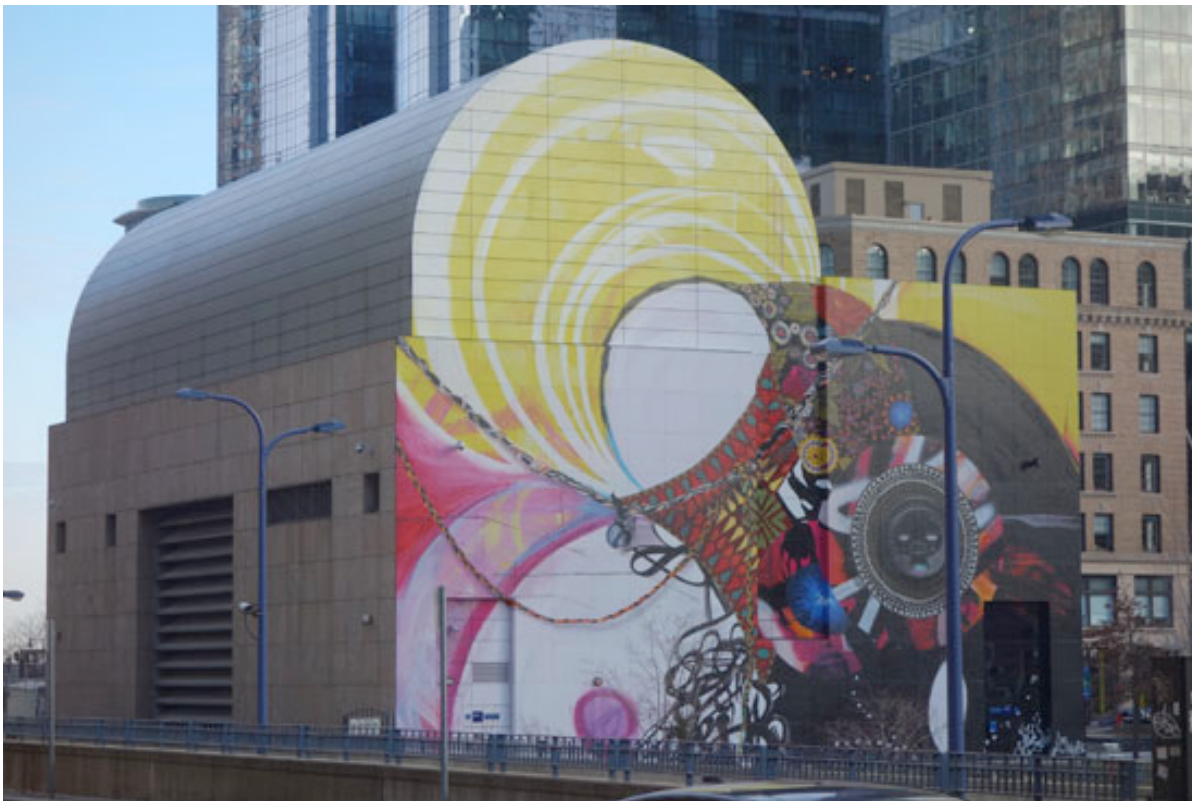


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Bright Matter: Shinique Smith in Boston

by Tom Csaszar

Shinique Smith: Bright Matter, the artist's long-run exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston seen from August 23, 2014 through March 1 of this year, coincided with the opening of her mural at Dewey Square in downtown Boston. In his first article for artcritical.com, Philadelphia-based writer Tom Csaszar argues for the eloquence and visual power of her work



The Greenway Wall at Dewey Square Park, Boston, Mass. Mural by Shinique Smith.
Photo: Tom Csaszar

At their simplest Shinique Smith's works are structured by a sweeping line interacting with a bundle of bright colors, often a cluster of actual fabrics. The line is at times calligraphic, at other times graphic – as in a printed representation of liquid motion such as that used by David Reed – and at still other times aerosol and graffiti-like. What keeps these works from falling prey to their own artifices, attitudes, and devices is Smith's ability to activate the works as light, color, and matter, in implied motion and rhythm. On the one hand, it is fair to say that Smith explores an almost encyclopedic variety of ways of how to use fabrics like paint – as well as how to use paint to imitate fabrics. Sometimes one of these ways, like the bleaching of blue denim in *The Spark* (2013), yields an engaging and accomplished work, but one that is fairly simple and one-layered. In other works, such as *Majesty* (2012), which are made only out of paint on canvas, in this case ink and acrylic, her calligraphic lines sweep around her billowing forms of bright colors. These bright shapes seem to be both a source and diagram for how she uses fabrics in her other works. But here it also looks like her observations of how colors and shapes from fabrics collage with each other and paint. The effects of motion and light are engaging for the pieces of a narrative they might imply, but are like songs that are melodically complex, but lyrically a bit plain.



