

<Gallery 2: Mapping>

“Landscape is always full of movement,” Smith wrote in 1984, in an artist statement for one of her earliest solo exhibitions. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, Smith made drawings and paintings of places with significance to her, including Wallowa, Oregon, and her reservation in Montana. The works, which she came to describe as maps, reject the conventions employed by Euro-American landscape painters. Instead of capturing romanticized, unpopulated panoramas of distant mountains or rivers, Smith depicts inhabited landscapes, with her marks signifying human and animal movements. Smith’s lines and blocky forms suggest the travois, a sled-like conveyance made of two poles and a platform used primarily by Plains people to transport heavy loads. Like the travois, these drawings carry personal meaning and understanding about place.

<Gallery 3: What Befalls the Earth>

In the mid-1980s, a proposed housing development in suburban Albuquerque, New Mexico, threatened to destroy a culturally significant lava-rock escarpment filled with ancient petroglyphs. Smith became involved with campaigns to save the area, which would eventually be recognized by the federal government as a national monument. The drawings and paintings of the Petroglyph Park series (1985–87) mark the first time Smith's art responded to news reports of current events, an approach that became integral to later works.

The 1989–91 Chief Seattle (or C.S.) series continues Smith's critique of unfettered industrialization and the reckless abuse of natural resources. These works grapple with broader global and regional concerns, such as the modern reliance on fossil fuels, a major contributor to acid rain. Smith combines objects like light bulbs, spoons, and garden hoses with canvases covered in thick paint, and overlays phrases attributed to the nineteenth-century Duwamish and Squamish leader Chief Si'ahl (Seattle) that emphasize the interdependence of humans and nature. Mainstream environmentalism at the time concentrated on issues like pollution and recycling, but Smith's work draws a clear link between the exploitation of the land and the blatant disregard of treaties made between the US government and Native nations. With these paintings, Smith implores viewers to understand their connection to the earth and forestall ecological crisis for the survival of future generations.

<Gallery 4: For a Post-Colonial World>

In 1992, planned celebrations for the quincentennial of Christopher Columbus's landing in the Americas provoked a powerful response from artists and activists. They sought to raise awareness of how Columbus's arrival set in motion one of the largest and most sustained genocides in human history. Smith was remarkably prolific during this period, creating dozens of new works and collaborating with fellow artists on exhibitions and events. Smith and a group of her friends formed the Submuloc Society, making T-shirts and pins and organizing activities for anti-celebrations. "Submuloc" is "Columbus" backward and this was a goal of the society—to reverse or counter the popular stories of European contact.

Though Smith's politics had always imbued her work, this particular moment in American history compelled her to be more direct. Her desire for clarity and transparency led the artist to pursue immediately recognizable imagery, such as the trade canoe and bison, and to explore these iconic motifs through collage. Smith's incorporation of clippings from newspapers, magazines, and books recalls the methods of artists like Robert Rauschenberg, but her approach differs: Smith leans into, rather than away from, the cultural significance and authority that printed matter can convey. The works in this gallery confront the violence of displacement and the extreme inequities of the earliest negotiations between Indigenous peoples and settlers in North America.

<Gallery 5: War is Heck>

The consequences of US-led invasions—of Indigenous lands on this continent and other sovereign nations abroad—are visible themes in Smith’s work across the decades. A 1993 series of prints and drawings co-opts a well-known image of George Armstrong Custer, the United States Army general notorious for his deadly campaigns against Lakota, Arapaho, and Northern Cheyenne people during the late 1860s, and for his defeat and death at the Battle of Little Bighorn in Montana in 1876. Custer’s widow successfully cultivated his mythic reputation as a military hero, a distorted view transmitted through American popular culture by widely circulated photographs and illustrations of him. Smith introduces an element of humor to Custer’s image, ridiculing his renown and underscoring the inaccuracies of recorded history.

In the early 2000s, Smith’s outrage over the invasion of Iraq and the post-9/11 policies of George W. Bush prompted her to address the imperialist violence perpetrated by the United States outside of North America. Her paintings and prints convey her visceral reaction to the horrors of war, often by employing art historical references such as Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), images of Sumerian artifacts looted from the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, and political cartoons by José Guadalupe Posada. Smith also highlights how objects and sites of cultural heritage are often targeted and weaponized in wars, and joins a long line of artists who have condemned such conflicts in their work.

