

Giving Castoffs a Second Life



The artist Shinique Smith in her studio in Hudson, N.Y.

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Visitors to Shinique Smith's studio in Hudson, N.Y., learn not to leave stray articles of clothing lying around the clutter when Ms. Smith is working. Items might get swept up into multipatterned sculptures of castoff clothing bound with rope in monumental bales or cloudlike bundles dangling from the ceiling, or else collaged into exuberant paintings with calligraphic graffiti and colorful fields of pigment and fabric.

The various works on display in her current solo exhibition at the James Cohan Gallery in Chelsea are all loosely based on the mandala form. "It's a constant dance between chaos and order," she said of the tension within each cacophonous piece. The relationship between paintings and hanging sculptures in the first two rooms of the gallery shifts visually between a harmonic balance and a more dissonant struggle, escalating in the third room to a constellation of buoyant sculptures suspended in midair.

"I want there to be a visceral sense of journey, of having an epiphany," said Ms. Smith, who will have a survey show next year at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. "I feel that there is a journey I go through emotionally as an artist where self-doubt occurs and then a kind of surrender, where I get out of my own way and feel like I'm channeling."

Ms. Smith, 42, draws bountifully on her formative experiences with dance, graffiti, Tibetan culture and fashion, synthesized with influences that range from Jean-Michel Basquiat to Japanese calligraphy. While her work shares certain attributes with

Abstract Expressionism, she says she's coming from a very different place. "I'm not a white man with an eye on redefining painting itself," said Ms. Smith, who was raised in Baltimore by her single mother.

"It's all personal," said Bonnie Clearwater, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, who organized Ms. Smith's first large-scale museum exhibition in 2010. "Shinique's addressing issues of abstract painting and dealing with this idea of how fabric and castoff clothing has meaning to her personally, as well as social and cultural significance." Since gaining notice in "Frequency," a survey of emerging African-American artists at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2005 Ms. Smith has made installations around the country incorporating materials collected from communities and thrifts shops: clothes, toys and other ephemera.

"I think my work is very American, and the way we consume and cast off is unique to us," said Ms. Smith, who was inspired to make sculpture from clothing after reading an article in The New York Times Magazine tracing the migration of a T-shirt given by a woman in Manhattan to her local thrift shop that was eventually included in a bale of used clothing shipped to Africa, where it was bought by a man because of the college logo. In "Frequency" she created her own six-foot bale using clothes she no longer wore or gathered from friends, a collection of past identities and old baggage tied up neatly in a bundle. She said she liked that the garments were subsumed in a composition of color, shape and form while still retaining their associations. "I think the consumerism, the clothing, the trappings, the shedding skins, the little bits make us who we are," she added. "I try to string it all together."

Her mother, Vkara Phifer-Smith, a former fashion editor at Baltimore magazine, crocheted wildly sculptural clothing shown on runways. "It was definitely influential," said Ms. Smith, who as a child accompanied her mother to fashion shows as well as to services at the Tibetan Meditation Center in Maryland, where she would drift off to sleep amid ringing bells and chanting monks.

From the age of 4 she studied ballet, but her mother insisted that she audition at 12 for the Baltimore School for the Arts, where she had rigorous classical training in life drawing and painting. "She saw that potential in me and pushed me toward it," Ms. Smith said.

As a teenager she got caught up with a crew of graffiti artists and began tagging. "My high school boyfriend was a brilliant artist with a very eclectic way of decorating, and some of my hand style comes from him," Ms. Smith said. She attended the Maryland Institute College of Art on a scholarship and received her master's degree there in 2003.

In graduate school she explored the relationship between Japanese calligraphy and graffiti. In both "you can't back up, you have to be self-assured putting the mark down," she said. "There's no erasing."

She is quick to acknowledge the deep spiritual dimension of her work. "I am a believer," she said. "I do find joy in all the fragile myths we hold onto. There's beauty in that."

She recently visited the Charles White Elementary School, which is in a turbulent neighborhood in Los Angeles and has a gallery space run by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. She worked with students there, discussing how they could find inspiration in everyday experiences, culminating in a current exhibition of paintings and sculptures by Ms. Smith interspersed with writings and collages by the children and items Ms. Smith selected from the museum's costume collection. For another show opening in August at the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama, commemorating the civil rights era and the 50th anniversary of the church bombing in the city, Ms. Smith is creating a mandalalike installation from collected dollhouses and stuffed animals to honor the four girls who died there.

In New York, as part of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's Arts for Transit program, Ms. Smith was commissioned to create a work for the Mother Clara Hale Bus Depot in Harlem, under construction on Lenox Avenue and named for the founder of the nearby Hale House Center for needy and unwanted children. While scouting the area she found on the ground a child's drawing of a bus stop, which she collaged into a lyrical tangle of arcing brush strokes and patterned scraps evocative of a resplendent garden and presided over by a maternal silhouette.

Her painting is being translated into a mosaic over 132 feet long for the facade of the bus depot, which will open by the end of the year. She is also fabricating 112 windows for the sides of the building using blown-up details from her painting collaged with drawings of flowers by children she worked with in a local school.

“They can look up there over the course of time and say, ‘That’s my drawing,’ ” said Ms. Smith, who has included their names.

She was selected from 120 artists who responded to the open call, said Sandra Bloodworth, director of Arts for Transit. “Shinique’s vision really caught the spirit of Mother Clara Hale and spoke to the panel,” said Ms. Bloodworth. “She so often takes bits and pieces from things that might be discarded and creates something very beautiful, which is exactly what Mother Clara Hale did with children whose lives were broken. When we took it to the community, they really knew this was a gift for them.”