

PRESS RELEASE



Cauleen Smith, still from *Sojourner*, 2018. Video, color, sound, 22:41 min. Courtesy of the artist, Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.

CAULEEN SMITH: MUTUALITIES TO OPEN AT THE WHITNEY IN FEBRUARY

New York, January 16, 2020—*Mutualities*, the multidisciplinary artist Cauleen Smith's first solo show in New York, will open at the Whitney Museum of American Art on February 17. The exhibition includes two films, *Sojourner* (2018) and *Pilgrim* (2017), shown in two installation environments newly created for the Whitney, along with a group of new drawings, collectively titled *Firespitters* (2020).

Scott Rothkopf, Senior Deputy Director and Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator, remarked, "We're delighted to welcome Cauleen Smith back to the Whitney. With their exquisite atmosphere and construction, *Sojourner* and *Pilgrim* offer lyrical views of important figures and sites in Black history, and also look toward a shared future. The show builds a beautiful bridge between the other pillars of our spring exhibition program, pointing to the political concerns of *Vida Americana* and the spiritual uplift of *Agnes Pelton*."

Smith (b. 1967)—whose banners were prominently featured at the Museum in the 2017 Whitney Biennial—draws on poetry, science fiction, non-Western cosmologies, and experimental film to create works that reflect on memory and Afro-diasporic histories.

Chrissie Iles, the Whitney's Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Curator, who has organized the show with Clémence White, senior curatorial assistant, commented, "We are proud to bring together Cauleen Smith's films, installations, and drawings in an exhibition that articulates an ethics of care, engagement, and generosity. Each element of the show is experienced through another—books written and chosen by poets invited by the artist appear in delicate gouaches; a film tracing a pilgrimage to spiritual sites is bathed in the colored light of the installation surrounding it. The museum's recognition of Smith's long and deeply engaged practice is underlined by our recent acquisition of both films, *Sojourner* and *Pilgrim*, which join her banners already in the Whitney's collection."

In *Sojourner*, a group of women walk in procession through sites including Dockweiler State Beach and Watts Towers in Los Angeles. The women carry translucent orange banners, each emblazoned with part of a text by the jazz composer and spiritual leader Alice Coltrane (1937–2007). Watts Towers, a cluster of seventeen sculptural spires, served as a symbol of hope and regeneration after surviving the 1965 Watts Rebellion unscathed. Smith locates a similar spirit in assemblage artist Noah Purifoy's Outdoor Desert Art Museum in Joshua Tree, California. The women end their procession there, listening to readings of the Black feminist Combahee River Collective, Sojourner Truth (1797–1833), and Alice Coltrane. Their collective voices, echoed in contemporary footage of the Chicago-based activist coalition R3 (Resist. Reimagine. Rebuild.), fuse spirituality and activism into a potent articulation of self-realization and resistance. The actions unfold not only within different sites within the film itself, but in an immersive kaleidoscopic environment of light and seating in the Museum that interconnects the film with a more expansive sense of place and collective presence.

Pilgrim traces the artist's pilgrimage to three sites: Alice Coltrane's Turiyasangitananda Vedantic Center in Agoura, California; Watts Towers in Los Angeles; and the Black spiritual activist Rebecca Cox Jackson's (1795–1871) Watervliet Shaker community in upstate New York. Smith vividly evokes the creative atmosphere of each place, allowing the camera to slowly explore the ashram's interior and Coltrane's musical instruments, and using the soft grain and subtle color of Super 8 film to infuse the footage of Watts Towers and the flowers in the Shaker garden with an emotional intimacy. Jackson's advocacy of racial and gender equality, her fight against the patriarchy of organized religion, and her awareness of the African roots of her faith resonate with Coltrane's own hybrid, transnational spiritual and musical language. Both women's challenges to accepted authority are, like the enduring independent spirit of Watts Towers, grounded in a sense of place, community, and generosity that are also hallmarks of Smith's own transformative work.

Unfolding across several important sites in Black spiritual and cultural history, the two films in the exhibition weave together writings by women from different eras, including Shaker visionary Rebecca Cox Jackson, abolitionist Sojourner Truth, the Black feminist Combahee River Collective of the 1970s, and experimental-jazz composer and spiritual leader Alice Coltrane, whose music also forms the soundtrack for both films. This gathering of voices enacts a shared Black female subjectivity, the collective strength of which is expressed in Smith's poetic use of the camera and light as improvisational instruments to reveal how invention, creativity, and generosity can be resources for transformation and regeneration. By placing the title of this exhibition in the plural, Smith draws a connection between the two films while pointing to the idea that what is held in common is never singular.

