

Vested Histories: Shinique Smith

by Aimee Walleston 08/30/10



Painting has a romance with itself, and its history; fabric's attractions are always to someone else. An intrinsically disembodied medium, fabric connotes apparel. Yet what it suggests—nudity and erotic intimacy; the line in the sand between profanity and propriety—seems too loaded to be properly unpacked. Fabric seems to always ask "who?" As in: who wore it, owned it, discarded it, designed it, sweatshopped it, mass-marketed it, knocked it off, etc. When fabric is used in the construction of an artwork, this whisper of "who" follows the work, disrupt the object's autonomy. In the case of artist Shinique Smith, whose sculptural work primarily comprises used clothing, re-configuration and re-contextualization are uncertain steps toward that autonomy.

The 39-year-old Brooklyn-based artist is well known for innovatively combining readymade and non-art materials for assemblage that could be described as embodying the "Unmonumental" aesthetic (Smith's work was exhibited in the New Museum's 2007 show of the same name). Now, her work is set to be exhibited in her first large-scale comprehensive US retrospective, opening at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami on September 16.

Smith is exhibiting pieces primarily from the past 10 years, and in a recent studio visit I was greeted with a few of the stars of the show, including a newer work comprised of a disemboweled stuffed toy lion strapped to a speaker and coated with fabric and gold lacquer. The piece, which sat amidst the artist's towering collection of color-coded fabrics and creepy, sublime array of plastic doll houses, evidence's her interest in tearing the trappings of childhood from their known environments. Also on view were some of the artist's "bales," sculptures of varying size that Smith makes by binding together layer upon layer of color-coded fabric. Along with these pieces, in the MOCA retrospective the artist will be showing her expressionistic paintings, which in their drapery formlessness recall Robert Morris' wall pieces and in their layering of gestural calligraphy, quotations of Jackson Pollock. Smith is the kind of artist whose works seem both of and apart from sanctioned art history. As much as her lyrical canvases harken painters past, the calligraphy, which in sight specific pieces extends beyond the canvas to the wall itself, is equally the spawn of an aesthetic sieved through tagging and graffiti.

A sense of an alternate, even renegade history is evident in the bales. The artist says that, in relation to her more free-form paintings, these works represent the implosive energy in her art practice. Smith invests each sculptural assemblage with a sense of history and psychology, in part because each of her bales is made with the cast-off clothing derived from her own closet. "Some of the clothing that I wear and/or purchase for myself is always inserted into my works," says the artist. "Inevitably, there are things I have bought things for myself solely for their pattern and color. I suppose at first I weeded my own closet due to a need for material, but over the years I realize I had a subconscious desire to include my own memories or histories among those of others." The bales also include the former vestments of ex-lovers and friends.

Smith's magpie aesthetic underscores the artist's interest in personal mythologies, and how our memories of objects and attire—possess keepsakes with sentimental value help us create our identities and personal histories. In regard to this creation of persona, it is also intriguing that the artist has also recently endeavored to translate her artwork to the choppy waters of fashion, which is a controversial realm for a fine artist, given the peril of a slippery agenda regarding women, race and class. "I have been working on accessory designs, handbags and scarves," says Smith. The artist also designed a textile for fashion designer Peter Som last season, but seems fairly unequivocal that her interest in creating and wearing fashion takes only a supporting role to her artwork. "When I was younger I was spending more energy and creative thought on what I wore and how I presented myself, but I realized that I needed to flip-flop that energy into my work." Perhaps the most interesting uniform in our closets is the one that allows us to be who we want to be.