



The Berkshire Eagle

With Mass MoCA exhibit and Fall Foliage procession, Cauleen Smith offers art in motion
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NORTH ADAMS – Where do parades come from? When filmmaker and visual artist Cauleen Smith began observing second lines in New Orleans, she started thinking about that question, and the concept of a procession, more and more.

"It has influenced everything in American culture somehow," Smith told The Eagle during a Thursday phone interview.

Parades' West African roots intrigued the Los Angeles-based artist who often draws from Afrofuturism. In that region, masquerade processions celebrated deceased elders long before colonization transported them elsewhere, according to Smith. Today, parades are everywhere, including the art world. In 2017, volunteers carried Smith's hand-sewn "In the Wake" banners around the streets of New York City after their presentation at the Whitney Biennial. Bearing poignant images and messages about violence enacted against black Americans – "I am holding my breath," one reads – a handful of the works now reside in "We Already Have What We Need," Smith's exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art that has been on display since May and will close in April 2020. They are distinct from the flags that will be part of a Smith-directed procession in North Adams' 64th Annual Fall Foliage Parade on Sunday, Oct. 6, two days before Smith is scheduled to speak at Williams College's Lawrence Hall.

"There are going to be these little semaphore flags that don't have any text on them," she said. "They're pretty shiny, but they're much more like the flag that's in [the exhibit's] entryway, the 'Emerge and See' flag."

Smoke will trail the procession, which will include music by Jeff Parker and choreography by Anna Martine Whitehead. A local marching band will play a composition based on "The Wizard of Oz" and "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." The latter inspired the notes in Smith's "H-e-l-l-o" film, a work on loop in the exhibit that captures musicians playing various bass-clef instruments in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Smith has long been known for her filmmaking. Her 1998 feature, "Drylongso," is a critical darling that premiered at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival. Curated by Susan Cross, Smith's Mass MoCA exhibit predominantly conveys her experimental exploration of the medium. With screens displaying different scenes and sounds simultaneously in a handful of rooms, the exhibit can never be encountered in a fixed state.

"In film, you have to build environments all the time and film inside of them. Even if you're on location, you have to control the space so that, from any given angle, there's something there that's helping you tell your story," Smith said, "and I think I like entering into spaces where that has become the thing that you notice first instead of, like, the architecture."

The first video gallerygoers encounter is across from the aforementioned Mylar "Emerge and See" blanket near the museum's entrance. In "Spin," a whirling young girl wearing a cape extends her arms like wings as a Sun Ra piano piece, "The Sound of Joy," plays.

"It's inevitably a celebratory little video," Smith said.

That optimism emerges at different points throughout the exhibit, but its appearance is coupled with caution at times. Look closer at "Spin," and you'll notice the girl is precariously close to a ledge.

"There's just that immediate, that kind of fast read or the way that the work greets you, but the longer you spend with it, the more you can tease out of it and start to ask more questions," Smith said.

Around a bend, 14-minute "Remote Viewing" offers more wariness. In a dusty landscape, a white clapboard schoolhouse gets pushed into a hole and covered with dirt. The film is a reenactment of a "true account of a white town burying its black schoolhouse," according to the exhibition pamphlet.

"I just couldn't stop thinking about it because I couldn't actually really understand, cognitively understand, what it would mean to bury an entire structure underground, to make it disappear, and I was really haunted by it," Smith said. "And then I started to really think about the violence built into land art, this sort of disregard for what's already there and this desire to make these marks that compete with natural elements on the surface of the planet."

The film is in HD, a stark contrast to the fuzzier "I Want to See My Skirt" series next door. Motivated by Malian artist Malick Sidibe's photographs of young West Africans during the mid-20th century, Smith's videos track the growth of a young girl, Roka, into a woman. They were shot in Super 8 film and transferred to video.

"I was really intrigued with how they made me feel so nostalgic, nostalgic for something I had never even experienced," Smith said of the photographs. " ... So, it seemed really natural to use a material that would have been around at that time, that maybe even that photographer would have had access to [to] reenact those photographs and reactivate them."

Smith created "I Want to See My Skirt" with poet A. Van Jordan, but her literary influences are more apparent when walking the exhibit's thoroughfare. On one wall, 32 gouache and graphite works on paper depict book covers of texts that inspire Smith and "tackle many of the subjects that she engages in her work, from African spiritual and intellectual histories to black resistance, indigenous knowledge, and the revolutionary capacities of love," according to the show's pamphlet. The books in "BLK FEMNNST Loaner Library 1989-2019" are quite varied; for instance, Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" and Wendy Makoons Geniusz's "Our Knowledge Is Not Primitive: Decolonizing Botanical Anishinaabe Teachings" are neighbors.

"It's really personal in the sense that they're just books that I'm really fond of, or that I think are really useful in terms of generating conversation, and a lot of them are even books that are written by friends of mine or people that I know that I really admire and are books that I've returned to," Smith said.

Her choices have prompted a ticketed book club at Mass MoCA that met for the time Thursday night to discuss Octavia Butler's "Parable of the Sower." Facilitated by Multicultural Bridge CEO Gwendolyn VanSant, the group will next meet to discuss Christina Sharpe's "In the Wake: On Blackness and Being" on Nov. 7. (Kathleen Collins' "Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?" will guide a Dec. 5 conversation.) Smith was clear that the books shouldn't be considered a

statement about canon.

"I really wasn't thinking about canon. I don't actually believe in anything like that," she said.

The drawings are across the hall from the exhibit's largest installation, "We Already Have What We Need." The room features five 22-foot video screens and accompanying tables filled with disparate items, such as African figurines, plants and a model sailboat, that CCTV cameras are capturing to project on the hanging surfaces. Behind these objects, cinematic landscapes from "Thelma and Louise," "Fargo" and others play, prompting questions about humanity's connection to the natural world and belongings. Smith's use of scale demonstrates that those relationships can often be distorted and that, consequently, people can overlook just how much there is to engage them.

"If you see the projected images, you think you're seeing a whole or sort of complete scene, like a tableau, but you can literally follow the projected image from the wires to the camera," she said. "If you trace that, you realize that there's a lot more there that you can't see from that particular point of view. That shift in scale to me is very important in terms of attempting to really force people to walk through, to put them inside that question of point of view and perspective and what they can and can't see at any given time."