

*Cauleen Smith:  
We Already  
Have What  
We Need*

All works courtesy the artist and  
Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, Illinois  
unless otherwise noted.

**Contemporary  
Arts Museum  
Houston**

**Love. Resist. Dream.** These rallying cries echo throughout Los Angeles-based artist Cauleen Smith's works, which remind us to nurture each other and the planet that sustains us. For Smith (b.1967, Riverside, California), these acts of caring operate as antidotes to the injustices and inequities that shape our past and present. She finds similar power in acts of the imagination, harnessing the revolutionary potential of envisioning a better world. The title of her exhibition—and the expansive video installation at its center—suggests that, in fact, “We Already Have What We Need” to create it.

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 everyday life, natural landscapes, and cosmological events 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, while reminding us that caring for the planet can be a lesson in caring for each other. Using the languages of science fiction, Third World Cinema, and Structural film (which reveals its mechanics), she rethinks traditional representation and the reality it constructs, rendering visible both the people and the systems often kept invisible, or recasting what we know in a new and colorful light.

Focusing on Smith's work of the last ten years, *Cauleen Smith: We Already Have What We Need* features film, video, sculpture, textiles, installation, and drawing. The exhibition weaves together themes of historical erasure, loss, separation from one's native culture, as well as the redemptive power of art, music, and text, while taking us across time and space—from Chicago's South Side, to an ashram in Agoura, California, and the city of New Orleans. Across multiple formats, Smith addresses 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. The Houston presentation of this exhibition is funded in part by the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance.

**Spin, 2012**

Digital video; color and sound, 3:30 minutes

Courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, Illinois

The short sketch-like video *Spin* (2012) pictures a young girl whirling and twirling on Chicago's South Side on the Lake Michigan shore. Cauleen Smith has combined the image with a sound recording of the iconic Afrofuturist jazz musician Sun Ra playing "The Sound of Joy" on the piano. The little girl is transformed into a picture of joyful liberation, envisioning herself—with a colorful cape spinning behind her—as a superhero, or perhaps an intergalactic being like Sun Ra himself. The power of this simple moment epitomizes Smith's approach as an artist, which she describes as a "reflection on the everyday possibilities of the imagination." The image of the girl might remind us of the last line of Gwendolyn Brooks's poem, "The Second Sermon on the Warpland," words which Smith has harnessed in other works: "Conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind." Like Brooks's poem, Smith's work encourages us to stretch—to flower even—despite the precariousness and warped conditions in which we live. As Brooks wrote, "Salve salvage in the spin."



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## **We Already Have What We Need, 2019**

Multi-channel video installation with projectors, slide projectors, projection screens, rope, sandbags, plaid plastic travel bags, monitors, CCTV cameras, tripods, c-stands, custom wood, metal, and velvet tables, LEDs, augmented antique and contemporary African figures, Dembe figure, tchotchkes, plaster bases, augmented model sailboat, globe mounted on drawing, Suiseki stones, cement Suiseki stones, plaster lamp, ceramic incense burner, Kintsugi porcelain cups and saucers, Maneki-Neko, radio, polaroid camera, polaroid photographs, potted plants, rocks, stands, rock with copper sulphate, minerals, artificial Bonsai tree, bonsai pots, crow mask, books, porcelain, tuning fork, mallets, drumsticks, disco ball ornaments, acoustic foam, candle, toy excavator, New Orleans King cake baby, ceramic whistle, peacock feather, and shells  
Courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, Illinois



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*We Already Have What We Need* (2019) invites us on a journey through an immersive labyrinth of images and objects that animate five 17-foot tall video screens. The installation features projected images of iPhone videos, short films crafted by the artist, found footage of cosmological events, seascapes and natural and urban landscapes populated by Shakers, activists, clothed African statuettes, and various other figures and artifacts of everyday life. Reminiscent of a ship's sails, these cloth structures hide from immediate view five tables that hold an array of seemingly incongruous objects. Live-feed CCTV recordings of these still-life vignettes—each set against the backdrop of a monitor streaming video—are projected at a large scale, creating new worlds as well as unexpected connections between images and iconography that challenge narratives crafted by a dominant white culture. While objects might seem to be mysteriously projected across the room, Cauleen Smith leaves the mechanics and means of production visible by allowing viewers to see the cables, cameras, and monitors at work.

In this immersive wash of imagery, Smith merges the beauty of our planet with the “stuff” that we accumulate as we try to fulfill deeply personal needs that range from food, shelter, and medicine to art, music, and spirituality. Here, Smith asks us to consider our relationships to our own histories and to those of our ancestors, but also, to the natural environment that sustains and shapes us. Nurturing the landscape becomes a map for caring for all living things, and vice versa.



