

Topic tour connects black identity and art in ICA exhibition

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Disco balls of various sizes sit in the corner of a room. Two balls spin on a silver turntable and reflect lights that bounce off the tall blue, silver and orange-colored walls. The colors create a pattern of towers, trees and buildings that resembles wallpaper. The sounds of birds vocalizing and loud thunderclaps fill the room. On the same side of the room, a white wall displays eye-catching videos containing neon colors of blue, red and green.

The sculpture is titled "Space Station: Two Rebeccas" and is located in the Reynolds Gallery of VCU's Institute for Contemporary Art. It's part of the newest exhibition called "Give It or Leave It" by Cauleen Smith.

On March 23, the museum offered tours of Smith's exhibit paired with a discussion on black identity led by Awendela Grantham, an assistant professor of African-American studies.

Grantham chose the tour's title, "Do We Know Who We Are Yet?" and said it reveals frustration with the struggle of validating black identity.

"Many black people are searching for a lost history," Grantham said. "Even though we as black people have created monuments, the great wonders of the world and many inventions, we are still striving to achieve equality as a people."

Grantham said images in media "mar black identity," and artists like Smith challenge racist heritage in the U.S. while also showing the diversity of black identities.

"Cauleen Smith gives us an experience," Grantham said. "She's not telling us that black identity is just one thing, she's pulling from different mediums and narratives to try to bring more cohesion and coherence to this experience."

Grantham said Smith's exhibit shows the black identity as revealing contrasting emotions of rebelling and resistance.

"I think when we polarize identity into two spaces of being hostile or being passive, it doesn't let you be who you are," Grantham said. "Often times black identity is something that is constructed from the outside."

Included in the exhibit was a black-and-white photograph by Billy May, taken a year after the California Watts Riots in 1965, the largest rebellion of the civil rights era. The photo shows eight black men sitting together near the Watts Towers.

"This picture is so revealing of the black identity because this picture was never published," Grantham said. "It doesn't show black people wanting to fight, it just shows a group of men wanting to be at peace, wanting to get along with each other and wanting to have a communal bonding time."

Isabelle Kinnard Richman, an assistant professor of religious studies, attended the event. Richman will give a topic tour of the same exhibit at the end of April and has visited the

exhibition three times.

"Each time I discover more and leave feeling inspired and deeply moved," Richman said. "Cauleen Smith's exhibit is a journey into the experience and communities of black women."

The exhibit includes multiple mediums of art such as three-dimensional sculptures, music from Alice Coltrane and two-dimensional patterns on the walls.

"These different mediums and dimensions show us that black identity is not a stereotyped or a rigid identity," Grantham said. "By connecting different kinds of art, Cauleen Smith demonstrates that black identity is not one dimensional. It's multi-dimensional."

The tour of Smith's exhibit is part of the ICA's weekly topic tour program that guides visitors through different exhibitions, encouraging discussion.

"The idea is that instead of having a variety of drop-in tours like other museums, we're letting you know what the topic is in advance," said Johanna Plummer, curator of education and engagement for the ICA. "We're identifying areas of interest to the general public and seeking out various folk to give those tours."