

Shinique Smith uses our garbage to her own ends *The life cycle of stuff*

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It's no secret that American society is, to a large extent, obsessed with acquiring, using and throwing away stuff. We're a consumer culture. Says Brooklyn-based artist Shinique Smith, who deals with these themes in her work, "These things that we use and discard, it's akin to a cycle of life in a way. I became very aware of it when I moved to New York [in 2003]. The glut is more exposed there."

Smith, 40, was recently in Madison for the opening of her exhibition at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, *Menagerie*, which runs through May 8 in the museum's main galleries.

While Smith has been featured in a number of group and solo exhibitions, *Menagerie* is her largest show to date, pulling together nearly 50 paintings, sculptures, works on paper, site-specific installations and videos. The show was organized jointly by MMoCA and the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami.

Smith's work is a colorful collision of high and low, melding art-historical references with pop culture, graffiti and the detritus of modern life.

Smith's Bale Variant sculptures, which she began making in 2005, are her most literal expression of the life cycle of stuff. As a thought-provoking *New York Times* article from 2002 pointed out, many of the clothes we give to charity in the U.S. wind up overseas, on the backs of the poor.

Wrote George Packer, "All over Africa, people are wearing what Americans once wore and no longer want.... A long chain of charity and commerce binds the world's richest and poorest people in accidental intimacy."

The forms of Smith's bales — monolithic standing pieces, many of them about human height — look just like agglomerations of old clothes and plush toys ready for shipping overseas. They're bound together with twine, cords or ribbon.

Some of the unwanted clothes are Smith's own, some have been passed along by friends, and others come from thrift shops or the street. Familiar brand names like Polo and stuffed toys, like a Wile E. Coyote and Dino the Dinosaur peeking out from a bale, connect the items to our contemporary moment.

Yet these items have now outlived the whims of their original owners. While they're bundled like unwanted goods being shipped to developing countries (where some of them probably began their journey in sweatshops), they've been transformed into the material of art. In Smith's work, the shifting valuation between retail item, refuse and art sparks a kind of tension.

But just as there's an economic angle to her work, so too is there a formal tension. While the *Bale Variants* take on geometric forms that echo minimalist sculpture, the intimate nature of the bound textiles humanizes them.

Smith's paintings reflect her days as a teenage graffiti tagger in her hometown of Baltimore, as well as her fascination with Japanese calligraphy. In large-scale, colorful canvases, loops and swirls sometimes reveal legible words, but most marks are purely visual.

Stormy Waters (2009), one of the stronger paintings in the exhibition, has a swoosh of calligraphic script in the center of large, swirling brushstrokes in shades of muddy brown, reddish clay, dark gray and black. The painting is a riff on *The Slave Ship*, the famous 1840 painting by British artist J.M.W. Turner.

As an African American artist, Smith has a complex relationship to historical subjects. Another black artist — a contemporary of hers — had done a work taking on America's fraught racial past, but Smith says she didn't feel that the references seemed authentic or appropriate to their generation. The piece was about African American history, but not *their* moment in history.

As a rapacious collector of fragments that find their way into her art, Smith began gathering images that had historical meaning, such as the familiar slave-ship diagram. But her would-be piece took a different turn. Sitting in the MMoCA galleries, Smith recalls, "There's a reason I hate those things" — because of the suffering they represent — "but I also hate them artistically. I was going to make a piece with all those things, but it didn't turn out that way.

"I had decided to rip off this Turner painting of a slave ship, but [ultimately] I used the palette to create these turbulent marks by writing and taking away, writing and taking away. Then I found a T-shirt with a schooner [design], and that's my 'slave piece,' in a way."

Thus, what might have been a straightforward engagement with history becomes something more oblique, taking on history — and the history of art — in a more subtle way. The cut-out schooner is visible near the center of the painting, amid a rush of brushwork and a color palette that pays homage to Turner.

While Shinique Smith's exhibition was co-organized by MMoCA curator of exhibitions Jane Simon and staff at MOCA North Miami, the Madison version of the show has a local spin. During her week in town, Smith, who has a degree in art education as well as studio art, worked with local high schoolers.

Several students from Malcolm Shabazz City High School and Middleton Alternative Senior High School worked with Smith to install and modify 2006's *No dust, no stain*, making it a site-specific work.

The piece, set up as a temporary "room" within the MMoCA galleries, reflects Smith's interests in ritual and also in the ephemera of daily life. The gallery floor is covered with a profusion of mats in various colors and patterns. Bowls of water and seating cushions — atop gilded milk crates — are scattered throughout the installation.

Marks that vacillate between graffiti and calligraphy adorn the walls, as do an assortment of notes, photos and other personal effects. Says Smith, "I invited [the students] to draw on the wall directly. There are also photos and notes, written things I've found over the years that are put into the piece." The students brought in their own objects and mementos to be incorporated.

The students were intrigued by Smith's career as a professional artist, and a few are considering a similar path. Meanwhile, Smith looks back to her own youth in her work, where pop-culture references abound, including the stars and obsessions of her younger days.

"Being older, I can recontextualize my youth," she says. "I'd begun to think about myself in terms of this 'cool aesthetic,' because youth culture and urban environments and graffiti references fall under the aesthetic of cool, whether I want them to or not."

She hoped she could offer a feminized response to the often macho ethic of coolness. "I wanted to have the same bravado, but make it feminine," she says.

One technique was to use her own body as an artistic tool, directly applying pigment to her body and pressing up against the gallery wall. One such piece, done in varying shades of blue, is on view at MMoCA, with the shapes of Smith's hands, breasts and stomach clearly visible. Mark-making and gesture, whether with the hand or the whole body, are central to her work.

Smith seems to be building her reputation largely on the sculptural bales, installations and videos, but her quieter drawings are some of the most compelling pieces in the show. Many are studies for the standing bales or hanging pieces, but they provide a satisfaction that, paradoxically, some of the 3D works don't.

Graphite drawings like *Study for Floaty with Dangling Brick* — a sketch for one of her bundles that hang precariously from gallery ceilings — possess a certain mystery and restraint that the three-dimensional objects don't. That's due to several factors: the smaller scale and monochromatic nature of the sketches, but also their less literal preoccupation with bundling.

At times, in her attempts to riff on the life cycle of objects by directly using masses of discarded things, the resulting aesthetic is too literally garbage-y, and threatens to work Smith into too narrow a corner artistically.

Smith is at a point in her career where she's gaining greater visibility: She's been written up in the *Washington Post* (critic Blake Gopnik dubbed her "as fine a mixture of street and salon as an artist could be") and shown at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington. She is currently a visiting critic at Yale.

MMoCA curator Simon sees a unified vision emerging from Smith's work in multiple media: "I think there's an incredible amount of cohesion. Ideas go together, techniques go together. It's a whole host of things, never just one thing: meditative practices, art history, popular culture."

Smith's themes are current and certainly worth exploring now, but it'll be interesting to watch her career and see how she develops, or if she engages in too much repetition of approaches she's already tackled.

With so many clear and direct references to earlier artists (such as Carolee Schneeman, who began painting with her body decades ago and whose precedent Smith acknowledges), Smith must be careful to push toward the future, even as she deals with pop culture and fine-art sources from the past.