

THE FUTURE IS NOW

Filmmaker and conceptual artist Cauleen Smith's work addresses the past, present and future of systems, sharing and hierarchies.

BY **ALLISON BERG**
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WHEN I REACHED OUT TO CAULEEN Smith in anticipation of this story, her contact puzzlingly appeared in my phone as "Saturn Jupiter." Some investigative journalism revealed that both Saturn and Jupiter are deeply rooted in the lexicon of Afrofuturism. Smith's oeuvre has long been informed by this social, political and artistic movement that respected cultural critic Mark Dery defined in his 1993 essay, "Black to the Future," as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture." Afrofuturism involves artists, filmmakers, authors and musicians exploring the intersection of African diasporic culture with science fiction, via the lens of Black history, narratives and imagery, to envision a future that celebrates Black culture in a way that overcomes issues of social hierarchy and oppression.

And so, it became clear to me that Smith had very intentionally chosen the cosmic moniker. I couldn't wait to unpack its significance along with what she was thinking about when she created her upcoming show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and what it all means in 2020 as we attempt to make our way forward.

"Absolutely," confirms Smith when I speak with her, "I created that email address when I moved to Chicago for a residency and was researching Sun Ra's archives ten years ago. Sun Ra was always saying he was from the planet Saturn." Inspired by the American jazz composer and poet, who is credited with being the first person to advance Afrofuturistic music, Smith derived the second half of her Gmail contact from her favorite song by his musical collective Arkestra, "The Second Stop is Jupiter." Smith improvisationally typed out the name while spending time immersed in the history of Ra, his business manager, social entrepreneur Alton Abraham, and their El Saturn Research conceptual lab and never looked back.

Afrofuturism provided Smith a place to land in terms of framing the work she was already making. "It's a tool for understanding how my interest in science fiction relates to Blackness with regard to creative expression," she says. "I was really grateful for the term when I encountered it." That said, Smith proposes there may be potential liability in the more recent formalization of Afrofuturism as an academic field of study. She worries people asserting themselves as "experts" may



Photographed at the historic Evergreen Cemetery in Boyle Heights, conceptual artist Cauleen Smith reflects on "the everyday possibilities of the imagination," addressing the past, present and future in her work.

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confuse the ideas of speculative and science fiction with supernatural and spiritual theories. Discussing Afrofuturism in the 1990s, Dery, scholar Tricia Rose and musician-producer Greg Tate laid a terrain filled with many new exciting ideas and questions that weren't overly concerned with definitive answers. "In the late 1990s, we were not thinking about spirituality," Smith explains. "We were thinking about what it meant to be a human being who was understood almost like a cyborg from the beginning of our presence on this continent and how that would shape our identity and expression." This practice of wondering and exploring future possibilities rooted in history and reimagining an America in which African-descended people and culture are valued and central to the country's story—rather than other—is in no small part what makes Smith's work so compelling.

Often labeled an interdisciplinary artist, Smith considers her practice conceptual. Though identifying first and foremost as a filmmaker, she makes determinations about her chosen materials,

gestures and devices based on the ideas she is exploring. She incorporates everyday objects into her installations that audiences are familiar with, so that she can then expand on those existing relationships. Her work speaks to perspectives and hierarchies. "I don't believe that if something is beautifully crafted, it is somehow superior to other things that are mass produced. The way that something is made makes a statement about it, but that in and of itself doesn't imbue importance or make it better than or lesser than another thing," Smith says. "When you mix things together and play with the arrangements, it confuses people's relationships to hierarchies."

Challenging concepts of hierarchies—or any value system—is clearly of primary interest to Smith. Similarly, she questions the way we think about nature, land and our place on this planet. Having grown up with parents who took great pleasure in their gardens, Smith finds planting a seed and watching it grow transfixing. "It is like watching a child grow or anything transform over time," she says. "In fact, I am



A still from Cauleen Smith's *Sojourner*, 2018

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, CORBETT VS. DEMPSEY, CHICAGO, AND KATE WERBLE GALLERY, NEW YORK, AND INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, © CAULEEN SMITH

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thinking more right now about our relationship with land. What if we, as Americans, tried to better understand our relationship with the earth and learn from indigenous ideas of how we are integrated into our spaces and environments?" A lover of cities, Smith finds nature's beauty everywhere—in weeds sprouting from sidewalk cracks, vacant lots and trees that thrive despite municipal neglect.

