

Cauleen Smith

Give it
or it
Leave it

Cauleen Smith

Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania

Give it
or
Leave it

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I APPRECIATE

you

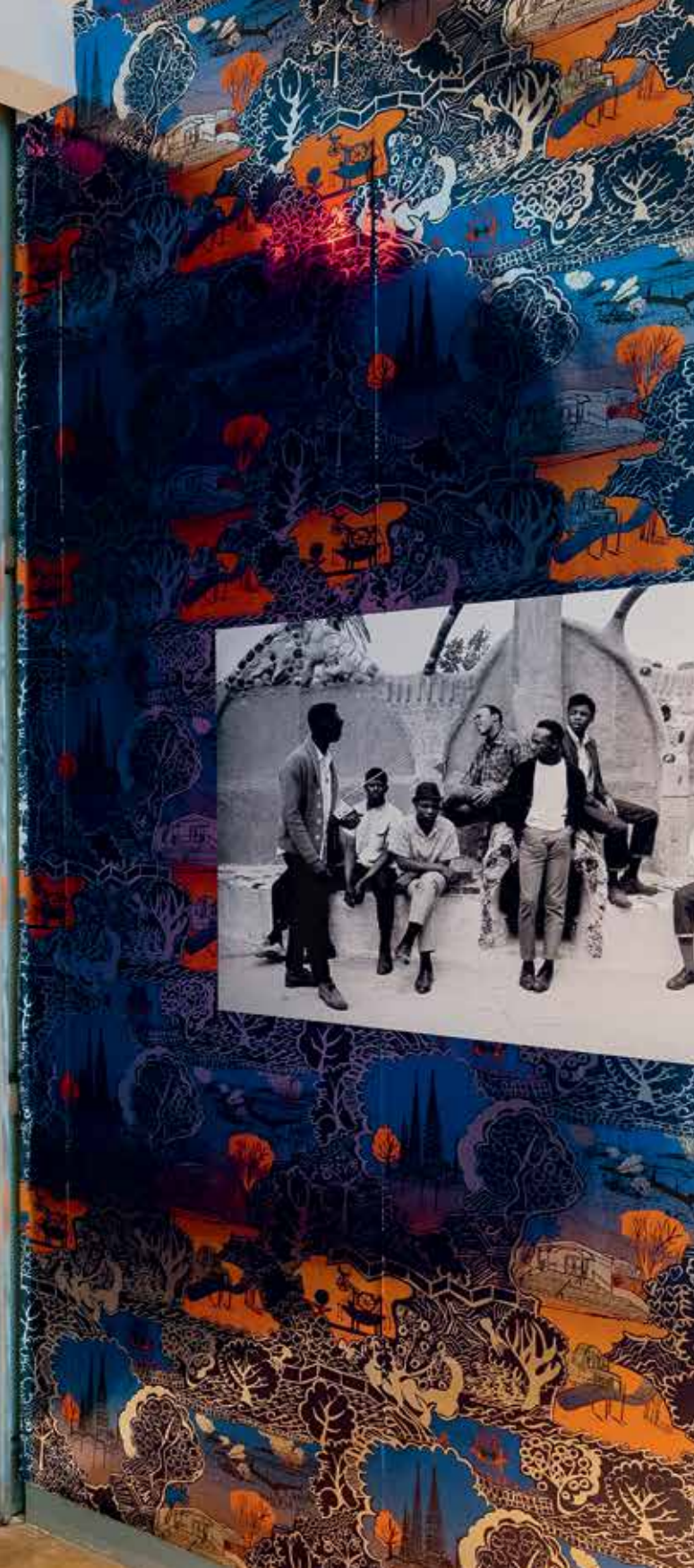
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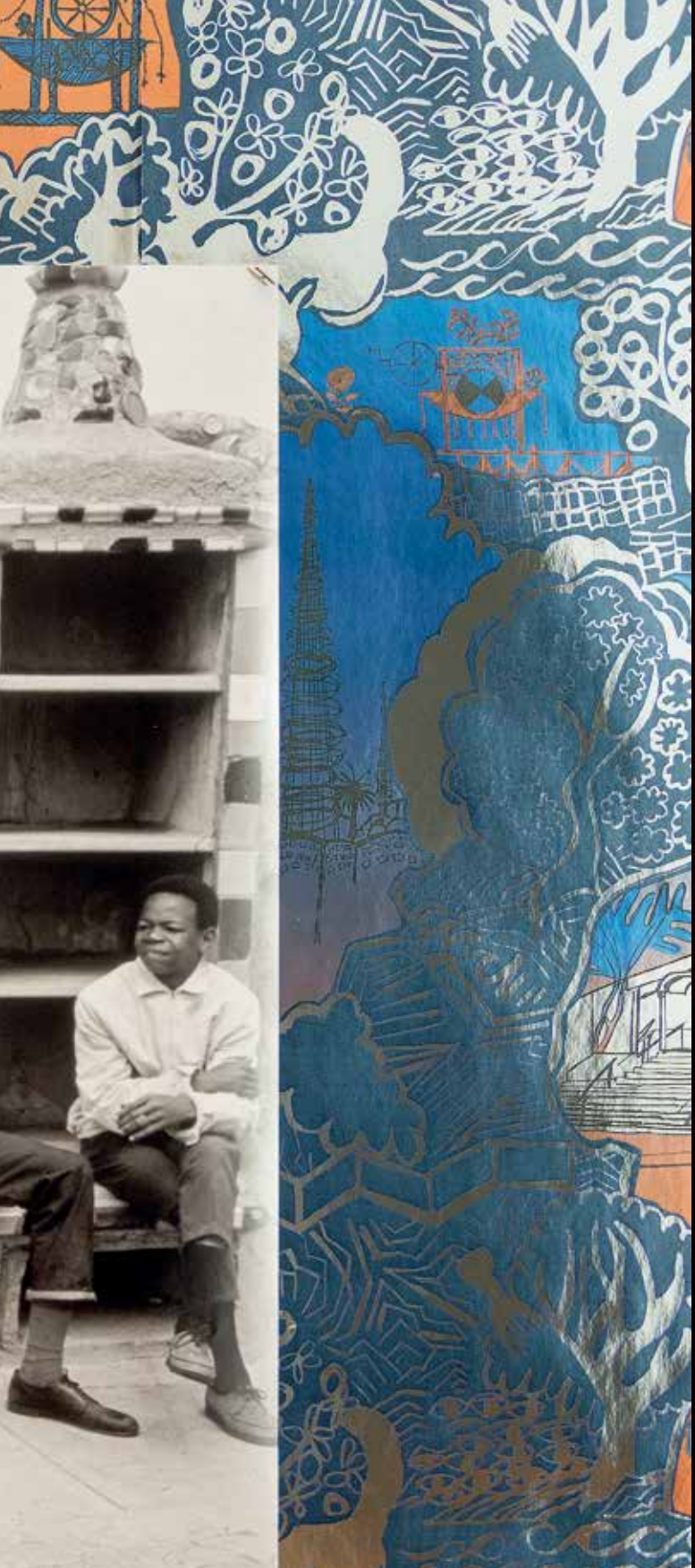
ADVANCE

