

REVIEW: Shinique Smith at MMoCA

By Karin Wolf
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In “Menagerie,” Shinique Smith’s debut museum exhibition at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Smith doesn’t so much attack mainstream culture from outside as she undermines it from within. She pulls back the curtain and exposes our dirty laundry, tied together with rope work and ribbon.

Smith’s work suggests that our thing for things is fetishistic, that we sort of desire or deserve our material bonds. As a viewer, it is hard not to look at “Menagerie” without a sense of self-consciousness about our collective consumer bondage,

but by exploring the wild environment Smith creates we may be able to reflect on the justification of our beliefs and values in a way that leads to a deeper understanding of our inconsistencies.

Smith takes samplings of readily available, and often obscenely sentimental, textile excesses and uses them as pigment for her abstract paintings and forms. Floral rugs, striped sheets, plaid shirts, bright patterned towels, silk flowers and gilded cherubs are to Smith what house paint was to Jackson Pollock, what Krylon is to a graffiti artist, and what wood, aluminum and cast paper were to Louise Nevelson.

Smith drips her preferred media onto limp canvases, tags it onto walls, and sculpts it into minimalist monochromatic soft towers. Her use of materials conveys her visual memoir as an African American female artist. For example, using vinyl, the sacred material of hip-hop, or the domestic goods that she associates with her grandmother, are as common to her art as the art history references to icons like Robert Rauschenberg whose “combines” famously included urban refuse.

In “Untitled (Bringer),” Smith seemingly redeploys Duchamp’s “Bicycle Wheel,” his infamous, 1913 sculpture of a bicycle wheel mounted to a four-legged, white stool. In Smith’s piece however, a stool encased in fabric holds a ball of clothing. In this way, Smith nods to Duchamp and his avant-garde art historical cohorts, carrying on the crusade to express previously unexpressed ideas, even if what she is expressing is a “soft” critique of their material fetishes.

From the moment one enters the “Menagerie,” waves of colorful fabrics and ribbons, apparently from deep inside the crates of Anytown’s Dig’n’Save Charity Resale Shop, drape from the ceiling, creating a strange and intimate canopy. In other areas of the gallery, bundles are suspended from the ceiling like inverse cargo parachutes ready to drop bags of materialist flotsam and jetsam to the ground. Instead of humanitarian

relief supplies, as we like to think of the throwaways we send to those less fortunate, Smith's heavy packages imply the opposite, that we may be unloading our "Good Will" garbage on the rest of the world.

In "Juice on the Loose," Smith takes a piece of rectangular denim fabric and paints it with bleach in a way that creates a white blossom. She embellishes the rest of the canvas with her signature flourishes gestures, swooping graffiti-esque lines and a ballpoint pen. The effect of bleach on blue denim is beautiful: It resembles batik on handwoven indigo died fabric, hinting at Smith's African American ancestry and recalling the restlessness of blue-jean-doodling high school angst. Bleach is an apt metaphor for "juice," which in hip-hop culture refers to qualities that make those around you fear and revere your power, and like bleach, power, tends to spread out of control and corrupt everything in its path.



As the term "Menagerie" implies, the curators have assembled an unusual collection of Smith's objects in this exhibition including video, photography, sculptures, installation, textural paintings and the delicate renderings the artist creates as studies for her sculptures. Smith has even painted borders and corners of MMoCA's galleries with bright splashes of paint and swirling lines influenced by her study of Japanese calligraphy. In some places she uses her body to apply the paint, making personal marks directly on the wall. In this way, Smith and her art have temporarily become an integral part of the building, much like a street artist and graffiti form a relationship with urban architecture.

"Menagerie" demonstrates the breath and depth of Smith's artistic accomplishments over the last decade. She experiments with countless techniques and materials and continually references the work of canonical artists. In so doing, she works within the conundrum of a bourgeois guilt trip, simultaneously ennobling urban mass culture while exposing the vulgarity of consumerism. This love-hate relationship with stuff is something most of us can relate to.

"Shinique Smith: Menagerie" continues through May 8 at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, 227 State St., Madison.

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