

**Cauleen
Smith**

**We Already
Have What
We Need**

MASS MoCA

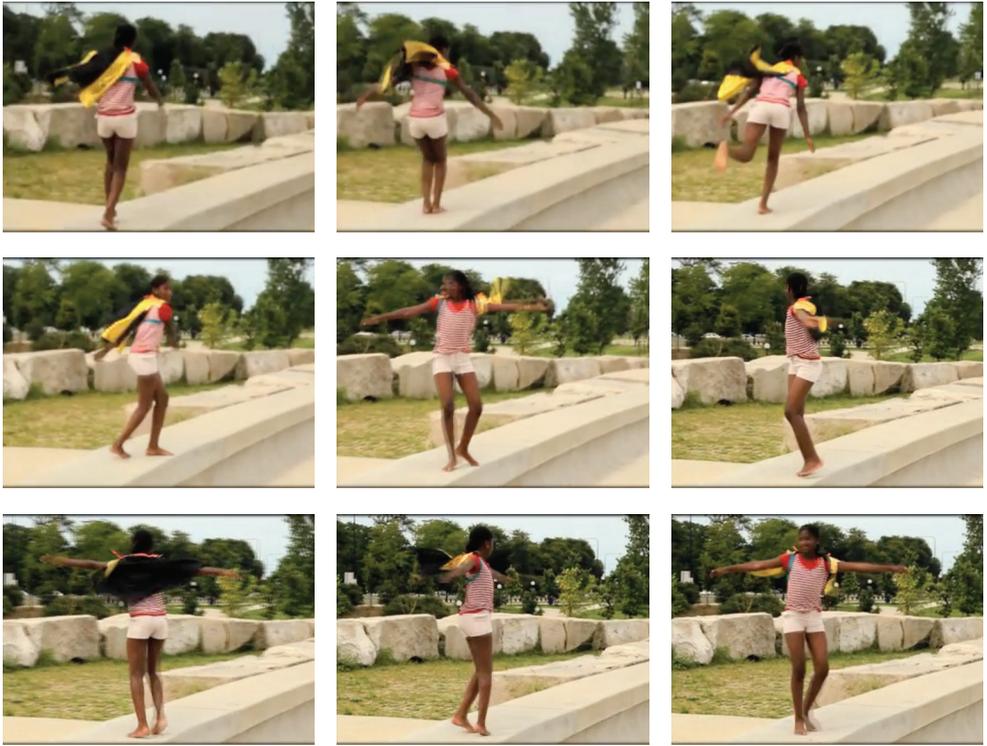
With her bold affirmation that “We Already Have What We Need,” Cauleen Smith sets an optimistic tone, the title of her exhibition assuring us that we have the tools to create the better world we yearn for. This hopeful outlook — maintained despite a clear-eyed view of the challenges we face as individuals and as a society — is announced with the first two works that greet viewers.

The short sketch-like video *Spin* (2012) pictures a young girl whirling and twirling on Chicago’s South Side on the Lake Michigan shore. Smith has combined the image with a sound recording of the iconic Afrofuturist jazz musician Sun Ra playing “The Sound of Joy” on the piano. The tough little girl is transformed into a picture of joyful liberation, envisioning herself — with a colorful cape spinning behind her — as a superhero, or perhaps an intergalactic being like Sun Ra himself. The power of this simple moment epitomizes Smith’s approach as an artist, which she describes as a “*reflection on the everyday possibilities of the imagination.*” The image of the girl might remind us of the last line of Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem, “The Second Sermon on the Warpland,” words which Smith has harnessed in other works: “Conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind.” Like Brooks’ poem, Smith’s work encourages us to stretch — to flower even — despite the precariousness and warped conditions in which we live. As Brooks wrote, “Salve salvage in the spin.”

