

Cauleen Smith: *We Already Have What We Need*

Artist's most comprehensive exhibition to-date spans the entirety of MASS MoCA's first floor galleries



Cauleen Smith
The Hold, 2017

Multi-channel video, video projectors, stereo speakers, CCTV cameras, camera tripods, furniture, figurines.
Courtesy of the artist; Kate Werble, New York; and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago; Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

NORTH ADAMS, MASSACHUSETTS —

On May 25, MASS MoCA will open artist Cauleen Smith's most comprehensive exhibition to-date, featuring a survey of her videos made over the last decade and a half, a written manifesto, and a selection of banners from her "In the Wake" series, which was included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. These prior works will be presented alongside a new textile and works on paper as well as an immersive video installation produced especially for the exhibition. Occupying the entirety of MASS MoCA's first floor galleries, the exhibition provides an in-depth look at Smith's incredible capacity to engage with and capture the experiences of her subjects, which she describes as "the fragile, the forgotten, the flawed, and the fugitive."

Building on her training as a filmmaker, Cauleen Smith creates visual and phenomenological experiences that ruminate on social, cultural, intellectual, artistic, and political liberation. Inspired by a wide range of sources, from Afrofuturism, the music of Sun Ra, science fiction, and Third World Cinema, her multi-disciplinary practice combines aesthetic richness with conceptual rigor to examine subjects like the African Diaspora, the image of black women in film, the post-hurricane landscape of New Orleans, and the transformative power of art, among so much more.

At the heart of Smith's exhibition at MASS MoCA is a new video installation that meditates on the many different notions of what constitutes our basic needs, from the material to the metaphysical, and including from food and shelter, to medicine, to the experience of music, as well as to our connections to others, to our ancestors, and to the natural environment. For the installation, Smith will project large-scale landscape images borrowed from films such as *Thelma and Louise*, *Fargo*, *Erin Brockovich*, and *Frozen* (all stories of white women's self-actualization) onto a series of five twenty-two-foot tall sail-like screens that will function as architecture within the gallery. Carving out a labyrinthine path for visitors, these screens also obscure from immediate view five tables supporting an array of the varied "stuff" that we accumulate, including African figurines, plants, a model sailboat, porcelain, seeds, incense burners, and more mundane items. Live-feed CCTV recordings of these objects will be blown up and layered on top of Smith's looming landscapes, transforming the here-and-now into a speculative future. The new installation, also titled *We Already Have What We Need*, follows other such provocative arrangements of objects and CCTV projections, which Smith calls "living rooms" or "space stations." These works invite us to consider the mundane aspects of life on earth, alongside our own untapped potential for positive change and evolution.

The gallery's 8 clerestory windows will also be treated with colorful film gels, ranging in hues that transition from blues to reds and back. Titled *Every Sunrise and Every Sunset All At Once*, after a physicist's description of the light visible in a lunar eclipse, the installation will alter the space with changing effects of dappled color.

Described by the artist as a “communal soul search,” the experiential installation will invite us to see anew—what is and what could be.

Also making its debut at MASS MoCA is Smith’s newest “Reading List,” which follows her earlier work *Human_3.0 Reading List*, a series of drawings of book covers that capture a new canon of must-read texts for a more advanced version of ourselves. The new *BLK FMNNST Loaner Library 1989-2019* focuses on the intersection of feminism, creative production, and theories of “black fugitivity.” The list of 30 books includes *The Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler, *In The Wake* by Christina Sharpe, *Lose Your Mother* by Saidiya Hartman, and *Whatever Happened To Interracial Love* by Kathleen Collins, among others. To spur further engagement with the series, MASS MoCA is organizing a book club that will focus on a selection from the list. During sessions scheduled for September, November and December 2019, MASS MoCA will facilitate discussions on the texts and how their themes intersect with the exhibition. Further information about this public programming series will be announced this summer.

Titled after Sharpe’s influential book which looks at the lingering aftermath of slavery, Smith’s *In the Wake* series will be represented with a small selection of the artist’s hand-stitched banners. Part protest sign, part flag, part pep rally accessory, these works respond to racial violence and inequity. They are influenced by a long history of banners hoisted for celebration as well as in support of social and political change, from those flown by labor unions or carried by activists in the Civil Rights movement. Smith has also been inspired by church banners, military regiment colors, and Vodun tapestries, as well as the heraldry of marching bands. These textiles are central to her practice and are made for use in her public processions. In conjunction with the Whitney presentation, the banners were carried through the neighborhood as participants sang lyrics incorporating the banner text. Among the banners selected for MASS MoCA is *Camera, Pen, or Gun?*, which seems to ask which is the more powerful weapon.

In Smith’s hands, both the camera and the pen are indeed powerful tools. In her manifesto for Creative Cinematic Maladjustment (reprinted for the exhibition), she highlights the role of the image as a form of resistance (against narrative, plot, and corporate servitude) and the filmmaker as a “dream custodian,” whose “bounty is a cornucopia (or vortex) of future histories.” The Maladjusted Spectator, she writes, “resists the indulgences of propaganda in favor of the rigors of aesthetic transcendence.”

Smith’s new works will be presented alongside a selection of videos, dating from 2001 to 2017, highlighting the trajectory of her practice. The earliest work on view, *The Changing Same*, is a short narrative film described by the artist as “experimental sci-fi.” The story follows an alien on a mission to Earth who believes she is the only one of her kind on the planet. She is surprised when she encounters a fellow agent, who has gone rogue. Inspired by the French New Wave, Smith explores how systems of power affect personal relationships and what it means to be an “outsider.” Following below is list of some of the other featured videos.

