



SHINIQUE SMITH

Wonder and Rainbows

October 9, 2015–January 10, 2016

Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery

*L*ike spiral galaxies composed of millions of orbiting stars, the works of New York–based artist Shinique Smith are graceful yet forceful combinations of many different materials and ideas. The wide range of inspirations that inform her artistic practice includes dance, Eastern spiritual philosophies, fashion, graffiti, music, childhood wonder, Japanese calligraphy, and poetry. Smith makes her sculptures, which hang from the ceiling or sit directly on the floor, by binding together an array of textiles, typically old clothing sourced from multiple locations, with knotted cords and ribbons. Tucked within the folds of fabric are seemingly unimportant items from everyday life such as artificial flowers, butterfly decals, and stuffed animals. In Smith’s paintings, these elements intermingle with cloth fragments, bold calligraphic brushwork, and vivid waves of color to create energetic expressions of her personal history as well as a greater sense of cultural concern and cosmic connectivity.

Smith attributes many facets of her multidimensional work to her unusually broad experiences as a child. She studied ballet, theater, and drawing throughout her youth in Baltimore, and her mother, then a fashion designer and magazine editor, brought Smith along to fabric stores and



fig. 1

fashion shows. Deeply involved in esoteric spiritual groups, Smith's mother also took her to the Tibetan Meditation Center, where the artist met the Dalai Lama and fell asleep amid the sounds of people chanting and bells ringing. Smith is an only child and often relied on her own imagination to pass the time. She states, "Drawing, making art, setting up play schools and pretend situations . . . that aspect of play, feeling of discovery, using your imagination with objects . . . still affects my work today."¹ Additionally, Smith notes

the influence of the physical environment of her childhood, recalling that her grandmother "would mix brocades and florals with plaids and patterns that didn't seemingly belong together [in her home], but they would harmonize. . . . I find magic in the relationships of objects and the people that surround me."²

At the age of twelve, Smith was accepted into the selective Baltimore School of the Arts. Like Jean-Michel Basquiat, she painted graffiti during high school, and suggestions of popular culture and expressive lines remain a fundamental part of her work, although she now regards direct references to tagging as a nostalgic recollection of her youth.³ Smith's 2003 graduate thesis at the Maryland Institute College of Art, where she had received a BFA in 1992, explored writing as a form of meditation and the relationship between graffiti and the more rarefied field of Japanese calligraphy. She posits that "in both you can't back up, you must have a confident

hand when you put your brush to the surface. There's no erasing."⁴ The vigorous handstyle found in her paintings today is a fusion not only of graffiti and calligraphy, but also of the dramatic gestures and delicate drips of Franz Kline, Joan Mitchell, and Jackson Pollock (fig. 1).

Shortly after graduate school, Smith began to focus on a body of work in which she binds an assortment of worn clothing and accessories into large rectangular forms (fig. 2). On one hand, the "Bale Variants" express the artist's lifelong attraction to fashion, textiles, and pattern and her aim to make formally compelling compositions in which each component, with its own properties and history, becomes subsumed within the larger whole, like individuals in society. But on the other, the series reflects her concern about a culture of excess and waste that permeates wealthy nations. The bales were inspired by a *New York Times Magazine* article that documented the shipment of massive machine-compressed blocks of unwanted clothing from the United States to impoverished countries.⁵ It followed the path of a T-shirt donated to a secondhand store by a woman living on Manhattan's Upper East Side to a man in West Africa. Smith sees the transatlantic

fig. 2



commercial exchange of this material object, discarded by one person and valued by another, as an overlooked connection between two people who would otherwise have no point of contact.

Clothing is a relatively timeless and universal mode of presenting one's gender, socioeconomic position, age, ethnicity, and even religion or occupation. In addition to apparel's role in constructing an image, Smith is interested in the memories and histories associated with attire. She sees a cast-off garment like a skin shed by a snake: the imprint of the wearer is still there and a part of his or her energy remains. By reusing old items in her bales, hanging bundles, and collaged paintings, Smith gives them new purpose and advances their journey. Some "donors" of the materials are unknown, while others are close family members and friends. The physical bodies of the clothes' previous owners are sensed through their absence or their formal suggestion. At times, Smith incorporates textiles associated with loved ones who have passed away and with significant moments from her own past, such as a dress she wore to many art events and an ex-boyfriend's shirts and socks. Evocative of both her life and the histories of others, each random yet selective assortment of belongings creates a teeming "cross section of time, place, and meaning."⁶

Making something out of what many would regard as nothing harkens back to the creativity of the artist's childhood, when she played with whatever was at hand. Her works often contain objects associated with girlhood: glittery fairy wings, dollhouses, the tulle of ballet tutus, and "artifacts" from the 1970s and 1980s—the decades of her youth—such as Care Bears, Cabbage Patch Kids, Barbie dolls, and My Little Ponies. By unapologetically featuring

these products—"kitschy" to some, beloved by others—in "high" art shown in major museums and galleries, Smith elevates and brings visibility to the often trivialized experiences of young girls. In doing so, she also counters a jarring assertion by an acquaintance who had said that "black girls don't frolic."⁷ The transition from little girl to teenager is referenced by such items as ripped jeans, deflated Mylar birthday balloons, composition books, and hair accessories (cover). These objects represent a range of childhood memories, from the magical moments in which whimsy and fantasy are embraced before the confines of adulthood set in, to the inevitable and at times uncomfortable journey of self-discovery that accompanies growing up.