On the wall facing *Spin*, a large silver flag made from a space blanket flutters in the breeze. The movement of the reflective material, aided by a wall-mounted fan painted to resemble an eye, produces shimmering reflections that create the impression that the room is under water. *Emerge and See* (2019) seems to signal both an emergency and the promise of rescue and healing. The banner announces a territory that might be on another side of the universe, or perhaps on the other side of a kind of suffering to which we’ve become blind. Smith’s works help us see a way out. Yet, while she may be an optimist, she would likely say that it is of necessity, in the vein of James Baldwin who declared in 1963: “*I can’t be a pessimist because I am alive. To be a pessimist means that you have agreed that human life is an academic matter, so I am forced to be an optimist.*” As Baldwin was, Smith is acutely



Cauleen Smith, *Conduct Your Blooming*, 2016 (detail). Seven banners: polyester, sequin-dot fabric, felt, cotton, and thread, 55 x 150 inches, Art Institute of Chicago, Ann M. Viekehr Prize Fund, The Neil G. Bluhm Contemporary Art Matching Fund Initiative, Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Endowment, Laura Slobe Memorial Prize, and Jacob and Bessie Levy Art Encouragement funds. Not in exhibition.



Cauleen Smith, *Spin*, 2012. Digital video, with sound, 3:30 min.

aware of the inequities — entrenched systems of oppression, racism, sexism, and violence that haunt our past and shape our present — yet she also maintains that alternatives are possible.

Trained as a filmmaker, Smith helps us visualize those speculative futures and histories, drawing on a range of literary, musical, and cinematic influences, from science fiction and experimental jazz to Third World Cinema. In her manifesto on “The Advancement of Creative Cinematic Maladjustment” (written by her alter ego, Kelly Gabron, and reprinted for this exhibition), Smith quotes Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the urgent need for new ways of seeing the world, advocating for a maladjustment to the status quo: “*I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination...*” King wrote, “*I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few.*” Likewise, Smith, the “maladjusted” filmmaker rejects these conditions and narratives that reify them. She resists simplified linear stories that distract and purport to resolve our desires. Instead, she chooses “aesthetic transcendence” and visual juxtapositions that set our minds free. “The Maladjusted play,” Smith wrote, “We play with all media and materials.” Indeed, in addition to working with the moving image, Smith makes objects, textiles, works on paper, and immersive installations, all of which are represented in the current exhibition. Across multiple formats, she addresses a range of themes related to the African Diaspora, the human condition, and the transformative power of art in all forms.



Cauleen Smith, installation view of *Give It or Leave It*, ICA, Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 2018
Photo: Constance Mensh

We Already Have What We Need

With her ambitious new video installation (also titled *We Already Have What We Need*), Smith was inspired by notions of what constitutes our basic needs, from the material to the metaphysical, and from the emotional to the ecological. She invites us on a journey through an immersive labyrinth of images and objects that animate five 22-foot tall video screens. Visitors navigate a path between looming slide projections, iPhone video, and found footage of cosmological events, along with seascapes, and natural and urban landscapes populated by various figures and artifacts of everyday life. Reminiscent of a ship's sails, these cloth structures hide from immediate view five tables that hold an array of seemingly incongruous objects: altered African figurines, a model sailboat, a black globe, Japanese Suiseki stones, plants, minerals, a hand-crafted ceramic incense burner with a tongue sticking out, braids, books, feathers, tchotchkes, and more mundane items. Live-feed CCTV recordings of these still-life vignettes — each set against the backdrop of a monitor streaming video — are projected at a large scale, creating new worlds as well as unexpected connections and challenges to categories and narratives crafted by a dominant white culture.

In this immersive wash of imagery, Smith merges the beauty of our planet with the “stuff” that we accumulate as we try to fulfill deeply personal needs that range from food, shelter, and medicine to art, music, and spirituality. Here, Smith asks us to consider our relationships to our own histories and to those of our ancestors, but also, and perhaps most significantly, to the natural environment that sustains and shapes us. Nurturing the landscape becomes a map for caring for all living things, and vice versa.