Smith brings this heightened sense of environment and space to "Cauleen Smith: Give It Or Leave It" at LACMA this December. On its final stop of a two-year journey from the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, this traveling exhibition navigates parallel realities through film, objects and installation. Smith does not seek to focus the show around any one object or subject. Rather, her approach leans toward maximalism. There is a lot happening simultaneously with all parts connecting to one another, so that viewers are challenged to make choices and decisions in order to settle into the work. "I have never been into the pure, quiet, simple art," explains Smith, laughing. "I want the art spaces to align with our totally crazy living environments."

In the show, objects on a table, in conjunction with films, create literal and figurative space. The films act as portals, synthesizing ideas about shifts in perspectives, values and time. "My hope is that viewers start thinking about how we perceive and understand how difficult it really is to trust that we are fully comprehending things we like to think we know very well," says Smith. The film footage features Alice Coltrane, a successful musician who established an ashram in Malibu, a photo shoot by Billy Ray at the Watts Towers built by Simon Rodia, Noah Purifoy, who spent years building his desert museum, and spiritualist Rebecca Cox Jackson, who established a Shaker community in Philadelphia primarily for Black women. These people and environments all embody a dedication to creating space for others. The tables in the exhibition are also very much about sharing with other people and reference ideas of equity and equality. "I really hate the metaphor of a 'level playing field,' because that is never true," says Smith, who is intrigued by both the actual table surface and what is on it. "But there is something about a table and the unbelievably high stakes of who gets to sit at it."

In addition to her art, for over a decade, Smith, who is currently part of the faculty at CalArts, has been sharing with others and giving back through teaching. I inquire if she differentiates her role as a teacher from her role as an artist. Smith tells me as a teacher she feels responsible for guiding her students toward a way of thinking and learning with a high cognizance of the outcomes, which is something she is not concerned with as an artist. She also contemplates her duty as an educator at a private school where the costs of the education, relative to the ability to survive financially after graduation, have become prohibitive.

Smith continues to think about collectives and cooperatives, gift economies and women who live their lives outside of acceptable norms in every possible way. "I remain fascinated by the choices women are forced to make. Not that long ago, it was unacceptable to be a single woman over the age of 30. No one ever asks us about it; we aren't the ones determining these values," she says. "I have been making work about the same stuff for 20 years—which is basically about a consciousness of Black women in terms of forming identities that are resistant to the systems we have to deal with in this world."

As fed up as she is with our current systems of inequality and cruelty, Smith is questioning when and how to move forward with projects. She is grappling, not only with the challenge of physically gathering, but also with how another film can be impactful when people



An installation view of "Cauleen Smith: Give It Or Leave It," which originally opened two years ago at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania. The traveling exhibition will make its final stop at LACMA this December.

are so inundated with information on their screens. "Give It Or Leave It" is a show with very willful exuberance that, in retrospect, she is not sure she was feeling in 2018. "I did think those ideas were important to conjure up in the face of some of the obstacles of that time. But does it matter now when we are embroiled in a global pandemic and the way capitalism is making our planet unlivable? Or maybe it is more relevant now to people who didn't previously care? We have literally become unsafe because we continuously take habitats from the things we share the space with. It's killing us," she proclaims.

Smith's endearing laugh softens even the gravest of statements. I wonder if it is a byproduct of her many years of teaching or the result of years of treading lightly when people were just "not getting it." But before I can ask, she continues, "I think we are witnessing the crumbling of a failed experiment. This is a country founded on genocide and coerced labor of captive Africans. There is nothing we can say that changes that reality, virus or no virus." Smith questions why it has taken the horrors of "now" to fully wrap our heads around atrocities such as the burning of bodies at the Nazi concentration camp Dachau or the traumas of the dystopia depicted in Octavia Butler's science fiction novel *Parable of the Sower* that quotes George Bush as saying, "Make America Great Again"—over 20 years ago. Maybe it takes the future to understand the past? The future has arrived. Where do we go from here?

"People are desperate to get back to 'normal,' but I think 'normal' was horrible, and I don't want to return to it," Smith explains. "I spend a lot of time thinking about what I can go back to or what I should be there. I believe we are witnessing the end of an empire." At the same time, Smith also feels a sense of excitement and momentum. "Things are moving fast, and people are catching on. Seven years ago, when Patrisse Cullors hashtagged Black Lives Matter, it felt offensive to many and was even suppressed," she says. "Now, we are talking about defunding the police on CNN and seeing Black Lives Matter signs on posh neighborhood garage doors. It was inconceivable that the people driving fancy cars would give a crap about Black people being murdered by police with impunity. I am sickened that a man had to die for this shift to happen, but I do have hope."