fig. 3

Giving objects new life and imbuing her work with their essence relate to Smith's spiritual leanings, which, like her art, braid together multiple strands. She is intrigued by the metaphysical realm and how people, objects, and the universe intersect. She believes that truths may be revealed through the study of astrology, numerology, auras, myths and legends, and cosmic energy. Although Smith does not subscribe to a specific religion, she is drawn to many Buddhist and Hindu philosophical concepts, especially those of the impermanence and the cyclical nature of the material world. The mandala form, the symbol of the

universe in Buddhist and Hindu traditions and an aid in meditation, often appears or is suggested by the strong centrality of her work (fig. 3). In a manner similar to abstract artist Agnes Martin, Smith sees the creative process as a ritualistic journey and the resulting objects as having a spiritual dimension.

In recent years, particularly after Smith moved to a pastoral retreat near the Catskill area of the Hudson Valley, nature has played a larger role in her creativity.⁸ She has become re-invested in color, which she had consciously stripped from her practice for a period, beginning in 2001. Like Wassily Kandinsky, who espoused similar theories in his treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), Smith believes that each hue can have a psychological impact and can reflect an individual's inner state. Since reintroducing color as a primary subject, she has also "embraced rainbows, butterflies and a plethora of symbols that connect to my youth, my femininity and the violent and romantic struggle of life."⁹ Smith reframes these often clichéd symbols of girlhood innocence and presents them as signifiers of serious-minded and universal concepts. For example, rainbows are not merely a pretty decorative motif, but can represent

unrestrained dreams, harmony after turbulent times, diversity, and, especially in the wake of the 2015 Supreme Court ruling on gay marriage, political equality. Butterflies likewise can symbolize something more philosophical. Their transformation from humble caterpillars to beautiful winged creatures capable of flight is, to Smith, "profound to any human being struggling to evolve in this world and in particular to any marginalized person."¹⁰

Through her emotionally and visually exuberant work, Shinique Smith channels and hopes to transfer to viewers the sense of wonder and discovery she cherishes from her childhood. Her installations often use all six surfaces of an exhibition space (employing the ceiling and floor in addition to the walls), creating an engaging aura of enchantment. Many objects simultaneously seem to represent teeming microcosms and macrocosms: are they telescopic pictures of galaxies or microscopic views of cells? Though Smith's artistic practice is informed by her own life and memories, she strives to connect to viewers by drawing attention to the beauty within our shared experience. Ultimately, the kaleidoscope-like sculptures and paintings are meant to convey a universal appreciation of both the sorrows and joys of life.

fig. 4



Katie Delmez
Curator

Illustrations

COVER: *Inner Clock* (detail), 2014. Acrylic, ink, fabric, paper collage, and found objects on wood panel. Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami

Fig. 1: *By the Light*, 2013. Ink, acrylic, fabric, and paper collage on canvas over wood panel. Collection of Francie Bishop Good and David Horvitz. Photo by Zack Balber

Fig. 2: *Bale Variant No. 0022*, 2012. Clothing, fabric, ribbon, twine, and wood. Collection of Jack and Sandra Guthman. Photo by Eric Wolfe

Fig. 3: *Forever Strong*, 2014. Acrylic, ink, fabric and ribbon collage, and vintage hubcap on canvas over wood panel. Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami

Fig. 4: *Somewhere out there (in here)*, 2011. Ink, acrylic, and fabric collage on canvas over wood panel. Private collection courtesy of David Castillo Gallery, Miami

OPPOSITE: *Tongues became flowers*, 2013. Artist's clothing, fabric, Poly-Fil, ribbon, and rope. Collection of Christopher Dlutowski and Peter Occolowitz

All artwork © Shinique Smith

Notes

1. Michael Huebner, "Shinique Smith Creating Art 'Etched in Collective History' at Birmingham Museum of Art," *AL.com*, August 14, 2013.
2. "Dynamic Display—*Shinique Smith: Firsthand*," interview by Sarah Jesse, *Unframed*, February 6, 2013, unframed.lacma.org.
3. Barbara Pollack, "Clothes Connections," *ARTnews*, January 2010.
4. Shinique Smith, conversation with the author, June 2015.
5. George Packer, "How Susie Bayer's T-shirt Ended Up on Yusuf Mama's Back," *New York Times Magazine*, March 31, 2002.
6. "Dynamic Display."
7. Shinique Smith, conversation with the author, May 2015.
8. Smith notes, "I think the inspiration [of nature] was always there, but moving just allowed me to focus on it. . . . You can't always pause to have a musing thought on the way a flower opens." Nadiah Fellah, "Shinique Smith Discusses Her New Show at James Cohan Gallery," *New American Paintings*, February 27, 2013.
9. Shinique Smith, e-mail to the author, December 18, 2014.
10. Shinique Smith, e-mail to the author, June 11, 2015.



SHINIQUE SMITH

Wonder and Rainbows

was organized by the Frist Center for the Visual Arts.

The Frist Center for the Visual Arts is supported in part by



Downtown Nashville
919 Broadway, Nashville, TN 37203
fristcenter.org