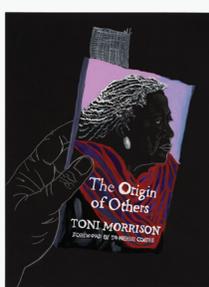
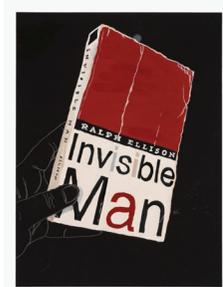
While objects might seem to be mysteriously projected across the room, Smith leaves the mechanics and means of production visible; evident cables, cameras, and monitors make a nod to the tactics of Structural film and act as a metaphor for truth and transparency. Yet this can still produce magic. Up above Smith's immersive terrain, she has treated the ten clerestory windows with colorful filters that progress from blue to red to blue again. As sunlight streams through the windows, veils of changing hue move across the screens and walls. The title of this artwork and architectural intervention, *Every Sunrise and Every Sunset All at Once*, refers to NASA's description of the light produced by an eclipse of a supermoon. Smith's title also suggests the compression of time, fusing past and future dawns and dusks into a medley of light and color, metaphorically connecting us to our ancestors, our descendants, and the galaxy that hosts us.

BLK FMNNST Loaner Library 1989–2019

Lining the central hall, *BLK FMNNST Loaner Library 1989–2019* (2019), a group of 32 works on paper, forms the physical and conceptual spine of the exhibition. The carefully rendered copies of book covers represent texts that influence Smith and that 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. The suite of drawings builds on her earlier work *Human_3.0 Reading List 2015–2016*, which offered a selection of writings that Smith proposed as a consciousness-raising “low-grade inoculation” against the seduction of neoliberalism and “corporate servitude.” As she wrote in an accompanying publication:

*Read. Write. Resist. Yes.
Read. Right. Resist. Yes.*

BLK FMNNST Loaner Library 1989–2019 focuses on the intersection of feminism, creative production, the nurturing of living things, and theories of “black fugitivity,” or strategies of refusal and liberation. The list of 32 books includes works by Dionne Brand, Ralph Ellison, Saidiya Hartman, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Christina Sharpe, among many others. Smith's choice of a black paper for the drawings is a reference to the tradition of velvet painting that captivated her as a child and a challenge to the tacit acceptance of “white” as a neutral ground.



Black and Blue Over You (After Bas Jan Ader For Ishan)

Black and Blue Over You (After Bas Jan Ader For Ishan) (2010) pays homage to Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader and his poignant, often absurdist investigations of human emotion and search for meaning. Smith's work mimics his 1974 film, *Primary Time*, which records the artist — seen only from the neck down — arranging red, yellow, and blue flowers for 25 minutes. (It has been described as a nod to fellow Dutchman Piet Mondrian's rigid adherence to primary colors). Smith similarly improvises a seemingly endless number of arrangements with a mix of blooms in black, white, and blue tones — the colors of mourning or, as the title suggests, a bruise. Smith's ritualistic action of arranging and rearranging suggests a continuous grieving. Grouping like colors together, she draws attention to the human impulse to construct categories of unnatural sameness. 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 many others. Simultaneously, the video celebrates the fleeting beauty of life.



Cauleen Smith, *Black And Blue Over You (After Bas Jan Ader For Ishan)*, 2010.
Digital video, with sound, 9:30 min.

The Changing Same

Smith's practice is deeply influenced by science fiction, ranging from Octavia Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* to Sun Ra's 1974 Afrofuturist cult film classic *Space is the Place* and Steven Spielberg's 1977 Hollywood blockbuster *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The earliest of Smith's works on view, *The Changing Same* (2001), mixes science fiction with film noir and French New Wave influences. The narrative follows an alien stationed on Earth who believes she is the only one of her kind on the planet. She is surprised when she encounters a fellow agent. The two find solace and companionship in each other amidst their isolation and attempts at assimilation. Several love scenes were filmed at the Rudolph Schindler House in L.A., an allusion to Smith's own upbringing in a diverse neighborhood with homes designed by Joseph Eichler and the utopian values associated with modernist architecture. Despite the protagonists' connection, the alienation is unbearable for the male who resorts to violently ending his mission — going "home," as he longed to do — in the only manner within his control. The film explores what it means to be an "outsider" and the desire to understand life's struggles within the context of some higher purpose and with the hope of an elsewhere.



