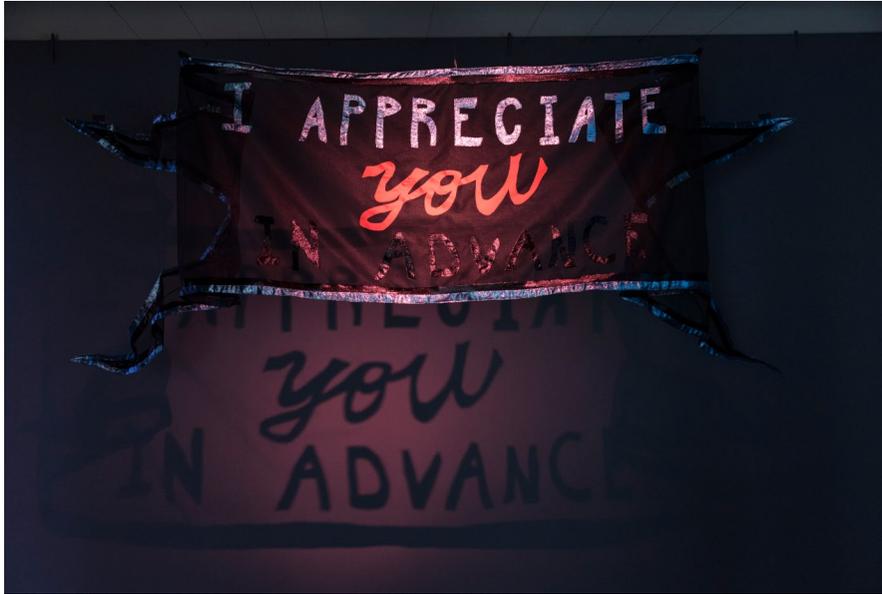


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Black, Feminist, Spiritual, and Alive: Cauleen Smith's Give It or Leave It

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Cauleen Smith, *I Appreciate You in Advance*, 2018. Fiberglass screen, woven metallic polyesters, woven two-tone silk. Courtesy of the artist, Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.

In *Give It or Leave It*, Cauleen Smith invites viewers on a journey across time and space, traversing the four interlinked top-floor gallery spaces of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. The exhibition unfolds as a series of installations including films, revised sculptures, an intervention modifying the gallery skylights with cinematic filters, embroidered text banners, and various ephemera all used to explore the contributing influence of four individuals: Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda (1937–2007), Rebecca Cox Jackson (1795–1871), Simon Rodia (1879–1965), and Noah Purifoy (1917–2004). Smith weaves utopic narratives into intersecting African American histories, Afrofuturism, Radical Jazz, and alternative futures. Smith is interested in using the individual stories of “those who have formed their own solutions” as a reconstructive and healing lens for considering the past. By centering on these artists’ lives, Smith demonstrates the generosity that can exist between artist and community, as well as reimagining a future that is “black, feminist, spiritual, and alive.”

The first work encountered is a reproduction of Billy May’s photograph of nine dapper black men at the Watts Tower taken on an assignment for LIFE magazine in 1996 as part of a feature considering the aftermaths of the Watts Rebellion riots that occurred one year earlier. Designed by Simon Rodia, the Watts Towers consist of seventeen interconnected sculptural towers, sculptures, and mosaics made from found materials. Rodia’s labor-intensive monuments were one of the few structures that remained unharmed in the aftermath of the Watts riots of 1965. He was the sole designer and architect of the towers, which have come to symbolize the resilient and optimistic spirit of the neighborhood. May’s image hangs on a wall entirely covered in the digitally printed wallpaper of *Chinoiserie #1: Take Hold of the Clouds* (2018) and leads into the first of several films in the exhibition.

Pilgrim (2017) unfolds as an eight-minute film capturing Smith’s personal pilgrimage to three historical sites: Coltrane Turiyasangitananda’s Sai Anantam Ashram, the Watts Towers, and the

Watervliet Shaker Community. Narrative and representation collapse into each other through music visually keyed to a recording of a notable Coltrane composition alongside footage of an old organ and these forgotten sites. *I Appreciate You in Advance* (2018) takes form as a banner embroidered with the eponymous phrase and hangs next to the film projection, drawing attention to these sites and the activist response Smith utilizes in connecting the individual narratives. If *Chinoiserie #1* introduced viewers to the central figures of Smith's narrative for this exhibition, *Epistrophe* (2018) in the adjoining gallery presents diverse references, all of which make up the multichannel video installation consisting of four CCTV cameras, monitors, projections, taxidermy, bronze, and wooden figures assembled to resemble an anthropologic display on a circular custom-designed wood table. This work is central to the entire exhibition as Smith mines through text, film, and object histories and presents them as cyclical and ever-evolving. Smith sees this work as an initiation for communal soul searching, revealing anew what is and what could be.

A highlight of the exhibition is the phantasmagorical installation *Space Station: Two Rebeccas* (2018), which queers and questions the nature of the relationship between the two Rebeccas central to the black shaker movement, Rebecca Cox Jackson and Rebecca Perot. Cox Jackson was a Spiritualist and founder of the first black Shaker community in the United States. Unknown in her lifetime, Cox Jackson's religious activism attracted mostly women members due to her promotion of communality, and drew harsh criticism from the male-dominated ministries of the time. In the installation, several differently sized mirror balls are stacked together while two sit on a turntable and continually rotate, as if waltzing. Reflective wallpaper creates a disco-like feeling that allows for multiple readings of the work and evokes the club as a freeing space where radical social communities can be formed.

The exhibition ends with a new film, *Sojourner* (2018), which reimagines Purifoy's Outdoor Desert Museum as a thriving black feminist community. Inspired by witnessing the Watts riots first-hand, Purifoy began collecting debris to reuse as artworks and as a way to channel his rage and frustrations. He completed the museum between 1989-2004 and filled it with what he described as "Environmental Sculptures," made from found objects. In recasting May's image with an all-female ensemble, Smith's film acts as a manifestation of the work done by The Combahee River Collective (1974-80) in their fight to redress the marginalization of black lesbians by mainstream feminism. Smith has previously described her subjects as "the fragile, the forgotten, the flawed, and the fugitive," which very much resonates in the exhibition's key figures. In honoring these people, Smith invites viewers to tap into a form of radical imagination as a strategy of refusal that moves beyond resistance to expose and escape state power and its oppression.

Cauleen Smith: Give It or Leave It is on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, until December 23.