or film, I really wanted to make images that didn't produce harm, and images that I really wanted to see. That's what drew me to filmmaking in the first place: I wanted to have control over the images as opposed to having to passively submit to what was being presented to me.

CH: Has that thinking about taking control over the images changed over time?

CS: That was more of a priority when I was thinking more about narrative and representation. I feel like my work is moving more and more toward—maybe it's not abstraction, but something that is less dependent on representation, or of people projecting their desires on something. My work now operates for people to engage and find their own way through something, as opposed to telling people what to think.

CH: Why the break from narrative and representation?

CS: I really gave up on narrative film and the film industry. Things have now changed, but I wasn't willing to stick it out over the last 15 years waiting for things to change [laughs]. I didn't want to have to pitch ideas or beg for money from people who had no investment in what I cared about. It was just trying to figure out how to make something that they were comfortable with as opposed to making something that was interesting, or powerful. And the art world has more receptivity to ideas. The film world is not about ideas, but things that we can consume.



Cauleen Smith, "Chronicles of a Lying Spirit By Kelly Gabron" (1992, still) (image courtesy the artist)

There were fewer gatekeepers as far as control of ideas in the arts communities that I found, and so I felt really free to pursue the edges of ideas and ways of making that I found interesting as opposed to trying to conform all my values into the kind of practice that didn't serve my interests at all.

CH: This is evident in the work that is grouped together under Afro-futurist Tapes (1989-2010). The word "Afrofuturism" can mean a lot of different things, so I'm interested in what it means to you.

CS: Well, my first stumbling upon the word was through this website, afrofuture.net, in the 1990s. At that point, it was really just creative black people who were interested in science-fiction and speculative-fiction, and the potentials of the African diasporic experience, aesthetic, and narrative. I'm happy that the word exists because, in the popular realm, it makes my work legible for people who before didn't understand what I was doing. I'm not so much disavowing Afrofuturism. I'm backing away from it and letting the people who seem to really need it, or need to leverage it, have it. I'm not entirely comfortable with how reductive it has become.

CH: The short works that are included in Afro-futurist Tapes were made over a number of years, and appear to have been a source of creative experimentation. Each little piece is very different than the one before.

CS: Totally. For me, the whole idea of using cosmological metaphors of space and time and sound and environment to talk about experience or identity was exciting. I was constantly trying to find different ways to play with what the form could be. So there's a lot of use of sound, there's a lot of use of text, there's a lot of appropriation of images, or not using images at all. Afrofuturism isn't for me about dressing in a space suit. It's about pushing notions of space and time.

CH: Can you talk about the importance of place in your work? There are films that are not just set in places like Chicago and New Orleans, but seem to be in conversation with those spaces.



Cauleen Smith, "Crow Requiem" (2015, still) (image courtesy the artist)

CS: I mean, talk about Afrofuturism and clashes of the past and the future – New Orleans is that place. It's vibrationally a central place of human culture. I depend on place, and I'm always looking for these different locations, to teach me or to reveal to me what's possible or what has been possible. Therefore, you can speculate in terms of possibility or impossibility. So, with New Orleans, on my first visit there in 2007, I realized this place, literally, is the bedrock and foundation of everything we understand about contemporary popular culture. In terms of rhythm, melody, and sound, it came out of Congo Square in New Orleans. Without that site, we wouldn't have rock 'n' roll music the way we have it now. We would have something completely different. And that's a really profound idea in American history, that we can link our culture to a place in such a direct way. That lineage is so clear, it's embedded in the earth there. And New Orleans has been flooded many, many times, so there is this idea of the subterranean, which emerges in "H-E-L-L-O" (2014), in terms of lower frequencies and what lies beneath, the depths of things. With *The Fullness of Time* (2008), that was about the post-water trauma of Katrina, a post-traumatic stress disorder rumination.

CH: And Chicago has now become a central place for your work.

CS: I have a similar reverence for Chicago in terms of its production of so many radical experimental thinkers, or of it being a laboratory, a place where people can push their ideas to the edge, and do it within a working-class context. I think what distinguishes Chicago from other communities in New York, Los Angeles, or Atlanta, is that experimentation for black artists can and does happen within the working class. That's really well understood. People are conversant in avant-garde ideas and practices. It's ridiculous how many accomplished and amazing African Americans have come out of Chicago. I was like: What is it about this city that was and is producing that? I'm still trying to figure it out. There is what the world knows about Chicago, then there is what life is really like here. But even though conditions have changed, there's still this really interesting creative experimentation that goes on here that I have never had the privilege of experiencing elsewhere.

CH: Paul Youngquist, in his recent book about Sun Ra and the birth of Afrofuturism, talks about Washington Park in Chicago as this hub of social and political activity, where working-class African-Americans could share and debate ideas. These kind of public spaces produced a network of ideas that could bounce off one another, and were stronger because of the contact.

CS: That particular narrative of Sun Ra hanging out in the park and talking with all these different constituencies was really influential. The stuff I made changed when I got to Chicago, and I started really designing films that were about performative gestures outdoors. It was about trying to reignite that idea about the possibility of public space here in Chicago.

CH: There is a clear connection between the performative outdoor gestures that is central to the films you're making in Chicago and "In the Wake," the banners that you created that are currently being exhibited in the Whitney Biennial. Were those made for a film project?

CS: If I had my way I would have already shot a film using those banners. They are meant to be used in a procession that was meant to be a film. I'm literally sending off a proposal to the Whitney this afternoon to get them to let me to borrow them back long enough to let them make that film. And the banners themselves, and the things on them, they come out of conversations, out of popular culture, out of music and slang, out of colloquialism and internal word-play. They are ruminations on the social conditions that have become really, really explicit in the

last couple of years.

Police shootings have always happened, but they were dismissed as isolated incidents. There is something both painfully discouraging and validating about the way social media refuses to allow that dismissal or isolation of these incidents to continue. We all must reckon with the reality of our condition as black people in the country, and how little our lives are valued. I was also thinking of funerals, and when you plan your own funeral and you splurge, and it's the best party you've had since, maybe, your wedding [laughs]. But yeah, those banners are hanging up there for people to see. But, man, I really hope I get to take them out into the streets very soon.



Cauleen Smith, "In the Wake" (2017), satin, poly-satin, quilted pleather, upholstery, wool felt, wool velvet, indigo-dyed silk-rayon velvet, indigo-dyed silk satin, embroidery floss, metallic thread, acrylic fabric paint, acrylic hair beads, acrylic barrettes, satin cord, polyester fringe, poly-silk tassels, plastic-coated paper, and sequins (photo by Benjamin Sutton for Hyperallergic)