

THE ASPEN TIMES

Aspen Times Weekly: Mural on the Mountain

by Andrew Travers / December 3rd 2015



Jeremy Wallace/The Aspen Times |

New York artist Shinique Smith works away on her mural at Elk Camp in Snowmass this October.

“I thought I would be staying here, too. At first I was like, ‘Oh no! It’s going to be like ‘The Shining!’” But it’s been really pleasant.”

The wall — just under 30 feet long and just over 9 feet high — had transformed into a windblown psychedelic abstract, with graceful gestures of black paint amid bright bursts of pinks and violets, cuts of paper and cloth collaged within giving it sculptural textures here and there, with detailed sections of calligraphy and drawing, and small silhouetted figures of a dancer and a skier. Even in its unfinished state, it was the kind of piece you could get lost in from afar or up close, as skiers have been doing since Smith completed it and the season opened in November.

Smith had a general idea of what she wanted to do with the wall before she arrived in Snowmass Village, guided by architectural drawings of Elk Camp. She shipped a panoply of supplies here ahead of her arrival, giving her a host of options for the piece. Once she got to work on the mural, she raided the children’s area at the museum for crayons and colored pencils.

“We wanted something that was exuberant, that might reference youth culture — like the graffiti that is sometimes associated with the graphics on snowboards.” -Heidi Zuckerman, Aspen Art Museum

“Not having experienced the space, things really shifted when I got here,” she says. “Over the course of the week it’s really departed from my original thoughts. It’s more painting than collage, more drawing than painting and more intuitive than the plan.”

She began at slightly center-right, with a small geometric figure, and from that painted lines suggesting energy coming from it or into it — like a molecular explosion or implosion — and the rest of the piece, titled “Resonant Tides,” took shape from there.

The salt and pepper shakers had been pushed aside and the tabletops in Elk Camp Restaurant, on the Snowmass ski area, were covered edge-to-edge with plastic buckets of paint, brushes, sponges, sundry digital prints on paper, swatches of green paisley fabric, piles of odd bits of cloth and old ski passes.

The mid-mountain restaurant, in the pre-season quiet of late October, had temporarily become an art studio for Shinique Smith. The celebrated New York-based artist was at work on a mural, commissioned by the Aspen Art Museum and the Aspen Skiing Co. for their “Art in Unexpected Places” program. Smith was on the tail end of a week’s worth of progress on the mural the afternoon that I took a muddy drive up the mountain to meet her.

“I thought it would be creepier to be here by myself,” Smith told me with a laugh.



Jeremy Wallace/The Aspen Times |

Shinique Smith used a variety of mediums and textures to create her new mural in the Elk Camp restaurant on Snowmass Mountain.

The Aspen Art Museum's installations at Elk Camp began in the 2012-13 winter with Los Angeles artist Dave Muller's wall painting inspired by his survey of Skico employee's musical tastes (the painting incorporated skiers, a mountainscape and an inset of albums). It was followed by Teresita Fernandez's site-specific installation "Golden Panorama (Snowmass Mountain)," an intricately realized depiction of the ski area on a reflective metal surface that remained in the space for two ski seasons. As those pieces depicted the mountain itself and the people who make it run, it's not a stretch to say that Smith's work depicts the emotion of a successful ski day in all its kinetic, exhilarating glory.

After featuring a piece that was specific to ski industry workers and one based on a map of Snowmass, Aspen Art Museum director Heidi Zuckerman said the museum wanted to continue diversifying its use of the Elk Camp space.

"We wanted something that was exuberant, that might reference youth culture — like the graffiti that is sometimes associated with the graphics on snowboards," Zuckerman explains.

Though Smith normally works out of a studio and makes paintings and sculptures for galleries, she has previously painted commissioned murals in cities like Philadelphia and Las Vegas. Last year, Americans for the Arts named Smith's massive outdoor "Seven Moon Junction" — in Boston's Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway — among 2014's Best Public Art Projects.

Smith, with her experience in site-specific work and her incorporation of disparate visual vocabularies — graffiti, dance, Japanese calligraphy — was a natural fit to take the Elk Camp wall in a new direction.

"I just thought she would be terrific," says Zuckerman.

Through the ski season, the mid-mountain restaurant will be abuzz with crowds of skiers stomping Frankenstein-like in their boots searching for open seats, families loading cafeteria trays with chili and pizza and hot cocoa, beginners in various states of victory and defeat making their way in from lessons on the "magic carpet" outside the Elk Camp entrance. Alone in the space in October, surrounded by the quiet of the forest, putting paint to wall, stepping back to contemplate her progress and pulling occasionally off a vape pen, it seemed Smith had tapped intuitively into the chaos and constant motion of an on-mountain restaurant.

"It's more about the emotional energy that's coming from within me, and multiple thoughts transpiring at once that got it to this state," she explains. "It's pretty energetic. ... Hopefully it won't drive people crazy while they're in here eating. Hopefully it's not too much."



Jeremy Wallace/The Aspen Times |

Paint buckets and art supplies take the place of plates and ski gear as artist Shinique Smith works on a new mural inside of Elk Camp restaurant at Snowmass during the off season.

Smith jumped at the chance.

She often riffs on habits of consumption, incorporating used and discarded clothing in collage. She's a collector of odd materials — storing fabrics and prints up for the day she might be inspired to transform them into art. Among her materials for the Elk Camp piece were bits of t-shirts picked up around the world, a bedspread she bought from a department store four years ago and unused wallpaper.

She incorporated some of them knowing that many of these collage elements will be destroyed over the course of the winter.

“It's like sacrificing them to the wall,” she explains.

And eventually, of course, the entire piece will be painted over and gone.

“That gives you freedom,” Smith says. “Because of that I had to really let go of any outside judgment.”

As her Elk Camp work neared completion, and Smith worked on final details, she was unsure of when she'd be able to call it done.

“It has been a lot of fun,” she said. “It's one of those things where I feel like I could keep going. I have to make myself stop.”



Jeremy Wallace/The Aspen Times |

Shinique Smith's new mural at Elk Camp restaurant in Snowmass as of October.