

Press Release

Exhibition

Cauleen Smith: We Already Have What We Need

July 15–October 3, 2021



Cauleen Smith, *We Already Have What We Need*, 2019. As installed in *Cauleen Smith: We Already Have What We Need*, MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts (May 25, 2019–April 2020). Photo: David Dashiell, courtesy MASS MoCA.

#CauleenSmith
#TrustArtists
#atCAMH

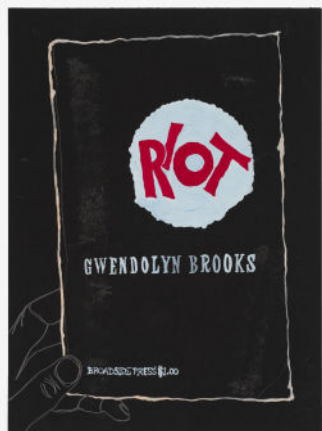
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HOUSTON, TEXAS (April 14, 2021) – Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) is pleased to announce the upcoming exhibition *Cauleen Smith: We Already Have What We Need*, which presents works by the acclaimed Los Angeles-based artist, and features film, video, sculpture, textiles, installation, and drawing. Organized by MASS MoCA, the exhibition has been modified for CAMH’s site-specific presentation which includes a new installation and recent work in neon, on view in the Museum’s Brown Foundation Gallery July 15 through October 3, 2021.

For over three decades, Smith (b. 1967, Riverside, California) has harnessed acts of imagination and the power of revolutionary thinking to envision a better world.

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Cauleen Smith
Riot, 2019
from the series *BLK FMNNST Loaner Library 1989-2019*
Gouache and graphite on paper
11 7/8 x 8 7/8 inches each (unframed)
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago



Cauleen Smith
Light Up Your Life (For Sandra Bland), 2019
Neon, Plexiglas, faceted hematite, and aluminum chain
106 3/4 x 68 x 5 inches
Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin. Commissioned and produced by Artpace San Antonio. Purchase through the generosity of an anonymous donor, 2020

The title of the exhibition—and the expansive video installation at its center—suggests that, in fact, “We Already Have What We Need.”

At the center of the gallery, sail-like projection screens take us on a metaphorical journey to a familiar—yet alternative—elsewhere. Merging projected images of nature with provocative still-life arrangements featuring plants, quotidian objects, and African figurines, Smith examines varied notions of our basic human needs, from the material to the spiritual, the personal to the universal. Using the languages of science fiction, Third World Cinema, and Structural film (which reveals its mechanics), she rethinks traditional representation and the realities it constructs, rendering visible both the people and the systems often kept invisible, or recasting what we know in a new—and colorful—light.

The literal and figurative capacity of light to serve as a beacon of truth and transparency comes further into focus in two new and recent works included in CAMH’s iteration of the exhibition. In her site-specific architectural intervention, *Leonids Over, Still, and Then* (2021), Smith applies colorful vinyl filters to the Museum’s glass entrance doors. As sunlight streams through the windows, veils of changing hue move across the space. Smith’s neon banner *Light Up Your Life (For Sandra Bland)* (2019)—the artist’s first work in neon—variously blinks “I will light you up” and “I will light up your life.” Made while Smith was an artist-in-residence at Artpace San Antonio, the work references both the menacing words of Texas State Trooper Brian Encinia, whose 2015 traffic stop of Sandra Bland, a Black woman, would lead to her death in police custody, and the hit 1977 love song “You Light Up My Life,” first sung by Debby Boone and later reprised by Aretha Franklin and Whitney Houston.

Light Up Your Life (For Sandra Bland) uses light and language to insist we bear witness to Bland’s murder, while also refusing her life be solely defined by the systemic, state-sponsored racism through which it ended. CAMH’s presentation also features additional videos that reflect Smith’s continued interest in spirituality and meditation, including recent works from Smith’s ongoing ikebana series, as well as her landmark 2017 film, *Pilgrim*, which captures the artist’s pilgrimage to three spiritual and community-centered sites: Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda’s ashram in Agoura, California, Watts Towers in Los Angeles, California, and Watervliet Shaker Community in Troy, New York.

We Already Have What We Need weaves together themes of historical erasure, loss, and separation from one’s native culture, as well as the redemptive power of art, music, and text. For example, the books Smith represents in her drawing series, *BLK FMNNST Loaner Library 1989-2019* (2019), arm us with wisdom and inspiration, while her sequined banners—sewn with messages such as “My Pathology is Your Profit” and “Camera, Pen, or Gun?”—simultaneously tell it like it is and offer simple pleas for change. Across multiple formats, Smith addresses

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Cauleen Smith
Camera, Pen, or Gun?, 2017
recto/verso

Satin, poly-satin, silk-rayon velvet, indigo-dyed silk rayon velvet, indigo-dyed silk satin, rayon-polyester ribbon, acrylic fabric paint, satin cord, poly-silk tassel, and sequins
73 x 47 inches
The Mohn Family Trust



Cauleen Smith
H-E-L-L-O, 2014 (video still)
Digital video, with sound, 11:06 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

CAMH Mission

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston presents extraordinary, thought-provoking arts programming and exhibitions to educate and inspire audiences nationally and internationally.

General Information

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston is located at 5216 Montrose Boulevard, at the corner of Montrose and Bissonnet, in the heart of Houston's Museum District. Hours of operation are Wednesday 12-6PM, Thursday 12-9PM, Friday 12-6PM, Saturday 12-6PM, and Sunday 12-6PM. Admission is always free. For more information, visit camh.org or call 713.284.8250.

a range of subjects related to the African Diaspora, the human condition, and the transformative power of art in all forms.

Cauleen Smith: We Already Have All We Need is organized by MASS MoCA and Susan Cross, Senior Curator. The exhibition's presentation at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston is organized by Rebecca Matalon, Curator.

Principal exhibition support was provided by Anne and Greg Avis and the Coby Foundation. Lead support was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts with contributing support from LEE Filters and Susan J. Weiler. Programming at MASS MoCA is made possible in part by the Barr Foundation, Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, and Massachusetts Cultural Council.

CAMH's presentation is funded in part by the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance.

Please visit camh.org for a complete list of Museum programs relating to this exhibition.

About the artist

Cauleen Smith received a BA in Creative Arts 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 of Harlem, New York; 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 for her films and installations at The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2020); The Frye Museum, Seattle, Washington (2019); Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU, Richmond, Virginia (2019) Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (2018); Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois (2017); Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois (2012); and The Kitchen, New York, New York (2011), among others.

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. Smith was previously included in two group exhibitions at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston: *Nexus Texas* (2007), which featured new works by artists living and working in the state and was on view during Smith's time living and teaching in Austin, and 2008's *Cinema Remixed & Reloaded: Black Women Artists and The Moving Image Since 1970*. She currently teaches in the School of Art at CalArts.