

Bringing joy to Smith's 'BRIGHT MATTER' works

By Geoff Edgers
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Shinique Smith in her upstate New York studio.

THE CATSKILLS, N.Y. — In the center of Shinique Smith's studio is a table that would be the envy of any arts-and-crafts teacher. Stacked eye-high, it holds swatches of fabric, jars of costume jewelry, even a clear container of crushed cans.

"That is like gold," Smith said, delicately lifting one of the crinkled, aluminum castoffs. "Especially with a straw. Who drinks a Coors with a straw?"

Smith's work space is a bright, rectangular room inside a renovated barn. With a DVD of "Grease" or "Clueless" playing in the background, she crafts canvases marked by bright colors, indecipherable messages, and attached fabrics and other materials. This is where she's finished up her final pieces for "Shinique Smith: BRIGHT MATTER," a show that will open on Aug. 23 at the Museum of Fine Arts. It's also where Smith has plotted out what will be her most high-profile work yet: a mural that will be painted next month on the Dewey Square wall that has previously featured art by Os Gemeos and Matthew Ritchie.

Smith, 43, is a long way from Baltimore, where she grew up, or Brooklyn, N.Y., where she lived for nine years and established herself by creating works that showed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, New Museum, and National Portrait Gallery. She's finding herself inspired, she says, after purchasing this 13-acre property last year.

She's quit smoking, a habit on-and-off since she was 15, though she does still occasionally puff on an electronic cigarette. She talks with excitement about the juicer she and her fiancé, Gary Pennock, have grown semi-obsessed with, even offering an orange-and-carrot concoction during an interview. Happy? Yes. But that doesn't mean she's comfortable.

"I don't want to peak when I'm 43," she said. "The idea of peaking worries me. A peak indicates that there's a decline. I feel like it's a new beginning with the work. But it's not like the end. It is a highlight. A major, major moment for me. And maybe it is a peak, but I don't want to think about it like that.

There is a joyousness that comes through in Smith's work. The colors are exuberant, the calligraphy almost schoolgirlish as it lopes around the canvas. She tinkers with objects, adding them, eliminating them, adding them yet again.

Take the pink, plastic dollhouse that sits on her materials table on a recent afternoon.

"At one moment, I saw the plastic dollhouse attached to one painting, and then she had removed it," said Jen Mergel, the MFA's senior curator of contemporary art. "That type of mark-making with material objects, I do feel like that is a very fascinating product of United States culture especially from the 1980s."

Those were important years for Smith. She was the lone child of Vkara Phifer-Smith, who had her at 18. She never knew her father. As Smith describes it, she was a gifted student but didn't follow rules well. After cutting class on 60 days during one stretch, she was asked to leave her high school. She did, but, after bouncing around a bit, ended up earning admission to the Maryland Institute College of Arts. She was just 16. She hung out with graffiti artists and punk rockers. She loved the Circle Jerks and Run DMC.

Phifer-Smith remembers her daughter collecting objects as far back as elementary school, whether rocks or pieces of signs that had blown off into the street. She was always decorating.

"She would be writing on her notebooks, writing on her jeans, adding safety pins, tying on ribbons and strings and chains," Phifer-Smith said. "And she was always into constructing things. She was always the artist. She always wanted to make stuff out of things that she found. I thought it was very special that she could find the value in things that other people didn't see as valuable."

Smith, squeezing a Beanie Baby given to her by Pennock, said it wasn't just her teenage life that influences her work. "It's my youth in general," she said. "Sometimes I think it's like a coming of age story. Like when you realize who you are and what you're into. Also, you feel invincible. And you see things in a different way. When you're little, you have the imagination to see objects and places in a different light, to see through them, that sometimes you lose when you're an adult. I feel like I can connect to that place, or that way of seeing through my work."



“Splendid.”

Mergel, who, at 38, relates many of Smith’s palette choices to the ’80s, was standing in the studio recently, looking at a work called “Splendid.” The piece is a kind of Fat Albert meets Jackson Pollock, swirling lines blending paint, ribbons, rope, and yarn on a wood panel. The background color is what caught Mergel’s eye.

“I said, ‘Shinique, I specifically remember picking out a school bag made by the Esprit company that was this exact turquoise blue,’” said Mergel.

“Seven Moons,” the piece Smith is adapting for the Dewey Square wall, bursts with yellow, but also includes — in its gallery form — a flattened coffee-cup lid. The mural won’t include any materials other than paint. But Smith believes the abstract image will be perfect for the space.

“I took into consideration the feel of the space and the negative space of sky and the surroundings,” Smith said, explaining how she settled on “Seven Moons” for Dewey Square. “And that the intersection is also a point of convergence. To me, the composition feels like multiple things coming into a harmonic balance. I liked the idea of something that was yellow there as a kind of sun emanating.”

She smiles and reconsiders.

“Does that sound too artsy-fartsy?”

The wall’s previous two incarnations have featured vastly different works. The Brazilian brothers known as Os Gemeos used bright colors to create a boy with pajama pants over his head. Matthew Ritchie stuck with grays and whites to craft an

abstract image. Smith declines to say which mural she preferred. She also says she's not creating her work to please people. Her job is to do the best piece she can.

"One thing I have learned is not to look for love in all the wrong places," said Smith. "There's public love, and then there's love love. I'm able to separate myself from the work. When I was a kid, it all affected me. Here, I'm just going to do my best, and hopefully it'll have a good response."



"Seven Moons," from which Shinique Smith will produce the Dewey Square mural.