I APPRECIATE
you
ADVANCE

THANK
you
ADVANCE



















Rhea Anastas in Conversation with Cauleen Smith



Conduct Your Blooming, 2015
Seven banners. Sequined fabric
with felt, cotton, rayon, letters.
Dimensions vary

On June 12 and 14, 2018, Cauleen Smith and I met at Smith's studio in Los Angeles to record a dialogue. Compiled and edited from our second day of talking, this conversation traverses Smith's most recent films, *Pilgrim* and *Sojourner*. Originating from a day of filming during December 2015 at Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda's ashram with Smith and Arthur Jafa both behind cameras, *Pilgrim* was finished for *The Warplands*, an exhibition at University Art Galleries, Contemporary Art Center (cac), University of California, Irvine, which opened in January 2017, and that I took as an opportunity to collaborate with Smith. Early into our work on this show, Smith, Anthony Elms, and I linked *The Warplands* to *Give It or Leave It* at ICA, aiming to enable Smith to develop multiple films, as well as other works. In this conversation—a year and a half after *The Warplands*, and three months before *Give It or Leave It*—we view *Sojourner* at a point when Smith was editing and working on the sound. To me, the conversation has the quality of seeing *Sojourner* take on its early shape for the first time, brought into view within the horizon of the project.

—————Rhea Anastas, June 14, 2018

Cauleen Smith

After you left on Tuesday, I started listening to a lecture with Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman, “The Black Outdoors,” because of the problem I’m having right now with the new film *Sojourner*.

Rhea Anastas

Can you say a few things about what was really sparking you in the lecture?

Cauleen

Well, I love the way it was about eschewing predetermined answers. Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman are very feral intellectuals. They are aware of the ground shifting underneath them, whereas other academics only try to cite their way into brilliance. In the lecture, Moten and Hartman were trying to respond to two scholars who wanted to have their theories validated. And Fred just comes correct saying, “We don’t all have to do the same thing.”

I feel that with art-making, there’s this expectation that you resolve what is supposed to be the answer to some question, right? And the problem is, I’m dealing with questions without answers. They only have models or tests or experiments that lead to more models or tests or experiments, which means that the things I’m making look like models or tests or experiments. The questions can’t be resolved, which is a problem, because that’s what showing in art institutions more or less demands.

As an example, I saw Mike Kelley’s work before I knew anything about art or who Kelley was. I was so disturbed by how I could enter the work but also felt very destabilized by it. It is shocking how comfortable I feel reading this work simply because he uses things that I know. But then he’s forcing me into conversations about this stuff that are disturbing. Even when pieces are beautifully made, they are horrifying, *and* they don’t seem resolved. I

was thinking about this aspect of Kelley’s work in relationship to the academics who were trying to get Moten and Hartman to validate their ideas in the lecture—not realizing that they don’t need validation. It would be so much better if they just kept asking questions.

Rhea

Right, if it was a flow or exchange. If the conditions are opened up, by which I mean, people conducting themselves with questions—when questions and refining an awareness with questions may produce a new thought.

It’s not surprising to me that in the work of a lot of the artists you are interested in, or I am interested in, we see this quality of being destructive towards taste and the decorum of analytical habits.

Cauleen

Decorum is the word, yeah.

Rhea

In your recent work, you study Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda’s incredible contribution to music and her life, her work. But I don’t want to speak about the work as research. It is the techniques—your way of getting very close to Coltrane’s work—and it’s the specifics of how this happens, which interest me most. I think the word, “research,” is impoverished when applied to art-making. What did you actually do? You listened. You read. You spoke with people.

Cauleen

Yeah, I mainly listened.

Rhea

You turned mainly to her musical output?

Cauleen

With Coltrane in particular, there is so much about her life that I chose not to bring into this project. I focused on the music because I was shocked and appalled at the way her music is kind of routinely



Pilgrim (still), 2017

Digital video and 16mm film,
color, sound, 7:41 minutes

dismissed. Well, not anymore, because in our moment she is one of the most fashionable twentieth-century figures to recuperate. Everyone is suddenly deeply interested in Alice Coltrane.

Rhea

Okay, but that’s only, what, four years old or something?

Cauleen

Oh, less than that. It’s literally the past two years. When I listened to her music, I couldn’t figure out how it was possible that she was dismissed. I just thought, she’s like the Yoko Ono of the jazz world, and all these macho heads are resentful of her, her life with John Coltrane, and how he was changing. She’s just a stellar musician; she just is. The keyboard and the harp, her voice, the way she uses her voice, which isn’t powerful; it’s simply a tool. The music is amazing and blew my mind.

Rhea

You’re speaking about the early- and mid-’70’s music?

Cauleen

That’s the stuff I love, after the death of John Coltrane, and then a few years into her move to California. There is this amazing output where she’s recording with people like Charlie Haden, and in the same moment she records an album with Carlos Santana.

Rhea

Alice Coltrane was the first figure, and then, within this hypothesis—a comparative one—you take Coltrane, together with Shaker gift drawings?

