

AMHERST BULLETIN

'The everyday possibilities of the imagination': Cauleen Smith exhibit at MASS MoCA shows range of multidisciplinary artist

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Multidisciplinary artist and filmmaker Cauleen Smith draws from a rich archive of sources – Black feminist thought, science fiction, jazz, diverse spiritual practices and experimental film – to examine issues of African-American identity and what she calls “the everyday possibilities of the imagination.”

As the Chicago Tribune wrote of her work a few years ago, “Her ideas never feel appropriately contained by one medium.”

In North Adams, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art has opened a stunning new exhibition by Smith, “We Already Have What We Need,” that features a new immersive installation, a survey of her videos made over the last decade, new textiles, a selection of banners and more. It’s the most comprehensive show of her work to date, according to MASS MoCA.

Next to the gallery text that introduces the exhibit is a digital video titled “Spin,” from 2012, that welcomes you to the work as a whole. In the film, a young Black woman dances in circles on the corner of a wall, a set of heavy jagged square cut stones in the near distance. The dancer wears a yellow and black cape but is otherwise dressed for summer heat, and her motions feel unselfconscious, playful.

There’s a pleasure in witnessing what looks like pleasure, at being alone, of being in public space, of being in a body turning candidly in public space. It has the feel of a home movie, the camera trained with a tender focus on a private moment where the light has snuck in to the day and leavened the mundane.

“Spin” is set to a soundtrack loop of Afrofuturist jazz pioneer Sun Ra’s “The Sound of Joy,” a buoyant returning figure that indexes one of Smith’s concerns, that of science fiction and imagining other worlds, other means of thriving and persistence.

Despite its brevity, “Spin” lingers and helps to open up the coherence, nested in objects, materials, text, and imagery, of the exhibition’s declarative promise. As a way in to Smith’s larger themes, this brief film sets a tone that inflects the many mediums and works to come.

Though Smith, currently based in California, is known primarily as an interdisciplinary filmmaker, the MASS MoCA exhibit showcases new work and a survey of older films, with a video installation that shares the name of the show at its center.

That installation is entered as if you’re boarding a ship, where five 22-foot-tall screens cut and positioned like sails hang from the ceiling and checkered plastic travel bags tucked into the corners act as ballast, the blue rigging for the screens tucked within them.

The gallery windows are fitted with filters that change the color of entering sunlight, giving the room a sense of motion as you walk through it. The projections on each tall screen are divided

– one still image on the bottom and a moving image above – and as you move through the space, the mechanics and logic of the images' arrangement comes into focus.

Five tables placed at intervals correspond to the five screens, and on each table, numerous objects are positioned in front of monitors on which landscapes scroll by, often natural and without people, and closed circuit cameras at the ends of the table capture and project both onto the screens/sails. The tables are full but uncluttered, and the things that occupy them – drumsticks, a tuning fork, a cassette player, Polaroids and a camera, a globe painted black, an artificial bonsai, African figurines and more – feel distinct even in their panoply.

Standing before the tables, the collections act like altars – to art, spirituality, creativity, to the African diaspora, to the everyday – whose positioning is intentional and intimate if oracular at first.

Animated on the billowing screens, the once-still objects seem to move through the space of their projections and, whether antiquated or contemporary, they symbolize a relationship between what we carry with us and the world we inhabit together, allowing us to visualize what sustains us – stuff and the environment – as interconnected.

It's not a didactic work but a suggestive one, and it's heightened by one projection in which Smith herself is featured, dancing and then marching in a field with a shimmering flag in hand.

A flag of no nation

We've seen that flag before. When you first enter the exhibition, it hangs on the wall across from "Spin," a mylar blanket moving slightly with a mounted fan painted to look like an eye, quilted with blocks of color and hemmed into a flag of no nation titled "Emerge and See."

Emergency and relief, the blanket acts as an ensign for a beyond, a way out. In the video, Smith holds it aloft in a field that could be anywhere. But her presence there, the fact of it, feels, in the hull of the gallery, like the living possibility of that beyond. "We Already Have What We Need" deserves time to indulge in its careful arrangements, especially as it reaches out to the other elements of the exhibit.

Smith offers a visual reference to her artistic sources with 32 graphite reproductions of book covers that have inspired, informed, and enlivened her work. Titled "BLK FMNNST Loaner Library 1989-2019," these images build upon an earlier reading list she hoped would act as an "inoculation" against neoliberalism. They are faithful portraits on black paper that connect ideas and open up ways to understand the exhibition as a whole, to live with it beyond the gallery.

It's this effort, to make art into a habit and a practice – something to live with – that makes her work "In the Wake," a collection of banners from 2017, so moving. The banners, first displayed at the Whitney Biennial in 2017, and carried in a procession captured on film available in the gallery, are made from hand-sewn textiles and contain a few words (Camera, Pen, or Gun?; My Pathology is Your Profit; This Fear of Black Flesh; Stop) and images that enlarge the language.

These plush, vibrant banners can provoke conversations about violence and suffering and also about resilience. They bear the mark of the effort to make them.

And like the visible cords and cameras that project and make possible "We Already Have What We Need," the repurposed emergency blanket, the books along the wall – all of this work folds in on itself, revealing an artist who follows her materials to distinct ends only to realize she is not finished with them, or that they have more yet to say.

In her essay "Positive Obsession," science fiction author Octavia Butler, referenced in Smith's catalog of books for "deep and active study," asks "What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future, the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing?" For Butler, science fiction was useful in opening up imagination and invention, even if the material effects of the work were ambiguous.

In Smith's generous archive of thought and action, in her interventions in space and medium, her resounding themes of resilience, care, resistance and transformation act as similar bulwarks against dead ends. Her work asks us both to engage with art as a way to enlarge the experience of being human together and to ask better questions of where that entanglement leads.

Art Middleton is the writer in residence at Forbes Library in Northampton.

Cauleen Smith's "We Already Have What We Need" is on exhibit at MASS MoCA in North Adams through April 2020. More information is available at <https://massmoca.org/event/cauleen-smith/>.