## **ABOVE**

### **Emerge and See, 2019**

Mylar emergency blanket, textiles, grommets, and painted fan  
Courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, Illinois

*Emerge and See* (2019) seems to signal both an emergency and the promise of rescue and healing. The fluttering and shimmering banner, made from a space blanket, announces a territory that might be on another side of the universe, or perhaps on the other side of a kind of suffering to which we have become blind. Cauleen Smith's works help us see a way out. Yet, while she may be an optimist, she would likely say that it is of necessity, in the vein of American novelist and activist, James Baldwin, who declared in 1963: "I can't be a pessimist because I am alive. To be a pessimist means that you have agreed that human life is an academic matter, so I am forced to be an optimist."



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## **ON FLOOR**

### **Quorum, 2019**

Reclaimed, reupholstered chairs (some charred), artificial hair, polyester cord, and plaster forms

Courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, Illinois

## **LEFT TO RIGHT**

### **Strelitzia Satellite Meditation, 2012**

Digital video; color and sound, 4:44 minutes

Courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, Illinois

### **Black and Blue Over You (After Bas Jan Ader For Ishan), 2010**

Digital video; color and sound, 9:30 minutes

Courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

*Black and Blue Over You (After Bas Jan Ader For Ishan)* (2010) pays homage to Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader and his poignant, often absurdist investigations of human emotion and search for meaning. Cauleen Smith's work mimics his 1974 film, *Primary Time*, which records the artist—seen only from the neck down—arranging red, yellow, and blue flowers for 25 minutes. (It has been described as a nod to fellow Dutchman Piet Mondrian's rigid adherence to primary colors). Smith similarly improvises a seemingly endless number of arrangements with a mix of blooms in black, white, and blue tones—the colors of mourning or, as the



title implies, a bruise. Smith's ritualistic action of arranging and rearranging suggests a continuous grieving. The touching work remembers the tragic death of Ishan, the nephew of a close friend, and alludes to the loss of many others. Alongside *Black and Blue Over You*, the exhibition presents three additional videos from Smith's ongoing Ikebana series, all of which depict the artist exploring, and at times failing at, the traditional Japanese art of flower arranging. While Smith has no formal training in Ikebana, these works serve as mournful homages or offerings of love to those lost as well as celebrations of the fleeting beauty of life.

**Cotton Plant 187?, 2018**

Digital video; color and sound, 6:43 minutes

Courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, Illinois

**Orange Jumpsuit, 2019**

Digital video; color and sound, 22:51 minutes

Courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, Illinois



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**Pilgrim, 2017**

Digital video; color and sound, 7:41 minutes

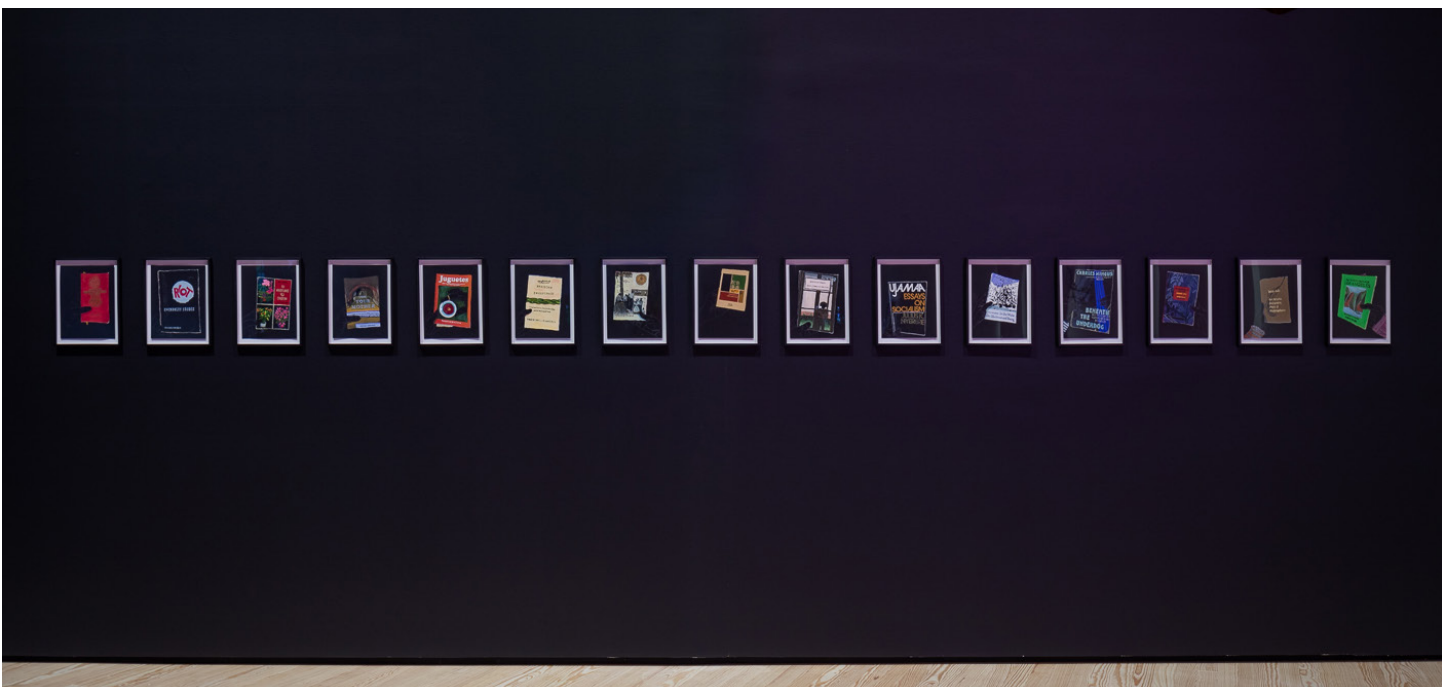
Courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, Illinois