Cauleen

I had been obsessed with the gift drawings for ten years. Then just three years ago I went to Coltrane’s ashram for Sunday services. They had a little book store; I bought everything I could. Most critically,





*Black and Blue Over You, 2010 /
Strelitzia Satellite Meditation, 2012 / Cotton Plant 187?, 2018*

Cauleen Smith



Cotton Plant 187?, 2018
Digital video, color, sound.
6:43 minutes

*Strelitzia Satellite
Meditation, 2012*
Digital video, color, sound.
4:44 minutes

*Black and Blue Over You
(After Bas Jan Ader), 2010*
Digital video, color, sound.
9:40 minutes

Don't listen to *me*. I'm supposed to be accompanying *you*!



Give It or Leave It
(installation view), 2018

“Would you rather love or write a love song?” she asked right off. “Play free jazz or be free?” There didn’t seem to be much question or much choice. I laughed, hoping she would as well, but she only stared at me, the nothing-ever-was-anyway look now indisputable.”¹ This she is not Cauleen Smith; still, the questions remain. How I “love or write a love song,” or, “play free jazz or be free,” speaks volumes to my attentiveness relative to Smith’s films and videos, objects and spaces. The answers appear easy. Yet even if this were the case, I shouldn’t. Too male too white too heathen too oblivious. Too implicated in traditions that would rather purchase the free and define a noun than live a verb. And yet I have to.

Pause to note: Cauleen Smith is a filmmaker, unabashedly. In her methods and source materials, Smith can be said to look to the past for present-tense repairs to the future. These repairs manifest as films and videos—yes—but also drawings and banners and processions and manifestos and reading lists and intermedia assemblages and transformed spaces. Her desire to repair leads her to uncover primary sources in libraries, potent places, and fellow travelers. She looks to tune into those who form their own solutions—those who move beyond taking measure of our reality to gift us with unknown worlds unto this world. Composer/keyboardist/intellectual Sun Ra, poet Gwendolyn Brooks, activist Harriet Tubman, ersatz sculptor Simon Rodia, spiritualist Rebecca Cox Jackson, Shaker Godhead Mother Ann Lee, composer/keyboardist/Godhead Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda, sculptor Noah Purifoy, the activist Combahee River Collective, sculptor Paul Thek, music organization the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians—this list grows unabated. Sometimes the artistic results of Smith’s attention toward these traditions, in form and content, become as simple as slowing time and embracing the spectrum of the world’s visual and aural rhythms.

Before worrying about individual works here, or which facts or histories are most pertinent to *Give It or Leave It*, it’s valuable to

saxophonist Steve Lacy. Accessed: <<http://www.openculture.com/2017/12/the-lonious-monks-25-tips-for-musicians-1960.html>>.

1. Nathaniel Mackey, *Late Arcade* (New York: New Directions, 2017), 56-7. Essay title taken from a list of advice by composer Thelonious Monk, copied down in a notebook by

simply spend time—to start at the middle of the exhibition and in the middle encountering. From a lawn chair, seated at slight recline under the multicolored gel skylights of *Sky Learns Sky*, amidst the tabletop social landscape and CCTV projection of *Epistrophe*, facing a series of three flower arranging videos. Drift or float or project. Blending aural cues calm the quicker-paced visual stimulation. The laid-bare nature of production is made visible, edges apparent, edits distinct, coiled cables and power strips fed, sandbags and camera stands steady, monitors and sculptures front and set. It doesn't take more than six minutes to get a feel for the ebbing-flowing tide of the observable mingling rhythms. Stay longer—much longer—and here's a gilding in and gliding out of feeling, location, discovery, and detailing. Peaceful in movement—to the right, liquid rippling and brittle crackling, then above, atmosphere manifesting among an airy rustle and assembled crows cawing. Tone proliferates. From another room muffled audience clapping. From farther on broadcast voices are teaching, declaiming, declaring. Overlapping from another direction, the lyrically curling piano pushes forward. Interrupting at another angle the obdurately clustering organ. Agile windy tinkling permeates from nearly every curve. Speculative didgeridoo waves apace. Attentiveness stills you in growing awareness of even more distant spaces than this blending landscape can directly impart.