Shinique Smith, *Bright Matter*, 2013.
Clothing, fabric, and ribbon on wood panel, 63 x 52 x 5 inches.
Zang Collection, London.
Photo: Adam Reich

On the other hand, in some works, Smith pares down her use of collaged fabric into three different modes. Bigger aesthetic moments come in these pieces in which Smith uses purchased fabrics as elements of color and shape, often combined with a painted surface, to make abstract images that hang like paintings on a wall, that is until they start to move off the wall into the room. Intelligently and

perceptively responsive to the materials and processes, Smith combines fabric and paint in three clearly differentiated ways: first, by almost completely absorbing and unifying the fabric elements with the paint into one design, second, by letting the fabric hang looser and be a separate semi-sculptural element in the work, and third, by developing the fabric as an entirely separate part of the work, which in its totality now becomes half-painting, half-sculpture. An example of the third way, *There were Sunday Mornings* (2008) has a train of fabric, so identified in the material list, which establishes itself as a separate object, leaving the surface to fall to the floor. It is politely evocative and carefully poetic. *Bright Matter* (2013) clearly establishes its own world, the fabric almost working free from the image, but not quite. Here in Smith's second mode, the fabric becomes another dimension in the work, but one that is not fully sculptural. It reasserts the movement and color of the flat surface continuing its mood and activity into bundles of color and light that activate its own separate abstract imaginary world. And in the most unifying presentation of fabric and paint, *Through Native Streets* (2011) and *Seven Moons* (2013) incorporate the fabric patterns and colors more fully into one abstract image. While they still have their own voice, one differentiated from the paint and ink, they are speaking in the same space and at the same time. In the case of *Through Native Streets* (2011), the dramatic tensions and narrative contrasts have multiple layers, patterned and emotional contrasts, and a tightly orchestrated and focused range of colors. I admire the eloquence and visual power of both of these works, while yet being aware of their different types of drama.



Shinique Smith, *There were Sunday Mornings*, 2008.
Acrylic, fabric, collage with train on canvas, 40 x 30 x 72 inches.
Photo: Adam Reich

Smith also uses fabrics bundled into pillars of color or hung across the ceiling like flying animals, surreal plants, or brightly colored irregular planets. Here Smith begins to realize most fully what the fabrics can do as sculpture. However, their dramatic and visual potential isn't yet as fully developed as in the best of her collaged paintings with fabric. In these Smith is developing, with careful consideration, an entirely different type of potential for her materials. These works just seem to be at an earlier stage of development, or maybe are becoming an outlet for a simpler way in which Smith responds to these materials.

Her mural at Dewey Square in downtown Boston, *Seven Moon Junction* (2013), based on her painting mentioned above, shows how well she is able to adapt her images to the size of architecture and monument. The image is transformed into an imagined world, and transforms the buildings around it into a cinematic fantasy of the different scales of the built urban environment. This mural exhibits an appreciable visual sensitivity to the narrative and rhythmic possibilities of color and scale.

Long-standing passions for abstraction, as well as older passions for formal harmonies and personal emotions, show signs of wearing thin here and there – and appealing to memories of past delights more than immediate desires. However Smith's works revive and animate legitimate interests related to these through connections to contemporary culture as well as past works. My understanding of the power of images, as well as the power of abstracted details from life, is enriched by an understanding of Smith's artistic output. I think it will be hard in the future to write a history of art and painting of the first quarter of the 21st Century without a consideration of Smith's works and the light they shed in dialogue with pieces like those of Fiona Rae, Michalene Thomas, Linda Benglis, Amy Sillman or Charlene von Heyl, to name just a few.



Shinique Smith, *Through Native Streets*, 2011.

Ink, acrylic, fabric and paper collage, and found objects on canvas over panel, 60 x 48 x 6 inches.

Photo: Adam Reich