Cauleen Smith, *The Changing Same*, 2001. 35 mm film transferred to video, with sound, 9:30 min.

H-E-L-L-O

H-E-L-L-O (2014) takes us on a languid tour of New Orleans and many of its most significant cultural and historic sites. At each, a musician plays a bass-clef instrument: trumpet, sousaphone, cello, bass saxophone, contrabassoon. They each 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*. The low frequency sounds take on a mournful tone against the backdrop of the city post-Katrina. They speak on a visceral, primal level, through our bones or the earth beneath our feet. The video starts at the Holy Cross Levee on the Mississippi River and moves to Tipitina's, one of New Orleans' best-known clubs; to Congo Square, its music center, once a remote part of town reserved for slaves; Booker T. Washington Auditorium, the de facto black civic center which has hosted Louis Armstrong and Mahalia Jackson; and St. Augustine Church, the oldest African American Catholic church in the nation. Smith articulates a feeling of abandonment in wake of the hurricane, as well as a deep desire to make connections across the divide, while celebrating the power that music has to communicate.



Cauleen Smith, *H-E-L-L-O*, 2014. HD video, with sound, 11:06 min.

In the Wake

Titled after Christina Sharpe's influential 2016 book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, which explores the aftermath of slavery, Smith's *In the Wake* banners (2017) speak both plainly and poetically to the ongoing violence experienced by black Americans. Part protest sign, part flag, part pep rally accessory, Smith's sumptuous, hand-sewn textile works are an important part of her practice and are usually created for use in her public processions. They draw on a long history of banners hoisted for celebration as well as social and political change, from those raised by labor unions or carried by activists in the Civil Rights movement. Smith has also been inspired by military regiment colors, Vodun tapestries, and banners flown by churches and marching bands. Her banner titled *Stop* is an anthem in a single word, while *Camera, Pen, or Gun?* seems to ask which is the more powerful weapon against bigotry and brutality. Presented at the Whitney Biennial in 2017, the banners were activated by a host of volunteers who paraded the streets outside the museum, singing lyrics incorporating the text on the banners set to music composed by Avery R. Young.



Cauleen Smith, *Stop*, 2017. Satin, poly-satin, upholstery, wool felt, silk-rayon velvet, embroidery floss, acrylic fabric paint, and sequins. 62 x 48½ inches
Cauleen Smith, *Camera, Pen, or Gun?* 2017. Satin, poly-satin, upholstery, wool felt, silk-rayon velvet, embroidery floss, acrylic fabric paint, and sequins. 73 x 47 inches

Egungun: Ancestor Can't Find Me

In *Egungun: Ancestor Can't Find Me* (2017), a figure shrouded in seaweed and shells emerges from the ocean and wanders between a lush jungle and a more suburban-looking swimming pool. The work references the Egungun masking traditions of the Yoruba people of West Africa who manifest and revere their ancestors in elaborate costumes usually accompanied by music, dance, and celebration. Smith was also inspired by the indigenous Calusa people who lived on the South Florida coast and left behind mysterious mounds of shells. Smith's silent, searching creature seems lost, perhaps the ghost of an enslaved African drowned in the Middle Passage or a Calusa ancestor looking for its descendants. Smith suggests, in her words, that "the chasm of time, distance, and violence has severed the ancestor's links to the living," leaving them to look for traces of them "in an endless, disorienting loop." Smith has treated the windows in the gallery with colored filters in a work titled *Weather #1* (2019), which submerges the room — and viewers — in a watery blue, bringing to mind the mercurial moods of ocean and sky, from balmy to brutal.



Cauleen Smith, *Egungun: Ancestor Can't Find Me*, 2017. 16 mm film transferred to video, with sound, 5:19 min.

