



Discovering Cauleen Smith's Universally Conscious Art
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In many ways Cauleen Smith is the dynamic, conceptual artist one would expect. Beyond expectations, however, is her bold—and especially collaborative—creative voice. “I want to tell stories beyond my own, stories that are somehow everyone’s stories,” the artist shares with *CR*. “The universal aspects are what I am always searching for, even in the most subjective narrative.” Smith finds these bridges of human connection in her latest exhibition *Mutualities*, which opens this week at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

The multimedia artist first endeavored into film while she attended San Francisco State University. Though her early film projects drew attention to her talent, it was her first feature work, *Drylongso*—which began as her MFA thesis at UCLA—that premiered to Sundance acclaim in 1999, and truly put Smith on the map as a filmmaker and rising arts star. The film’s title references an African American expression for “same old” or “everyday,” touching on the idea of telling the day-to-day truths of our lives, which has since formed an ongoing thread in her work. “As an artist, maybe I am more able to contribute to smaller scale, even mundane shifts,” says Smith. “My goal is to understand and express the things we all go through, even if we are very different people.”

Now, two decades after her breakout feature—with over 40 films, a Whitney Biennial, and dozens of international museum exhibitions to her credit—Smith is building on the foundation of her success, using it as a platform to tell conscious stories and create art with universal resonance. Here, *CR* speaks with Smith about the diverse inspirations for her latest exhibit, why her art is far more complex than its feminist and Afrofuturist tones, and how our present conversations become the future we unfold.

What are the key inspirations for your *Mutualities* exhibition?

“At the Whitney, the show includes two film installations that were part of my exhibition at ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art], Philadelphia, and nine new drawings. I was inspired by artists who built a world around themselves through their creativity and radical acts of generosity. Alice Coltrane, an accomplished jazz musician, who moved to Malibu after her husband John [Coltrane]’s death, started her own ashram. Simon Rodia built the beautiful monument of the Watts Tower in LA. He toiled for more than 20 years to create it, then gave it away—literally just signed the deed away to his neighbor. As a result, it became a site of generosity and gives the neighborhood leverage as a cultural landmark. There was Noah Purifoy, who built the Outdoor Desert Museum in Joshua Tree, and Rebecca Cox Jackson, an activist and spiritualist in the Shaker community. She kept a journal filled with all her thoughts—dreams, everyday musings, even prophetic visions—for decades. There were also groups of people like the Combahee River Collective, who made successful attempts at creating and living their own ideas of utopia. I love looking at how all of these people truly felt that they knew what they knew.”

***Mutualities* includes the films *Sojourner and Pilgrim* with your new drawing series, “*Firespitters*.” How do the works fit together conceptually?**

“For me, it’s a method of working that is discursive. I am always interested in having a conversation. Because I don’t have a background in poetry, drawing is like learning about

a poet's 'desert island' book of poetry. It is a new way for me to learn, and a new kind of community to render more visible for myself and anyone interested. It is the same conversation I am attempting to have with the show's inspirational figures. I am very curious and I know they have a lot to teach me."

Themes of memory and Afrofuturism are often part your work. How do you realize these ideas in Mutualities?

"It has been interesting to take films designed for one space and make them fit into another, especially *Sojourner*. The physical space changes the feeling of watching a film because the environment enriches it and the viewer is also part of the space. I hope they feel that they are part of the experience and interaction, because they are important to the process of exchanging ideas. The past is always leaving us messages and it is up to us to listen. I feel we have to choose to act on these messages. I like to look at the past and share it in the present. I see this moment as an invitation to think about our actions, and also as a sign post for the future we are creating."

You have mentioned the "weight of history" on artists' choices. How does the past inform your art practice?

"One way this weight comes through is the heaviness of traumas we experience and bring with us. There is also a respect and a desire to carry something positive forward. I think a lot about the stakes: What happens if we don't use what we know to create something better for the future? I want everything I make to be in conversation with what is still to come. The audience always arrives for the films I make, even if not at the time when I make them. It is not necessarily that things are legible in the past or even the present, but they may become legible in the future. We must pay attention because we will move ahead into something else and the present can teach us how to build a better future."

How does the show bring together collective and personal voices of the black female experience?

"It is important to access someone else's position—there is such a gift in understanding. I frequently change my mind around what I thought and the ideas I had going into conversations. I like to look at collective experience too, because that is part of what makes me who I am. There is always a tension between a specific position and the collective, less malleable identity. That is a tension that you need to exercise and utilize. I make my films for everyone. If I think about a desire that I have, it's the universal. While that's a very aspirational ideal, it is also a distillation of what makes us all human. I can't point to different views; all I have to work with is my own subjective experience. I am trying to get help and support from history to make my experience closer to the universal."

You have said that you see art as a powerful medium for starting conversations. What dialogues does this exhibit aim to begin?

"The distinction with activism is that I am not interested in power and controlling the conversation. I want the discourse; I don't want the power. For change to happen, we must first have conversations about what we need and what we love. Those conversations are necessary as a foundation for anything greater. It is what we need to do on a larger level, and this is the part I can do. An argument doesn't need a winner or loser, but with policies and broader change, the stakes are high—what if we get it wrong? We need to get it right and I hope to help build the foundation to do that."

How does Mutualities imagine and hope to realize alternate futures?

"It imagines a future where the least among us can have space to feel like their whole selves, as well as a space where we can listen to each other. In one room of the show, there is giant, fuzzy blue couch. It is emblematic of my hopes for people in the show's space, even if they just sat on the couch and didn't watch the films. I want to give people space to feel listened to, recognized, autonomous, a space where they can connect to the earth and to themselves. I want to create an environment for people to be able to sit with those feelings. It's like when you go to the park by yourself and there are kids playing Frisbee and people walking their dogs. You may go alone, but the different people and their actions surrounding you ultimately remind you of your own humanity."