

*Ming Smith: Feeling
the Future*

**Contemporary
Arts Museum
Houston**

Portraiture is the heart and soul of Ming Smith's photography, through which she superimposes expansive and intimate views of the human experience. For nearly 50 years, her images have portrayed Black life and embodied the root emotions that not only comprise the individual but that also create connections within communities.

After graduating from Howard University, the Detroit-born artist moved to New York City where she lived and worked in close proximity to other visual artists, models, and musicians. As a result, Smith often found herself, personally and artistically, participating in and influenced by multiple art movements. In those early years, the New York art world made it difficult for Smith—as a young, Black woman—to be taken seriously as an artist. Despite many obstacles, she carved her own path, becoming the first woman to join the Kamoinge Workshop in 1972, an influential collective of Black photographers, and in 1979 becoming the first Black woman photographer to be included in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art. These achievements simultaneously speak to Smith's unlimited artistic vision and the shortsightedness of the era. Today, her influence can be seen and felt in contemporary art of all forms.

Feeling the Future, a collection of works spanning five decades, is the first holistic consideration of Smith's work in a museum setting. The exhibition collectively articulates her artistic voice through a selection of her lens-based work, including street photography, figurative imagery, and abstract compositions, as well as new experiments in film, sound, and installation. Using in-camera techniques and sometimes forgoing conventional techniques altogether, Smith's depiction of life is less engaged with documenting events than with expressing the spirit of a moment, responding and improvising as needed so that the viewer can feel as if they are a part of that experience. Whether walking in her neighborhood, traveling internationally to places like Africa and Europe, navigating the internal worlds of relationships, or capturing dynamic art forms such as music and dance, Smith not only blurs the line between art and life, but expands the boundaries of image making.

Amen Corner Sisters (Harlem, New York), 1977



Oolong's Nightmare, Save the Children (For Marvin Gaye), (New York), 1979



**Acid Rain (“Mercy, Mercy Me,”
Marvin Gaye), 1977**

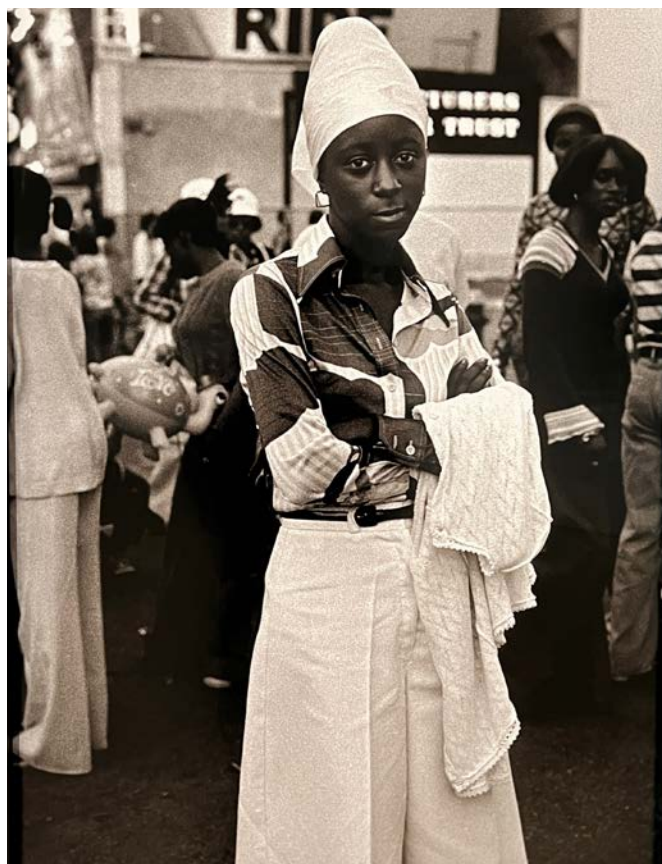
Ming Smith uses a range of photography techniques to capture the unique feeling of a scene. *Acid Rain (“Mercy, Mercy Me,” Marvin Gaye)* exemplifies her use of superimposing multiple images to show the multidimensionality of a community and its environment in a single photograph. Often her titles establish a relationship with the work, and here she includes a reference to arguably the most immersive of media: music. The photograph is also an example of how Smith is inspired by and incorporates multiple artistic forms, even when she’s not explicitly documenting one genre.