*Pilgrim* (2017) captures Cauleen Smith's pilgrimage to three historic locations: Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda's Sai Anantam Ashram in Agoura, California; Watts Towers in Los Angeles, California; and the Watervliet Shaker Community in Upstate New York, once home to the movement's founder, Mother Ann Lee, and later to Black spiritual activist Rebecca Cox Jackson. *Pilgrim* is a lyrical and meditative portrait of three spiritual and community-centered sites that offered varying, though equally radical, models of world-building outside of the mainstream.

Set to a live recording by Coltrane from 1978, Smith uses the breaks in Coltrane's music, the moments when she lifts her hands from the organ, to guide the film's editing. These moments of rupture serve as the propulsive force behind the experimental and largely abstract imagery, which includes close ups of Coltrane's organ, flowers in a garden, and the looming spires of Watts Towers. *Pilgrim* honors and memorializes the work of Black spiritualists, activists, and community-builders, paying tribute to their individual proposals for new ways of living and being in the world, together.



The 15 drawings on view are part of Cauleen Smith's ongoing series *BLK FMNNST Loaner Library 1989–2019* (2019–). The carefully rendered copies of book covers represent texts that influence Smith and tackle many of the subjects she engages in her work, from African spiritual and intellectual histories, to Black resistance, indigenous knowledge, and the revolutionary capacities of love. *BLK FMNNST Loaner Library 1989–2019* focuses on the intersection of feminism, creative production, the nurturing of living things, and theories of “black fugitivity,” or strategies of refusal and liberation. The list of books includes works by Dionne Brand, Gwendolyn Brooks, Saidiya Hartman, Georges Perec, and Christina Sharpe, among many others. Smith's choice of a black paper for the drawings is a reference to the tradition of velvet painting that captivated her as a child and a challenge to the tacit acceptance of “white” as a neutral ground.



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## **RIGHT TO LEFT**

From the series **BLK FMNNST Loaner Library 1989-2019**,  
(2019–):

All works gouache on paper

All works courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey,  
Chicago, Illinois unless otherwise noted.