The screenings of Smith's films in High Line Art's presentation of *Signals from Here*, organized by Melanie Kress, High Line Art Associate Curator, will take place from dusk until the park closes, on the High Line at 14th Street. The program includes *Three Songs About Liberation* (2017), *Crow Requiem* (2015), *Lessons in Semaphore* (2015), *H-E-L-L-O* (2014), and *Songs for Earth and Folk* (2013).

About the Artist

Cauleen Smith is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work draws upon Black radical thought, structural film, poetry, and science fiction. Born in Riverside, California in 1967, she grew up in Sacramento, and earned a B.A. in Cinema from San Francisco State University and an MFA at the University of California, Los Angeles School of Theater Film and Television. At UCLA, she studied with the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, a group of graduate students who started a Black Cinema movement at the university's Film School in the mid-1960s. She has made over 40 films, and her first feature length film, *Drylongso* (1998), premiered at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival before circulating with acclaim to other film festivals. She has had exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago, ICA Philadelphia, MASS MoCA, the Studio Museum of Harlem, the New Museum, New York, the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, and the Kitchen, New York, and was featured in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. She is the recipient of numerous awards and residencies including the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2007), the National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture, Artist Award (2012), the Washington Park Arts Incubator, Arts and Public Life Residency (2013), and the Rauschenberg Residency (2015). She has taught at various universities over the span of the last two decades, and is a Faculty member of Cal Arts School of Art in Los Angeles.

Public Program

Screening and Conversation with Cauleen Smith and Michael Gillespie

Friday, March 27, 6:30 pm

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Whitney will present a rare screening of *Passing Through* (1977, 105 min) by LA Rebellion filmmaker Larry Clark, preceded by one of Cauleen Smith's films. Following the screening, Smith will be in conversation with film scholar Michael Boyce Gillespie, Associate Professor of Film in the Department of Media and Communication Arts and the Black Studies Program at the City College of New York, City University of New York.

Tickets required. (\$10 adults; \$8 members, students, seniors, and visitors with a disability).

Curatorial Credit

Cauleen Smith: Mutualities is organized by Chrissie Iles, Anne & Joel Ehrenkranz Curator, with Clémence White, senior curatorial assistant.

Exhibition Support

Cauleen Smith: Mutualities is part of the Whitney's emerging artists program, sponsored by

NORDSTROM

Generous support is provided by The Rosenkranz Foundation.

Additional support is provided by the Artists Council.

About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists at a time when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for more than eighty years. The core of the Whitney's mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists themselves, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art

The Whitney's Collection: Selections from 1900 to 1965	Ongoing
Order and Ornament: Roy Lichtenstein's Entablatures	Through April 2020
Pope.L: Choir	Through March 8, 2020
Making Knowing: Craft in Art 1950–2019	November 22, 2019–January 2021
fruits, vegetables; fruit and vegetable salad	January 15–February 17, 2020
Cauleen Smith: Mutualities	February 17–May 17, 2020
Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945	February 17–May 17, 2020
Jill Mulleady: We Wither Time into a Coil of Fright	On View March 2020
Salman Toor: How Will I Know	March 20–July 5, 2020
Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist	March 13–June 21, 2020
Dave McKenzie: The Story I Tell Myself	April–May 2020
Prints from Everyday Objects	June–September 2020
Julie Mehretu	June 26–September 20, 2020

Working Together: The Photographers of the Kamoinge Workshop	July–October 2020
Around Day's End: Downtown New York, 1970–1986	July–October 2020
My Barbarian	Opens September 2020
Public Art Project: David Hammons: Day's End	Opens September 2020
Jasper Johns	Opens October 28, 2020
Dawoud Bey: An American Project	Opens November 2020

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Museum hours are: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday from 10:30 am to 6 pm; Friday from 10:30 am to 10 pm. Closed Tuesday except in July and August. Adults: \$25. Full-time students, visitors 65 & over, and visitors with disabilities: \$18. Visitors 18 years & under and Whitney members: FREE. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 7–10 pm. For general information, please call (212) 570-3600 or visit whitney.org.

###