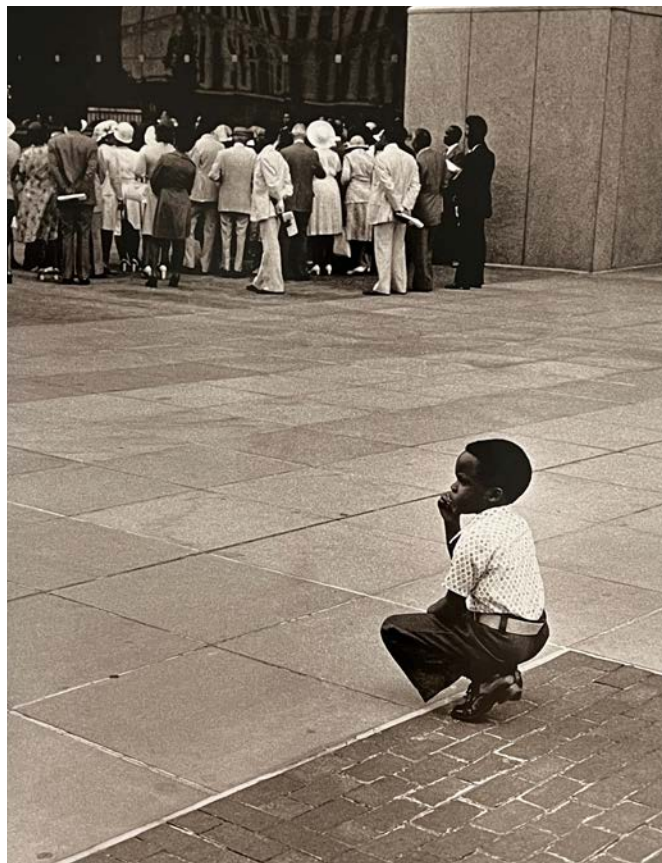
Mother and Child, 1977



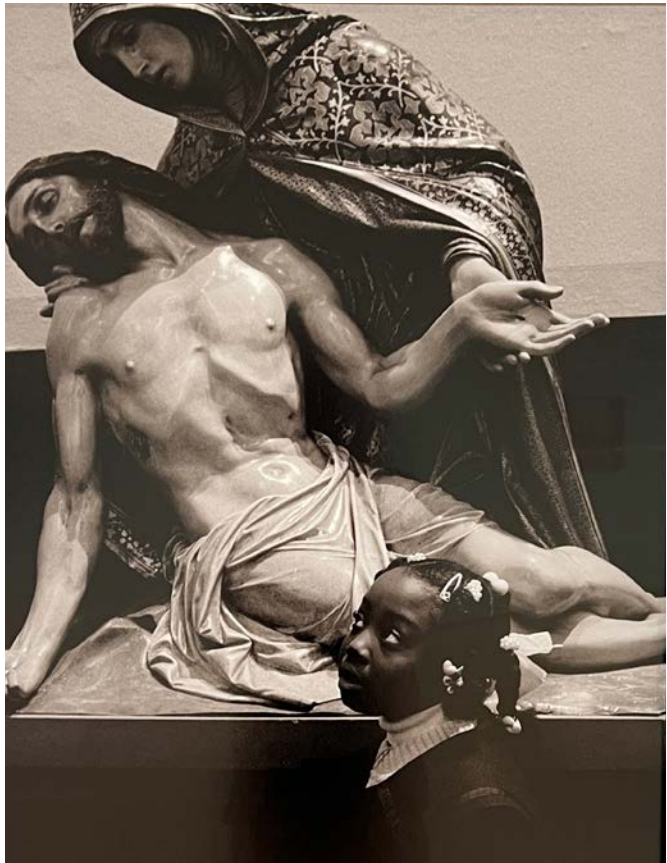
Instant Model, from the series Coney Island (Brooklyn, New York), 1976



What's It All About (Harlem, New York), 1976

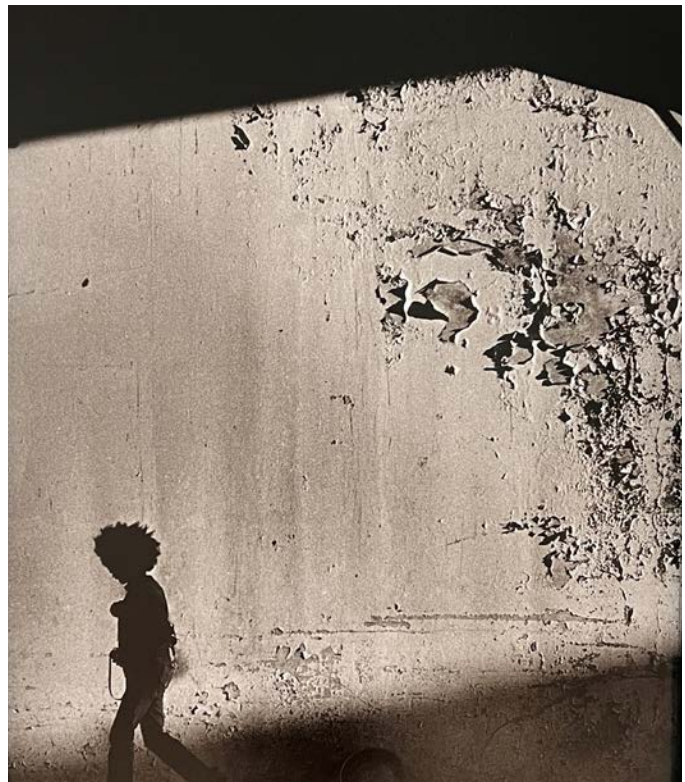


God, Mary, Jesus (Far View), 1991
Courtesy Lester Marks / LCM Partners

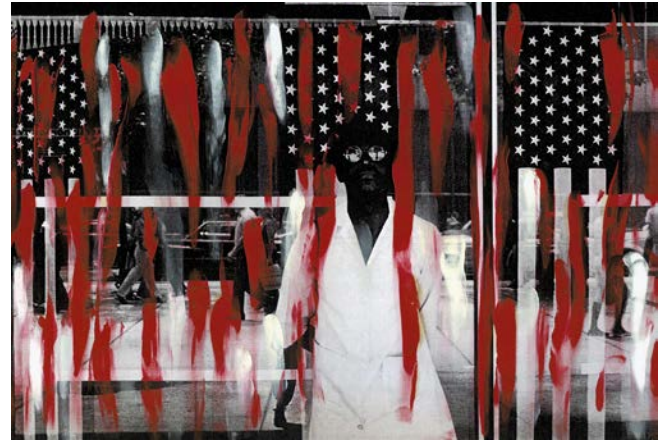


Another Place and Time (Harlem, New York), 1973

Another Place and Time (Harlem, New York) shows Ming Smith's powerful use of silhouette in black-and-white photography, and materializes her ability to convey a wealth of meaning with just a few details. Smith presents a scene that could be in almost any place at any time, however by naming Harlem in the title, she resists a general read of the image. She invites the viewer to see what she sees, using the emotive power of light and shadow to depict the figure and surroundings as deeply connected.



America Seen through Stars and Stripes (Painted), (New York), 1976



“When You See Me Comin’ Raise Your Window High,” (Harlem, New York), 1972

“*When You See Me Comin’ Raise Your Window High*,” (Harlem, New York) captures many of the same formal elements as *Gogging with Darkness and Light (Sunflowers)*, (*Singen, West Germany*), also included in this exhibition, but here Ming Smith uses them in a completely different fashion. Once again, she’s depicting a community, capturing what it feels like for individuals to be in a shared space, both physically and emotionally. The juxtaposition of the figures with the building is immaculate, reminiscent of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s *Madrid, Spain* (1933) in that it brings people from multiple physical spaces onto one visual plane. Here, however, Smith’s image offers a view into the everyday lives of two Harlem residents.



Ming Smith and Mingus Murray
Suspension (Hubris), 2023
Video: color and sound, 9:24 minutes

Since the early 1970s, Ming Smith has been engaged in photography as a means of creative expression, capturing the energy of the future as it was unfolding and the spirit of the cultural movements in which she was involved. Her artistic vision resulted in a blurring of boundaries that have challenged and rewarded viewers' expectations of what images can do.

With *Suspension (Hubris)*, her first foray into film, Smith continues her responsive exploration of the fluid relationships among image, time, and movement through the lens of the Black experience. She and her son, musician Mingus Murray, collaborated to make the film, for which Murray created the score. Although sound has been present in Smith's photography for decades—for example, through her portraiture of musicians—it adopts an overt role in *Suspension (Hubris)*. The collaboration offers the two artists a chance to engage with each other's creative process and to jointly experiment with the emotive power of time-based media.

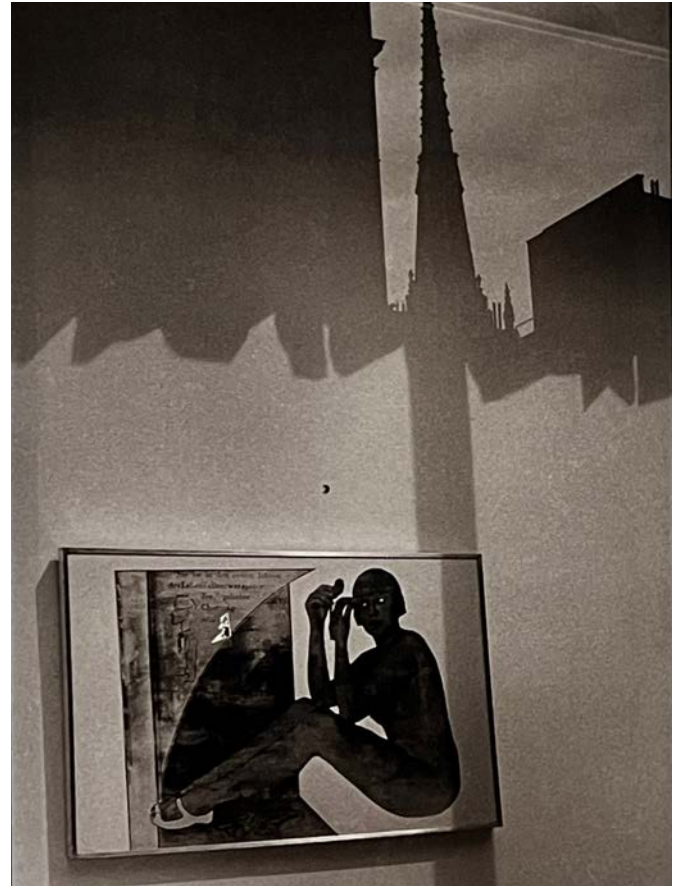
In *Suspension (Hubris)*, Smith hints at both limitless potential and lurking barriers through a selection of imagery that reaches forward and backward in time, continuing her exploration of Afrofuturism and presenting a throughline to the exhibition's title, *Feeling the Future*. The film's representations of strength, power, and Black masculinity amidst the cosmos launch poignant questions about the future and its inhabitants.



Brown-Skinned Model and Steeple (New York, New York), 1971

Ming Smith's unrestrained approach to photography allowed her to experiment with formal considerations of image-making to portray an experience or emotion.

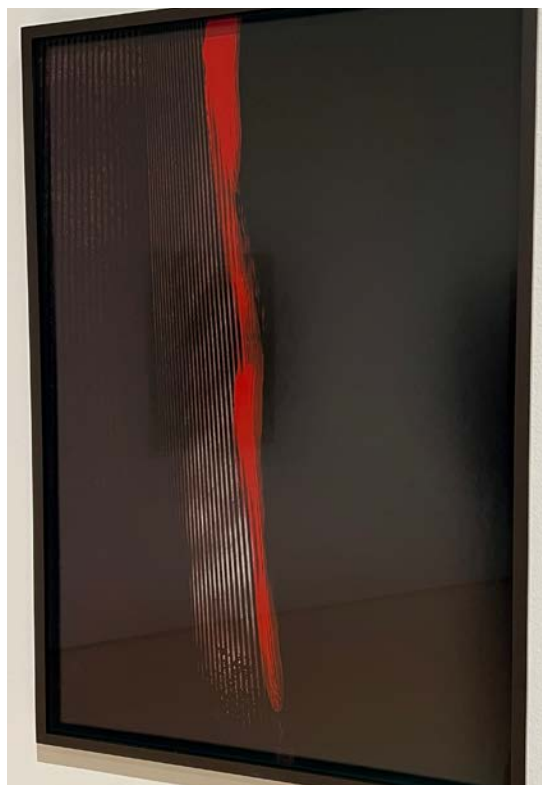
Brown-Skinned Model and Steeple (New York, New York) combines many aspects of her experience in New York in 1971, as she explored and discovered the city, finding bits of herself in the process. By layering images, whether shadows, silhouettes, or even another artist's work such as that by Elizabeth Catlett seen here, Smith shares her impressions of the famous city and her place in it. Through her depiction of interior and exterior spaces, along with the physiological spaces of looking and being looked at, Smith plays with duality, creating depth of field and meaning simultaneously. Although the image is full of visual information, it remains obscure enough for the viewer to add meaning by making their own personal associations.

**Self Portrait with Camera, 1989**

Invisible Man, Somewhere, Everywhere, 1991
Courtesy Bruce Eames Family Collection



Manhattan Parallels (with paint), 1976



Circular Breathing, Hart Leroy Bibbs (Paris), 1980
Courtesy Ming Smith Studio, ART IS BOND, and Barbara Davis Gallery



Poem for Katherine, 1979



Dakar Roadside with Figures (Senegal), 1972

Courtesy Bruce Eames Family Collection

Dakar Roadside with Figures (Senegal) is an example of how Ming Smith gravitates toward photographing moments that other people may have missed, whether during her travels or spending time in her own neighborhood. Here Smith manages to capture the fluid motion of a person walking down the street in Senegal, an everyday occurrence that caught her attention. The dynamic nature of the scene is at once activated and grounded by the visual effects of wind and the formal qualities of the woman walking and the two trees, all of which foregrounds the angled perspective of the fence.



Grace Jones at Cinandre, 1974s



My Father's Tears (San Miguel de Allende, Mexico), 1977



Door of No Return, 1972



**Chicago Art Ensemble, Malachi Favors
(Chicago), 1979**



Sun Ra Space I, 1978.

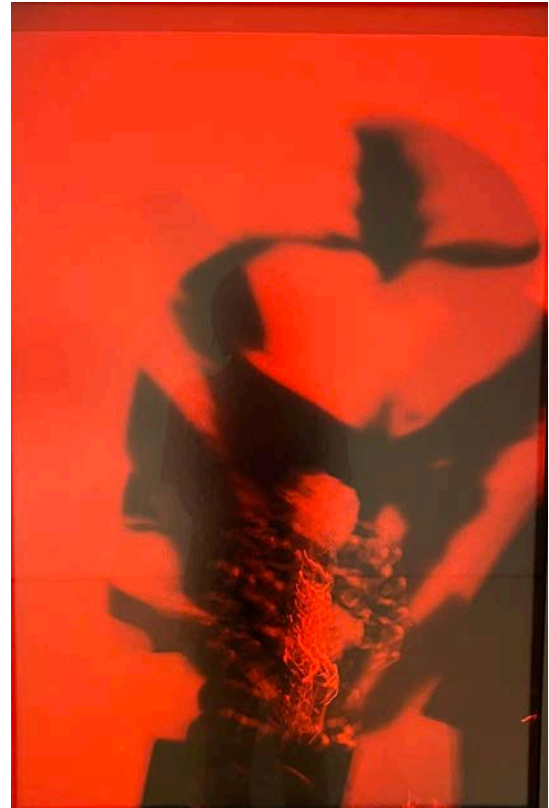


Sun Ra Space II, 1978
Courtesy Bruce Eames Family Collection

Ming Smith did not shy away from photographing people, places, and things that seem overly familiar, or even untouchable. We may think we know these subjects—whether Paris, Grace Jones, or Sun Ra—but she invites us to look again. Smith’s portraits of jazz musician and composer Sun Ra capture his otherworldly essence and unfixed identity, using the formal technique of blurring to convey motion and lend itself to a visual interpretation of the Afrofuturist’s metaphysical nature. Similar to Smith’s *Acid Rain* (“*Mercy, Mercy Me*,” Marvin Gaye), this photograph is also a portrait of music and its transcendent qualities.



Red Hot Jazz III, 1979

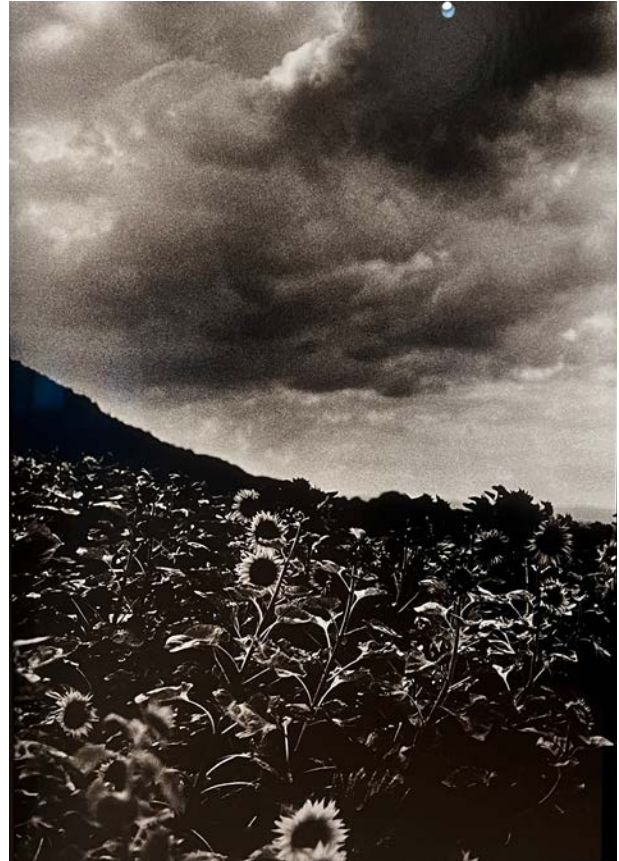


Red Hot Jazz II, 1979



**Goghing with Darkness and Light
(Sunflowers), (Singen, West Germany),
1989**

As Ming Smith was driving, she stopped to create *Goghing with Darkness and Light (Sunflowers), (Singen, West Germany)*. As with many of Smith's works the scene could be one from hundreds of places. Smith seemed to recognize something utterly human in this view, as if these sunflowers were looking back at her, and therefore at the viewer. She flips conventional techniques of landscape photography to create a portrait of a landscape, foregoing any hierarchy between one visual plane or the other. The field of sunflowers reflects the ways Smith creates images of a community in many of her other photographs, capturing a view of several individuals but simultaneously making them one.



Eiffel Tower–Bicentennial (Paris), 1989



**Flamingo Fandango (Painted),
(West Berlin), 1988**



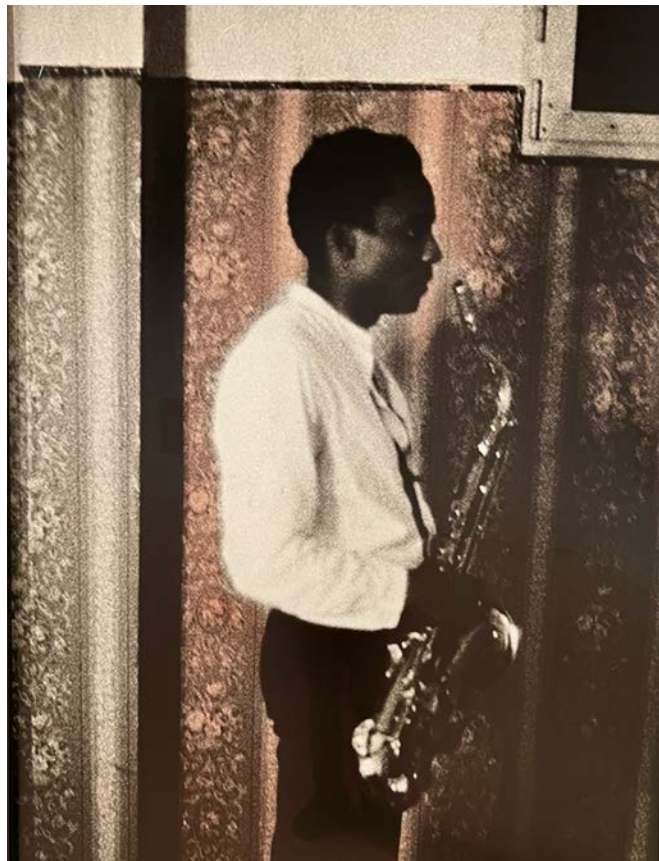
Female Nude (New York), 1977



Male Nude (New York), 1977



David Murray in the Wings (Padua, Italy), 1978



“Transcendence, Turiya and Ramakrishna,” for Alice Coltrane, 2006



Meditation on Harlem (Baldwin),
2006



Meditation in Blue (Water), 2006



Harlem Gardens (Purple), 2022



Meditation in Green, 2006