**Day Hikes Around Los Angeles**, 2019

**Wabi-Sabi for Artists**, 2019

**The Radiance of the King**, 2019

**Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus**,  
2019

Private Collection, Chicago, Illinois

**In the Wake: On Blackness and Being**, 2019

Pomona College Collection. Walter and Elise Mosher Memorial  
Fund

**UJAMAA: Essays on Socialism**, 2019

The Mohn Family Trust

**Species of Spaces and Other Pieces**, 2019

Collection Susan J. Weiler

**A Dictionary of Color Combinations, 2019**

**Land into Light, 2019**

**Braiding Sweetgrass, 2019**

Collection Milliken Family

**Juguetes (Toys), 2019**

**Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route, 2019**

Pomona College Collection. Walter and Elise Mosher Memorial Fund

**128 Houseplants You Can Grow, 2019**

**RIOT, 2019**

**American Cinematographers Manual, 2019**



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Cauleen Smith's *In the Wake* banners (all 2017) speak both plainly and poetically to the ongoing violence experienced by Black Americans. Part protest sign, part flag, part pep rally accessory, Smith's sumptuous, hand-sewn textile works are an important part of her practice and are usually created for use in her public processions. They draw on a long history of banners hoisted for celebration as well as social and political change, from those raised by labor unions, carried by activists in the Civil Rights movement, or lofted in the ongoing protests against white supremacy. Smith has also been inspired by military regiment colors, West African Vodun tapestries, and banners flown by churches and marching bands. Her banner titled *I Am Holding My Breath* is both a nod to the frequency with which historically marginalized groups are asked to wait for change and a piercing commentary on the suffocating and deadly toll such false promises take on Black Americans, while *Camera, Pen, or Gun?* seems to ask which is the more powerful weapon against bigotry and brutality. Originally presented at the Whitney Biennial in 2017, the banners were activated by a host of volunteers who paraded the streets outside the museum, singing lyrics incorporating the text on the banners set to music composed by Avery R. Young.



## ABOVE

### **I Am Holding My Breath, 2017**

Satin, poly-satin, wool felt, silk-rayon velvet, cotton, embroidery floss, acrylic fabric paint, satin cord, polyester fringe, poly-silk tassels, and sequins

Collection of Carrie Schneider and Ben Fain



### **My Pathology Is Your Profit, 2017**

Satin, poly-satin, wool felt, silk-rayon velvet, cotton, embroidery floss, acrylic fabric paint, acrylic hair beads, acrylic barrettes, satin cord, polyester fringe, poly-silk tassels, and sequins

Courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, Illinois



**Leave me for the Crows, 2017**

Satin, poly-satin, silk-rayon  
velvet, metallic thread,  
polyester fringe, poly-silk  
tassels, and sequins

Collection of the artist



**Camera, Pen, or Gun?,**

2017

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

The Mohn Family Trust



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**Light Up Your Life (For Sandra Bland), 2019**

Neon, Plexiglas, faceted hematite, and aluminum chain  
Blanton Museum of Art; Commissioned and produced by  
Artpace San Antonio. Purchase through the generosity of an  
anonymous donor, 2020

Cauleen 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 in San Antonio, the work references the menacing words of Texas State Trooper Brian Encinia, whose 2015 traffic stop of twenty-eight year old Sandra Bland, a Black woman, would lead to her death in police custody in Waller County, Texas, little more than fifty miles from CAMH. Smith reclaims Encinia's threat of violence and weaves it together with the hit 1977 love song “You Light Up My Life,” first sung by Debby Boone and more famously 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. Smith writes: “I wanted to play with this threat, ‘I will light you up,’ by finding a response that neutralized it. ...And so this flashing neon is a dance off, a sing-a-thon, a battle, a protest, a memento mori that collectivizes Sandra Bland's resistance, reclaims her sovereignty, and reifies the ways in which Black culture is inextricably woven



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**H-E-L-L-O, 2014**

Digital video; color and sound, 11:06 minutes

Courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, Illinois

*H-E-L-L-O* (2014) takes us on a languid tour of New Orleans and many of its most significant cultural and historic sites. At each, a musician plays a bass-clef instrument: trumpet, sousaphone, cello, bass saxophone, and contrabassoon. They each repeat the five-note sequence G - A - F - F - C, the recognizable alien greeting composed for Steven Spielberg's film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). The low frequency sounds take on a mournful tone against the backdrop of the city post-Hurricane Katrina. They speak on a visceral, primal level, through our bones or the earth beneath our feet. The video starts at the Holy Cross Levee on the Mississippi River and moves to Tipitina's, one of New Orleans' best-known clubs; to Congo Square, its music center, once a remote part of town reserved for slaves; Booker T. Washington Auditorium, the de facto Black civic center which has hosted Louis Armstrong and Mahalia Jackson; and St. Augustine Church, the oldest African American Catholic church in the nation. Smith articulates a feeling of abandonment in wake of the hurricane, as well as a deep desire to make connections across the social and civic divide, while celebrating the power that music has to communicate.



**Leonids Over, Still, and Then, 2021**

LEE filters

Courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, Illinois

In her site-specific architectural intervention, *Leonids Over, Still, and Then* (2021), Cauleen Smith has treated the Museum's glass doors with colorful filters in a range of colors from deep blue, to blood red, and earthy green. As sunlight streams through the windows, veils of changing hue move across the gallery and the works on view. The title of this artwork, *Leonids Over, Still, and Then*, refers to the bright and colorful meteor shower that occurs when Earth's orbit and the orbit of Comet Tempel-Tuttle intersect each year in November. Although occurring annually, every 33 years the Leonids radiantly streak across the sky by the thousands per hour. In this work, Smith beams the celestial beauty of these debris trails through the Museum's front doors, suggesting the capacity of light to serve as a beacon of truth and transparency.