In collaboration with poet A. Van Jordan, Smith created *I Want to See My Skirt* (2006), a video installation based on a black-and-white photograph taken by Malian artist Malick Sidibé, who is best known for his photographic work in the Niger Valley of West Africa throughout the 1960s. Smith animates Sidibé’s image of a young girl in a long skirt, creating a multi-channel video that chronicles the growth of the young girl into a woman through a series of playful interactions between the main character and her close friends and family. Combined with Jordan’s evocative poetry, which is displayed visually in English and read aloud in French (the official language of Mali), Smith examines and expands traditions of portraiture in this multi-channel installation while drawing attention to the fashion and music that spread between Europe, the United States, and Africa and influenced global identities. Three photographs by Sidibé will be presented in conjunction with the videos, along with a sculpture by Smith titled *All the World’s Treasures*, that consists of a low table cut into the shape of the section of the Atlantic Ocean traversed in the Triangle Trade, its Middle Passage transporting slaves to

the Americas and the Caribbean. The table supports one thousand bean bags made from Vlisco Dutch wax print fabrics.

Smith's inspiration for *Remote Viewing* (2009), another short film, came from her frustration with the Land Art movement of the 60s and 70s. Artists of this period often made monumental alterations to the land while ignoring its deeply embedded history, enacting a form of violent erasure. Smith draws ties between their actions and a true account of white townspeople burying a schoolhouse to omit the presence of black inhabitants in their region. *Remote Viewing* physically enacts the burial of history; a looming white schoolhouse stands tall amidst a landscape of dirt, facing a gaping hole that the building is eventually, and suddenly, thrust into.

Black and Blue Over You (After Bas Jan Ader For Ishan) (2010) pays homage to Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader and his conceptual investigations of action and emotion. Smith's work mimics his 1974 film, *Primary Time*, which records the artist—seen only from the neck down—arranging red and yellow carnations for 25 minutes. Smith similarly improvises a seemingly endless number of arrangements with a mix of blooms in black, white, and blue tones—the colors of mourning. Smith's ritualistic action of arranging and rearranging, grouping like colors and then integrating them, suggests a prolonged grieving. Set against the musical backdrop of a single saxophone, the touching work remembers the tragic death of Ishan, the nephew of a close friend, and suggests the loss of and mourning for many others, along with life's fleeting beauty.

In *H-E-L-L-O* (2014), a series of individual musicians playing trumpets, tubas, cellos, saxophones, and other bass clef instruments at various sites throughout New Orleans repeat the five-note sequence G - A - F - F - C, the recognizable alien greeting composed for Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. With this eerie music against the languid landscape of New Orleans post-Katrina, Smith touches on the city's long-standing cultural traditions while tapping into a sense of alienation in wake of the hurricane.

Egungun (2017) follows a shell and seaweed-encrusted figure, who emerges from the ocean and then wanders between a lush landscape and a more suburban-looking locale with a swimming pool. Smith references the Egungun masking tradition of the Yoruba people, who were among the many African peoples captured and sold into the transatlantic slave trade. With this work, Smith demonstrates how the chasm of time, distance, and violence has severed the ancestor's links to its living descendants, leaving it to look for traces of them in an endless, disorienting loop. At MASS MoCA the film will be installed in a gallery with windows treated with colored gels, bathing the space in a watery blue.

About the artist:

Cauleen Smith was born in Riverside, California, in 1967 and grew up in Sacramento. She earned a BA from San Francisco State University and an MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles School of Theater, Film and Television. Her films, objects, and installations have been featured in group exhibitions at the Studio Museum of Harlem, New York; Contemporary Arts Museum Houston; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; the New Museum, New York; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. She has had solo shows for her films and installations at The Kitchen, New York; Art Institute of Chicago; and DuSable Museum, Chicago; and currently has a solo exhibition that is travelling to the ICA at VCU, Richmond, and the Frye Art Museum, Seattle, following its debut at the ICA Philadelphia. She is the recipient of multiple awards and fellowships, including the prestigious inaugural Ellsworth Kelly Award of the Foundation for Contemporary Arts and the Herb Alpert Award in the Arts. She has received a Creative Capital grant, a Rauschenberg Residency; Black Metropolis Research Consortium Research Fellowship; and the Director's Grant at the University of California Institute for Research in the Arts. She is represented by Kate Werble, New York, and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago. Smith recently relocated from Chicago to Los Angeles, where she teaches at CalArts.

Sponsorship:

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Images

High-resolution images are available through this link:

About MASS MoCA

MASS MoCA is one of the world's liveliest (and largest) centers for making, displaying, and enjoying today's most important art, music, dance, theater, film, and video. MASS MoCA's 250,000 sq. ft. of gallery space includes partnerships with Laurie Anderson, the Louise Bourgeois Trust, Jenny Holzer, Anselm Kiefer with the Hall Art Foundation, Sol LeWitt, and James Turrell.

Gallery admission is \$20 for adults, \$18 for veterans and seniors, \$12 for students, \$8 for children 6 to 16, and free for children 5 and under. Members are admitted free year-round. The Hall Art Foundation's Anselm Kiefer exhibition is seasonal and currently on view. For additional information: 413.662.2111 x1 or visit massmoca.org.

Hours

MASS MoCA is open from 11am to 5pm, closed Tuesdays from September 4 through the end of June. From the end of June through August, MASS MoCA's galleries are open seven days a week — from 10am to 6pm Sundays through Wednesdays and from 10am to 7pm Thursdays through Saturdays.

About ArtCountry

ArtCountry is nestled in the Berkshire hills of western Massachusetts and at the foot of the Green Mountains of southern Vermont, with art and music all year round from four incredible museums — MASS MoCA, The Clark Art Institute, Williams College Museum of Art, and Bennington Museum — and the unparalleled Williamstown Theatre Festival, all less than three hours from New York and Boston.

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