Remote Viewing

Remote Viewing (2009) was inspired by a true account of a white town burying its black schoolhouse. Smith's video records the physical reenactment of this violent suppression of history; a picture-perfect white clapboard schoolhouse building stands tall on a dirt plain, facing a gaping trench made by a large excavator. The camera follows the machine as it methodically does its work, while a mother and child bear witness. Once the grave-like pit is completed, the building is suddenly pushed into the void. The large cut in the land brings to mind the monumental interventions of the Land Art movement of the 1960s and '70s. Smith draws parallels between these two kinds of callous erasure. The title of the work refers to the relative inaccessibility of these massive earthworks and the fact that they are mostly experienced at a distance through photo documentation. This remove mirrors the detachment evident in the general acceptance of systemic social violence and its distancing embedded in the neatly tied up narratives we click on with our TV remote. At the same time, the "remote" viewing of recent acts of racism and murder recorded on cell phones and spread via social media has brought usually invisible incidents into public view.



Cauleen Smith, *Remote Viewing*, 2009. HD video, with sound, 14 min.



Cauleen Smith, *Life: Shango & Roka*, 2006. Super 8 film transferred to video, with sound, 3 min., part of *I WANT TO SEE MY SKIRT*, made in collaboration with poet A. Van Jordan

I WANT TO SEE MY SKIRT

Smith created *I WANT TO SEE MY SKIRT* (2006) in collaboration with poet A. Van Jordan. The multi-channel video installation is inspired by photographs by Malian artist Malick Sidibé, who is known for his portraits of the people and energy of Bamako in the 1960s and '70s, in the wake of Mali's liberation from French colonial rule. Three of his photographs are presented in conjunction with this installation. Smith animates Sidibé's image of young West Africans, crafting a story that chronicles the growth of a young girl named Roka into a woman. The narrative revolves around the video of a portrait session with a photographer when Roka is little and she wants to see herself and her brilliant orange skirt. We see Roka at various ages: at home with her parents, enjoying the beach, and at a dance party with friends. A two-channel video features Roka and her boyfriend playfully tossing a beanbag back and forth across the screen. Combined with Jordan's evocative prose, which is displayed in English and read aloud in French (the official language of Mali), Smith examines the formation of identity and rethinks the portrayal of women on film through a collage of images and sound. She draws particular attention to the fashion and music that spread between Europe, the United States, and Africa and which have created hybrid global identities.

The installation includes a sculpture by Smith titled *All the World's Treasures*. A table shaped like the section of the Atlantic Ocean traversed in the Triangular Trade is piled high with hundreds of vibrantly patterned beanbags. Their eccentric shapes are likewise based on bodies of water sailed in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. They are stuffed with rice and black-eyed peas, crops which were brought to the Americas and cultivated by enslaved West Africans, and remain a significant part of the food culture in the South. Many are made out of Vlisco Dutch wax print fabrics which are produced in the Netherlands (since 1846), based on Indonesian Javanese batik, sold to West Africans, and associated with African identity. The beanbags reflect the legacy of colonialism and an ongoing appropriation and exchange of global cultures and commodities. A number are reminiscent of the human figure, underscoring a history of humans treated as chattel.



Cauleen Smith, *Woman Discusses Her Photograph*. Super 8 film transferred to video, with sound, 1:36 min., part of *I WANT TO SEE MY SKIRT*, 2006



Cauleen Smith, *Clock*. Video, with sound, 4:03 min., part of *I WANT TO SEE MY SKIRT*, 2006

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 in 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 at The Kitchen, New York; Art Institute of Chicago; and DuSable Museum of African American History, Chicago; the Center for Contemporary Art & Culture, Portland, Oregon; and Threewalls, Chicago. She is currently the subject of a solo exhibition which originated at the ICA, Philadelphia and is travelling to the ICA, Richmond, Virginia; the Frye Art Museum, Seattle; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Smith 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, where she resided for over a decade, to Los Angeles where she teaches at CalArts.

Cauleen Smith
We Already Have What We Need

May 26, 2019 – April 2020

Curated by Susan Cross

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Cover:

Cauleen Smith, *Egungun: Ancestor Can't Find Me*, 2017. 16 mm film transferred to video, with sound, 5:19 min.

All Cauleen Smith images courtesy of the artist; Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago; and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.



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