Monday evening, February 18, 1850. I was instructed concerning the atmosphere and its bounds. I saw it in its form—it is like the sea, which has her bounds—"Thus far shalt thou come, and no further." It covered land and sea, so far above all moving things and yet so far beneath the starry heavens. Its face is like the face of the sea, smooth and gentle when undisturbed by the wind. So is the atmosphere, when undisturbed by the power of the sun and moon. When agitated by these, it rages like the sea and sends forth its storms upon the earth. Nothing can live above it. A bird could no more live or fly above its face, than a fish can live or swim out of water.²

This distant experience is remarkably similar to that of the lawn chair's slight recline. So the questions: Who halts and also guides? Higher power? Equal partner? Within *Give It or Leave It*, you are a point within patterns of musical and geographical and historical and spiritual and physical caress. Each from elsewhere, even as it offers up seemingly intimate glimpses of new expanses. Maybe I am obliquely delaying direct discussion of Smith's efforts. Indeed. To

understand *Give It or Leave It*, or even much of Smith's past efforts, it is important to acclimate and attend, even, for a time, to be a good ride in prismatic splendor.

In delay is space—space for qualities and states rather than quantities. Every little thing rather alive. These intervals as you grow to accept them set everything in mixture: sound, sculpture, video, wallpaper, projection. A tuning fork chimes from the corner and breathing becomes a way to quickening orchestration. Cauleen's expanded sense of cinema—films made for a broad landscape and setting, not for the standard architecture of theaters—builds similarly to artist/filmmaker Elaine Summers's definition of intermedia, as, "when you enter the image and get wrapped up in it."³ Smith's intermedia assemblage is incessantly visual, no matter how she might appeal to musical or literary or geographical models, as one is foremost placed amidst her images. Her structures are groundwork for getting wrapped up in haunting and vulnerability and tactility and chromaticism and—.

An Aspect of Love, Alive in the Ice and Fire
LaBohem Brown

It is the morning of our love.
In a package of minutes there is this We.
How beautiful.
Merry foreigners in our morning.
we laugh, we touch each other,
are responsible props and posts.
A physical light is in the room.
Because the world is at the window
we cannot wonder very long.⁴

It's all there: here. Let's not wonder. To declaratively list the positional pivots embedded in *Give It or Leave It*: Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda's Vedantic center, the Sai Anantam Ashram; a 1966 photo shoot by photojournalist Bill Ray at Simon Rodia's Watts Towers; Noah Purifoy's desert assemblages; Rebecca Cox Jackson's visions and her primarily African American Philadelphia Shaker community; and finally, the politics of the black feminist Combahee River Collective.

Each broadcast along CCTV cameras and Triton monitors; all projection video and astral, along the Earth's rotation, a social gathering. *Italicize attentions to this.*

This is not only *Epistrophe* unfolding to a landscape responsible for props and posts to histories of black creativity, spiritual generosity,

3. This definition was quoted in the wall text for the 2018-19 exhibition *Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

4. Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), p. 21-22.



The Association for the Advancement of Cinematic Creative Maladjustment

A Manifesto

The following text is from a pamphlet that accompanied the public event, *Skowhegan and Whitewalls Conversation #3: Cauleen Smith and Greg Tate present The Association for the Advancement of Cinematic Creative Maladjustment*, which took place January 15, 2012, at the New Museum, New York.

FRIENDS, I alert you: This manifesto is a gasconade a non-violent word-grenade

a plushy feral tirade

a bombastic love parade. So, please, walk with me.

Bang your drum. Blow your horn. Load your camera. Let us promenade.

— Kelly Gabron

The third day of January on our two-thousand-twelfth lap around the Sun.

CREATIVE MALADJUSTMENT—————

There are certain technical words within every academic discipline that soon become stereotypes and clichés. Modern psychology has a word that is probably used more than any other word in modern psychology. It is the word “maladjusted.” . . . I say to you, my friends . . . there are certain things in our nation and in the world which I am proud to be maladjusted and which I hope all men of good-will will be maladjusted.

I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination.

I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry.

I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few.

I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to self-defeating effects of physical violence.

But in a day when Sputniks and explorers are dashing through outer space and guided ballistic missiles are carving highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can win a war. It is no longer the choice between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence. In other words, I'm about convinced now that there is need for a new organization in our world: