FPFV153/553

**CINEMATIC VOICES: ARTISTS IN PERSON**

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4:00pm-7:00pm, Bijou Theater, Spring 2020

**February 19**

**CAULEEN SMITH: FILMS, DIGITAL PIECES AND INSTALLATIONS**

Cauleen Smith in person

**WEEK 4 – Films, Digital Work and Installations by Cauleen Smith**

Cauleen Smith will present a selection of short films and digital pieces ranging from her early classic, *Chronicles of a Lying Sprit by Kelly Gabron* through recent works made in Chicago and Los Angeles. Smith will also speak about her current installation practice, and her activities as a radical art activist in contemporary African American culture.

Cauleen Smith has been creating and exhibiting work in many mediums since the early 1990s, and she has become one of the most celebrated and active media artists of this generation. Smith has had numerous one-person exhibitions major museums and galleries: the Frye Art Museum, Seattle (Summer, 2019), the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, Boston (current) and an installation at the Whitney Museum in New York City opens this month on February 17, 2020.

Smith’s films and videos have shown at festivals and venues throughout the world. Her multi media performance *Black Utopia LP* on the art and vision of Sun Ra (premiering at REDCAT in April 2013) was featured at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival and she will appear with a program of recent films and videos at the Essay Film Festival in London on April 2, 2020.

Cauleen Smith has taught courses and led workshops in the CalArts School of Film/Video, and she is currently on the regular faculty of the CalArts School of Art.

Smith’s work has a strong connection to afro-futurist traditions in jazz music, Third Cinema and structuralist film, and since her debut feature film, Drylongso (recently restored by the Academy Film Archive), Smith has worked primarily within the spaces of the gallery and experimental film. This program highlights Smith’s interpretations and re-imaginings of the music of Alice Coltrane and Sun Ra, her interests in science fiction interwoven with African-American history, and the ways in which the historical and contemporary can be brought into dialogue through artistic practice.

**[ADDITIONAL MATERIAL]**

**Cauleen Smith** (born Riverside, California, 1967) is an interdisciplinary artist whose work reflects upon the everyday possibilities of the imagination. Operating in multiple materials and arenas, Smith roots her work firmly within the discourse of mid-twentieth-century experimental film. Drawing from structuralism, third world cinema, and science fiction, she makes things that deploy the tactics of these disciplines while offering a phenomenological experience for spectators and participants. Her films, objects, and installations have been featured in group exhibitions. Studio Museum of Harlem, Houston Contemporary Art Museum; Yerba Buena Center for Art, and the New Museum, New York, D21 Leipzig and Decad, Berlin. She has had solo shows for her films and installations at The Kitchen, MCA Chicago, Threewalls, Chicago. She shows her drawings and 2D work with Corbett vs. Dempsey.  Smith is the recipient of several grants and awards including the Rockefeller Media Arts Award, Creative Capital Film /Video, Chicago 3Arts Grant, and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, Chicago Expo Artadia Award, and Rauschenberg Residency. Smith was born in Riverside, California and grew up in Sacramento. She earned a BA in Creative Arts from San Francisco Sate University and an MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles School of Theater Film and Television. Smith was based for several years in the great city of Chicago and served as faculty for the Vermont College of Fine Arts low-residency MFA program.

Smith is currently a member of the faculty in the School of Art in the California Institute of Arts.

[www.cauleensmith.com](http://www.cauleensmith.com/)

Smith will present a one-person show, “Mutualities,” at the Whitney Museum in New York City beginning February 17, 2020 and continuing through May 17, 2020.

“Cauleen Smith draws on experimental film, non-Western cosmologies, poetry, and science fiction to create works that reflect on memory and Afro-diasporic histories. *Mutualities* presents two of Smith’s films, *Sojourner* and *Pilgrim*, each in a newly-created installation environment, along with a new group of drawings collectively titled *Firespitters*. The films unfold across several important sites in Black spiritual and cultural history, weaving together writings by women from different eras, including Shaker visionary Rebecca Cox Jackson, abolitionist Sojourner Truth, the 1970s Black feminist organization Combahee River Collective, and experimental-jazz composer and spiritual leader Alice Coltrane, whose music also forms the soundtrack for both films. This gathering of voices enacts a shared Black female subjectivity, the collective strength of which is expressed in Smith’s poetic use of the camera and light as improvisational instruments to reveal how invention, creativity, and generosity can be resources for transformation and regeneration.” – Whitney Museum Website

*Cauleen Smith: Mutualities* is organized by Chrissie Iles, Anne & Joel Ehrenkranz Curator, with Clemence White, senior curatorial assistant.

<https://whitney.org/exhibitions/cauleen-smith>

**ART REVIEW**

# At Mass MoCA, artist Cauleen Smith offers visions of black resilience

**By Cate McQuaid** Boston Globe Correspondent, Updated August 29, 2019

— “The privileged and the pampered can suffer from a poverty of imagination. They are not called to dream beyond what they already have. But it’s also true that those who lack don’t always recognize their blessings.”

Cauleen Smith’s exhibition, “We Already Have What We Need,” at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, flips the script on privilege. Yes, the cosseted, wealthy white folks hold too much power and wealth in their tight little fists — this show does not ignore those dynamics. But the hopes, the dreams, the daring creativity, and the ties of community and family shared by people who have been oppressed forge an ulterior strength. Smith’s work sanctifies that.

The exhibition opens with a short video, “Spin.” A barefoot black girl in a superhero’s cape twirls happily on a sidewalk. Afrofuturist jazz keyboardist and mystic Sun Ra plays “The Sound of Joy” on the soundtrack; this video is the picture of joy.

Smith, now 51, is herself an Afrofuturist, reckoning the damages of the past and embracing the cultural richness of the African diaspora to imagine a better future. She started her career in the 1990s as a filmmaker, but Hollywood wasn’t receptive to black women filmmakers, so she found her way to galleries and museums.

Elements pop off her screens and into the gallery, and films are broken up and distributed around the space. The resulting installations are less linear and more immersive, less a story and more an experience.

“We Already Have What We Need,” the exhibition’s enveloping and vaulting title piece, uses space, scale, projection, and sculptural assemblage to shuffle several murmuring, hallucinatory, and archetypal scenes. Five 22-foot-tall vertical video screens hang like walls diagonally through the gallery. Among them are five tabletop assemblages, each a little altar with treasured objects — books, bonsai, African sculptures, feathers — set in front of video monitors playing landscapes, cityscapes, and submarine-scapes. CCTV cameras mounted on the tables capture these tableaus, and project them onto the large screens.

Spatially, “We Already Have What We Need” is maze-like; you don’t know what you will find around the next screen. The tabletop piece beside you may appear on a large screen at the other end of the gallery. This has an almost mythic effect. You move through time from one section to the next, and then what you saw minutes before arises like a memory, but on a grander scale or a much more intimate one than before. Time become a spiral, a net in which everything is linked, oscillating between concrete details and expansive dream-space.

Some of the landscape videos come from Hollywood films such as “Thelma and Louise,” but now they’re dominated by the bold silhouettes of African figurines. Whose landscapes are these? I found myself thinking, mildly uneasy in the face of a familiar place popping up behind an unfamiliar tableau. Who, here, is the hero? Who is the god? Yet Smith’s small, orderly assemblages summoned me back to the dear things of the real world.

God told Moses, “No man can see my face and live.” Smith’s skillful use of space diverts us because what she wants us to look at is too big, or painful, or glorious. We can only perceive it through labyrinths.

Her more direct one-channel videos divert with symbol rather than space, offering peripheral views of the pervasive loss the black community has faced. “Black and Blue Over You (After Bas Jan Ader for Ishan)” refers to the Dutch artist Ader’s 1974 film “Primary Time.” Here, as in that film, the artist simply arranges flowers. Smith’s bouquets are black and blue, bruised and funereal. They recall painter Jennifer Packer’s achingly elegiac floral still lifes, alive with love and despair. Smith’s, in their constant rearrangement, also express grief’s ruminative anxiety.

In “Remote Viewing,” an excavator appears as a monstrous villain, digging a hole and shoving into it a one-room schoolhouse — seat of learning, shelter to children. A mother and son bear witness.

The exhibition pamphlet tells us the video was inspired by a true story of a white town that buried its black schoolhouse. Its title attests to the detachment of so many of us watching the news in our armchairs as neglect, devastation, and violent oppression flicker across the screen.

Not all the works in “We Already Have What We Need” are videos. Smith’s “BLK FMNNST Loaner Library 1989-2019,” drawings of books on black paper, reads like a revised canon, the sidelined nourishment from authors such as Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, and Zora Neale Hurston (alongside books about desert wildlife and art) that the children in that entombed schoolhouse should have been reading all along.

Why is the girl in “Spin” so exuberant, when schools are buried and communities burdened? When innocent black men are killed by police? When so many black and brown people in America today feel more threatened than respected?

Because Smith, at least, still has hope. Hope in making things, hope in naming and describing the darkness, in reaching out a hand. That hope has driven the work of black artists before her, and it casts a light into the future. Smith holds up a lantern, and it shines for us all.

**Cauleen Smith: We Already Have What We Need** At Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, 1040 Mass MoCA Way, North Adams, through April 2020. 2111, [www.massmoca.org](http://www.massmoca.org/" \t "_self)

# Essay Film Festival - Session Fourteen: Cauleen Smith/Shorts Programme

**Thursday 2 April, 21:00-23:00, ICA**

**Cauleen Smith: short film programme and conversation**

**Films:**Sojourner**, Cauleen Smith, USA, 2018, DCP, 22 minutes**

Three Songs About Liberation**, Cauleen Smith, USA, 2017, DCP, 10 minutes**

Pilgrim**, Cauleen Smith, USA, 2016, DCP, 11 minutes**

Crow Requiem**, Cauleen Smith, USA, 2015, DCP, 11 minutes**

H-E-L-L-O**, Cauleen Smith, USA, 2014, DCP, 11 minutes**

Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band**, Cauleen Smith, USA, 2011, DCP, 10 minutes**

**Following the screening, Cauleen Smith will be in conversation with Matthew Barrington, Essay Film Festival.**

In this session, we present a program of recent shorts by the artist and filmmaker Cauleen Smith. An interdisciplinary artist, Smith’s work has a strong connection to afro-futurist traditions in jazz music, Third Cinema and structuralist film, and since her debut feature film, Drylongso (recently restored by the Academy Film Archive), Smith has worked primarily within the spaces of the gallery and experimental film. This program highlights Smith’s interpretations and re-imaginings of the music of Alice Coltrane and Sun Ra, her interests in science fiction interwoven with African-American history, and the ways in which the historical and contemporary can be brought into dialogue through artistic practice. Pilgrim, H-E-L-L-O and Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band all bring together musical performance with significant local sites. Three Songs About Liberation and Crow Requiem both continue Smith’s interest in local history through metaphor and staged performances. The program concludes with Smith’s most recent film, Sojourner, in which she repurposes the Noah Purifoy Outdoor Desert Art Museum in Joshua Tree, California as a radical feminist utopia, incorporating an homage to feminist abolitionist and human rights activist Sojourner Truth.

<https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/visual-arts/with-disco-balls-and-gorgeously-cinematic-installations-this-artist-is-creating-deeply-subversive-work-at-the-frye/>

**From: WIKIPEDIA [February 14, 2020]**

**Cauleen Smith** (born September 25, 1967) is an American born filmmaker and multimedia artist. She is best known for her experimental works that address the African-American identity, specifically the issues facing black women today. Smith is best known for her feature film *Drylongso*. Smith currently teaches in the School of Art at the [California Institute of the Arts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California_Institute_of_the_Arts).

In 1991 Smith completed her B.A in Cinema at [San Francisco State University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Francisco_State_University). While a student there, she completed several films, two of which received a lot of attention: *Daily Rains*, which was completed in 1990, and *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit by Kelly Gabron*, which was fully completed in 1993.

Once she finished her B.A., Smith was accepted into M.F.A. program at [UCLA](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UCLA). Her work there gained worldwide recognition. In her second year of the program, Smith decided to shoot a feature-length film titled *Drylongso*. However, it was against UCLA’s rules for film students to shoot feature-length films, "and for good reason, you don’t know what you are doing!" as Smith has said. She was, after some struggles, able to complete the film, and it got a significant amount of attention at the [Sundance Film Festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sundance_Film_Festival), and took home several Best Film awards from other festivals, mentioned below. In 1998, Smith graduated from UCLA with her M.F.A. and a growing reputation as an up-and-coming force in the film industry.

In 2007, she attended the [Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skowhegan_School_of_Painting_and_Sculpture) in Maine.

[*Drylongso*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drylongso_(film)) was an acclaimed film that gained Smith much attention and popularity. Smith made the movie while completing film school at the University of California, Los Angeles. The film takes place in [Oakland, CA](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oakland,_CA), and follows a young African-American woman named Pica, on her quest to photograph her concept of a dying breed, referring to African-American men. The movie follows Pica through the attrition of the young black men around her and how she balances this with her dysfunctional family's struggles. The film brings up the topic of gang violence that took place in Oakland which claimed the lives of many innocent African-American young men. "Drylongso" is an old African-American term meaning "same old" or "everyday". *Drylongso* was well received at many film festivals, most notably [Sundance Film Festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sundance_Film_Festival). in 2000,*Drylongso* also won best feature at the Urbanworld Festival, Los Angeles Pan-African Film Festival, and the Philadelphia International Film Festival. [Yusuf Bey's](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yusuf_Bey) son Sayyed Yusuf Bey had a minor acting role in the film, he was photographed by the main character Pica.

In November, *Drylongso* will be included as part of the "Cinematic Legacy" series at the 2018 [AFI Fest](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AFI_Fest), screened on a new 16mm print issued by the [Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academy_of_Motion_Picture_Arts_and_Sciences).

Smith has held consecutive residencies in Chicago at ThreeWalls, the Black Metropolis Research Consortium, and the Experimental Sound Studio in addition to an artist residency at the University of Chicago Arts Incubator. In 2012, Smith installed overlapping shows at the [Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Museum_of_Contemporary_Art,_Chicago) and ThreeWalls, and was named Outstanding Artist by the National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture. Smith has also been a Visiting Artist at the [School of the Art Institute of Chicago](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School_of_the_Art_Institute_of_Chicago) while exploring the intersection of art, protest, commerce, and community on Chicago's South Side.

Smith's site-specific installation, "17," ran from March 10, 2013, to July 7, 2013, both at Hyde Park Art Center and on the corner of East Garfield Boulevard and Prairie Avenue on the South Side. "17" features approximately 260 feet of hand screen-printed wallpaper. The title of this exhibition materialized from Smith’s "meditations on the number’s spiritual significance as a marker of immortality"and further alludes to numerous aspects of art and culture spanning from ancient history to modern day. "17" was also inspired by Smith's research of the life and legacy of [Sun Ra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun_Ra). Sun Ra, a student of numerology, was interested in a kind of "cultural immortality” for which the number "17" has been said to carry significance.

Smith was one of 63 artists whose work was exhibited as part of the 2017 Whitney Biennial. Her elaborately designed hand-stitched banners were hung from the ceiling. The banners are in response to the artist's "disgust and fatigue" from having watched videos of police violence against black people. Smith and artist [Aram Han Sifuentes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aram_Han_Sifuentes) facilitated a workshop in conjunction with the Biennial called Protest Banner Lending Library a project Sifuentes had initiated in Chicago.

Smith's "Human\_3.0 Reading List" was exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2017. The project conceived in 2015 consists of 57 drawings—each produced on 8½ × 12-inch graph paper in watercolor over graphite, occasionally elaborated with acrylic of 14 books. Smith describes these books as such: "These are some of the books that literally changed my life, saved my life and sustain my life, but also, (fair warning) make it difficult for me to go along, get along, look the other way, and gets mines."

Smith's "Give It or Leave It" was exhibited at the [Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institute_of_Contemporary_Art,_Philadelphia) in 2018, with support provided by an Ellsworth Kelly Award from the [Foundation for Contemporary Arts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foundation_for_Contemporary_Arts). The description of the exhibit reads, "Through films, objects, and installation, Give It or Leave It offers an emotional axis by which to navigate four distinct universes: Alice Coltrane and her ashram, a 1966 photo shoot by Bill Ray at Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers, Noah Purifoy and his desert assemblages, and black spiritualist Rebecca Cox Jackson and her Shaker community. These locations, while not technically utopian societies, embody sites of historical speculation and radical generosity between artist and community. In reimagining a future through this mix, Smith casts a world that is black, feminist, spiritual, and unabashedly alive.

Smith exhibited her ongoing multimedia work, *Black Utopia LP*, as a part of the [International Film Festival Rotterdam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Film_Festival_Rotterdam) in 2019. According to [*Hyperallergic*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyperallergic), "The performance was primarily part of a program of Smith's work that included a screening of her recent shorts, a new 16mm restoration of her much acclaimed, rarely seen 1988 feature film *Drylongso,* and a previously unscreened short film, *Sojourner,* in the festival's Tiger Short Film Competition."

Marking Smith's entrance onto the Chicago art scene was her work in creating the Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band Project, the yield from her residency with Threewalls. Composed of members of the Rich South High School (Richton Park, Illinois) marching band and occasionally the South Shore Drill Team as well, the Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band descended like a flash mob on various parts of Chicago that had been hit with waves of youth violence, including Chinatown and the meatpacking district, a few times throughout the fall of 2010, playing and dancing to an orchestration of Sun Ra’s "Space is the Place" led by music director Y. L. Douglas. Smith coupled the militant undertones of marching bands with the Sun Ra-style of free jazz in an attempt to combat youth violence with music.

Smith is a player in the movement of [Afrofuturism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afrofuturism), an emergent literary and cultural aesthetic that combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western cosmologies in order to critique not only the present-day dilemmas of people of color, but also to revise, interrogate, and re-examine the historical events of the past.

In an interview with [*BOMB Magazine*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BOMB_Magazine) in 2011, Smith noted: "There’s the strand of my work that is Afrofuturist. Afrofuturism, for me, is about speculating on the potentiality of what is known about technology and physics to create metaphors that allow me to explore an African diasporic past and generate possible narratives for the future. Dark Matter is part of this. I had constructed an alien narrative—not an alien-abduction story, but one about alien assimilation. Aliens are never caught. Nobody ever notices them. The conflict is that the world that they land in doesn’t work for them; it’s toxic for them. But Afrofuturism is also a rumination on memories to which I have no access. My investment in it as a production strategy has run its course; Afrofuturism provides a way to investigate trauma very explicitly. But we only reenact traumas, don’t we? We don’t reenact prom night, or our favorite birthday party. This is a problem—it doesn’t seem to fix things; it amplifies them. There’s gotta be something else, the after-the-trauma."

# Cauleen Smith Projects a Futuristic Black Utopia

From Hyperallergic, February 7, 2019

[**https://hyperallergic.com/483433/cauleen-smith-black-utopia-lp/**](https://hyperallergic.com/483433/cauleen-smith-black-utopia-lp/)

ROTTERDAM — At what speed do moving images become a movie? Most films move at 16, 24, or 60 frames per second. Yet, as a 90-minute “film without film” by filmmaker and interdisciplinary artist Cauleen Smith demonstrates, a series of images that move at a much slower pace works perfectly well. Involving a 35mm slide projector, a pair of vinyl records, and a sound system, Smith’s evolving, revolving multimedia project [Black Utopia LP](https://iffr.com/en/2019/films/black-utopia-lp) is expansive in both its setup and content. She performed the work at the Kunsthal Rotterdam as part of the 2019 edition of the [International Film Festival Rotterdam](https://iffr.com/).

The performance was primarily part of a program of Smith’s work that included a screening of her recent shorts, a new 16mm restoration of her much acclaimed, rarely seen 1988 feature film [*Drylongso*](https://iffr.com/en/2019/films/drylongso), and a previously unscreened short film, [*Sojourner*](https://iffr.com/en/2019/films/sojourner), in the festival’s Tiger Short Film Competition. It was also part of the festival’s [Blackout](https://iffr.com/en/2019/programme/blackout) exhibition, a stunning showcase of 35mm carousel slide projector artworks created since 2004, the date which Kodak ceased to manufacture that device.

Black Utopia LP is emblematic of the festival’s commitment to programming events that encourage visitors to experience art related to the moving image in an expanded format and outside of a traditional cinema setting. An all-analogue operation, it involves a 35mm slide carousel slide projector and a double LP played on a turntable. Cauleen Smith stands behind both, dropping the needle and swapping out slides, swaying gently behind the booth at the back of the room.

The title record and the performance are born from the same subject: experimental jazz musician, thinker, and bandleader Sun Ra. Smith’s professional engagement with Sun Ra began with a 2010 residency at Chicago non-profit Threewalls where Smith investigated the Sun Ra Alton Abraham archive; this produced several exhibitions and the 2012 album at the center of this performance.

The record, which Smith plays in its entirety, consists of Sun Ra Arkestra rehearsal recordings, snippets of live performances and lectures, interviews with various friends and Ra collaborators, and poetry by artists Krista Franklin and Avery R. Young. It also contains speeches spliced together and compiled from multiple voices that form a kind of Afro-futurist collage of sound and language, rhapsodizing on the utopian potentials and possibilities of Black space travel and astrology, among other cosmic concepts explored in Sun Ra’s oeuvre.

The visual component includes an ever-growing collection of more than 800 35mm slides, the selection and order of which vary with each performance. Smith draws on research and archives in the locations of previous performances to add to her collection, creating a satisfying sense of infinite possibility. She selects images from a large library of slides related to Afro-futurism and experimental Black culture that create a dialogue with the audio collage, either obliquely or directly. In one cycle of slides, shots of audio equipment are placed next to astronomical charts, with Sun Ra chiming in on music’s paranormal potential. “Music is alive, the vibrations change the air,” he says. Another montage features images of black astronauts, space memorabilia, and Afro-futurist comics and posters, with the Sun Ra Arkestra’s “The Second Stop Is Jupiter” jubilantly accompanying the imagery.

Each shutter sound of the slide projector becomes hypnotic, until the imagery ends, breaking the spell. Smith walks out through the crowd, waving a giant flag cut from a silver space blanket that casts a billowing shadow against the light of the projector. After all those images without her obvious presence, the gesture of seeing her stepping out is very moving. The show left me ruminating on all the sounds and images that wafted past my ears and eyes. What makes a film a film? Smith’s “film without film” certainly seemed like one, and its slow pace should leave viewers with plenty of space to think.

“Cauleen Smith, who trained as a filmmaker, designed the elaborately hand-stitched banners on view in the Biennial to be used in processions. The works stem in part from the artist’s sense of disgust and fatigue when confronted with video after video offering evidence of police violence against Black people. Texts sewn on one side of the banners use pronouns like “I,” “you,” and “we”—grounding them in personal experience but also acknowledging our complicated shared history as citizens. Smith’s language unfolds like a poem or series of film stills, expressing complexity and contingency as well as frustration, resistance, and mourning. On the other side of the banners, private symbols—including instruments of communication, drops of blood, and surrogates for the human body—suggest the urgent need to be heard in a time of struggle.” – 2017 Whitney Biennial Catalogue

# “The Complicated Exodus of Art World Star Cauleen Smith “ By [CHRISTOPHER BORRELLI](https://www.chicagotribune.com/chinews-christopher-borrelli-20130507-staff.html#nt=byline) | CHICAGO TRIBUNE | AUG 18, 2017

Artist and educator Cauleen Smith works on a project at the South Side Community Art Center last month. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

Cauleen Smith is moving. She's leaving Chicago in November for Los Angeles, to teach at the California Institute of the Arts. She wanted to stay and teach here but didn't get the university jobs she applied for. She hasn't been in Chicago that long — just seven years. Still, in that time, she's launched parades and wrapped the Hyde Park Art Center in handmade wallpaper; less than two years after arriving, she landed a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art that found room for jazz iconoclast Sun Ra, astrophysics, extraterrestrials and Stevie Wonder. She came here as a Sundance-certified filmmaker and will leave as a filmmaker who also makes sculptures, draws, paints, sews, presses vinyl records, creates puppets and leads marching bands through Chinatown. Her interests have stayed constant — science fiction, African-American history, technology, improvisational music, memory —but Smith is leaving as Exhibit A of the contemporary American artist who refuses to settle on a single defining art form.

Or obvious direction.

She became the interdisciplinary artist's interdisciplinary artist.

"Since moving here, Cauleen has been a definite upward trajectory kind of person," said Julie Rodrigues Widholm, director of the DePaul Art Museum and former MCA curator. "She's got prestigious grants and acclaim. She's exploded, but in a way that's uncommonly limitless, refreshingly hard to pin down — her ideas never feel appropriately contained by one medium." (Indeed, Dean of CalArt's School of Art told ARTNews recently that Smith's "ever-widening repertoire" was a major reason they grabbed her.)

This year alone, Smith has had work in the Whitney Biennial, the Brooklyn Academy of Music and, through Oct. 29, a show at the Art Institute of Chicago; in the fall, for Expo Chicago, she'll have an installation at the DuSable Museum of African American History.

Chicago, you hardly knew her.