<Gallery 7: Green Flag / McFlag>

Although couched in humor, irony, and satire, Smith's work in recent decades offers a biting critique of American capitalism and consumerism. In the paintings and prints in this gallery, she targets the once foreign concepts of private property and commodity foods (the rations given by the federal government to people living on reservations), which have decimated Indigenous economies, diets, and medicinal practices. She also takes aim at Manifest Destiny, the Anglo-Christian doctrine that asserted westward expansion was a divine plan for the United States, thus justifying the attempted extermination of Indigenous peoples.

The repercussions of these beliefs and policies live on in the many ways that contemporary consumer culture has infiltrated Native American traditions: canned Spam instead of bison meat, for instance, or manufactured pharmaceuticals rather than herbal medicines. Looking more widely at life across the US, Smith draws connections between visual tropes of the "Wild West," like the "cowboys and Indians" of advertising and entertainment, and the seemingly unlimited reach of corporate influences into even the smallest and most personal experiences of contemporary daily life.

<Gallery 8: Grasp Tight>

Smith often makes a simple but profound observation: “My existence is a miracle.” With this phrase, she recognizes that despite genocide, decades of war, forced assimilation, and systemic oppression, she and other Indigenous survivors are still here to practice and share their culture. Throughout her work, Smith acknowledges that the wisdom of ancestors and elders is not only sacred but essential, and references to matrilineage and matriarchal power recur, often through the image of the cut-wing dress. Plains and Plateau women express their creativity and mark life events with the dress, and Smith uses it to convey the individuality and strength of Indigenous women who lead their families and communities. Densely layered and laden with meaning, Smith’s signs and symbols celebrate the ways in which reclamation of traditions and their continued observance preserve Indigenous cultures for generations yet to come.

<Gallery 10: Re-Mapping>

The map of the United States is one of the most central and recognizable motifs in Smith's paintings, drawings, and prints. Her works reveal the falsehoods and assumptions underlying this supposedly objective image, thereby challenging its authority and symbolic power. In Smith's maps of North America, the land transgresses and ignores current borders, demonstrates changing populations and notions of citizenship, and foregrounds how Indigenous peoples have shaped this continent since long before European invasion. Smith's works reflect her philosophy of maps: they are pictures of experiences rather than markers of geopolitical boundaries, embodying an understanding of place that privileges relationships, stories, and memory. Her maps are a form of reclamation, forcefully asserting Indigenous sovereignty on stolen land.

<Gallery 11 [Kaufman]: Which Comes First>

The abuse and mismanagement of the environment by industry and government have been marked points of concern in Smith's work. Through her activism and her art, Smith continues to attend to the environmental changes she sees—from global concerns to the health of ecosystems near her home and even in her backyard garden. Smith has said, “Ecology is a science that has been practiced by the Native people on this continent for thousands of years. For instance, in my tribe, after harvesting the bitterroot for the spring feast, there is the specific act of cleaning the plants to ensure next year's crop. This is *giving back*. This has been our way of survival.”

In 1977, Smith and other Indigenous students at the University of New Mexico formed a collective called Grey Canyon, its name a nod to the cast-concrete water conduits seen throughout Albuquerque.

The group—Larry Emerson, Conrad House, Emmi Whitehorse, Paul Willeto [all Navajo (Diné), except for House (Navajo [Diné]/Oneida)], Felice Lucero (San Felipe Pueblo), and Smith—met informally to discuss their art and support one another, but Smith also actively sought opportunities to show their work.

Through her efforts, the art of Grey Canyon would travel to several venues from 1979 to 1983, including the Gallery of the American Indian Community House in New York, the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in Santa Fe, the Portland Art Museum in Oregon, and the Galleria del Cavallino in Venice, Italy. Smith was energized by this kind of organizing, and throughout her career continued to push for the recognition of contemporary Native American artists, curating the first traveling exhibitions of Native women artists (*Women of Sweetgrass, Cedar and Sage*, 1985) and Native photographers (*Photographing Ourselves: Contemporary Native American Photography*, 1984) in the United States.