

Artist Shinique Smith visits Charles White Elementary

By Judy Graeme
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New York based artist Shinique Smith is known for taking everyday, unwanted objects and transforming them into complex, colorful sculptures. Some hang from the ceiling in rope-bound bundles, others sit on the floor in bale formations. All are products of the artist's passion for discovering and collecting materials wherever she finds herself in the world. Fabric, discarded wrappers, cast-off toys, old clothing, and

second-hand furniture are just some of the items that have found their way into her pieces. Also known for her large-scale paintings and installations, Smith, 42, brings a concern for finding common threads between people to her work. She was first inspired to incorporate used clothing into her sculpture after reading a New York Times Magazine story that followed a t-shirt donated to a thrift shop in Manhattan and eventually became part of a bale of used clothing that was shipped to Africa. Growing up with her fashion editor mother in Baltimore, Smith had a wide range of experiences with travel, art, clothing design, and spirituality, all of which inform her work today.

Another of Smith's passions is working with children — she earned a degree in arts education at Tufts University before going on to an MFA from Maryland Institute College of Art. This made her a natural choice for LACMA On-site's current project at Charles White Elementary School in the Westlake district near Downtown. LACMA On-site is a partnership with LAUSD that provides art programs and materials to schools, libraries, and community organizations.

"We selected Shinique because we thought her background and artistic practice would resonate with the students. She has natural instincts as a teacher. Her work is fundamentally about transforming everyday

objects into something one-of-a-kind, special....and emboldened the students to see their environment through new eyes," says LACMA educator Sarah Jesse. The museum operates a gallery in the school, opened in the former Otis Art Institute on Wilshire Boulevard, and Shinique Smith: Firsthand is the fifth exhibition mounted there. The show has served as a catalyst for artist, museum, and community to interact. It consists of three parts; work by Smith, objects chosen by her from LACMA's Costume and Textile collection, and art by students at Charles White. A new piece made by Smith specifically for the show was inspired by her exploration of MacArthur Park and the downtown fabric district.



Smith was first introduced to the students at assemblies last September. She showed images of her art, talked about what inspires her, and posed questions to the students about finding beauty in their everyday lives. The children were asked to collect their own ideas and inspirations in sketchbooks which they later worked from to create paintings and collages that became part of the show. Smith later returned to the school and in partnership with Jesse, conducted workshops with the kids where they made small sculptures out of socks, ribbon, yarn, and tape. All of the students' creations will be assembled by Smith into one

giant sculpture, and will remain at the school permanently. Smith gathered unused socks from a New York store that was going out of business, and also during outings in Downtown Los Angeles and Koreatown. During one recent workshop, she gently urged a group of fourth graders to think about the materials they were about to utilize. "Why do you think I use socks? Are you the only people who use socks? People all over the world wear them, so that's something that connects us," she said.

Smith said that working with the LACMA Costume collection was a joy. "This was a first for me, the first time I've used part of a museum's collection (as part of a show), and a great opportunity. I wanted everything!," she said. "I chose objects for aesthetic and formal reasons, things that related to my work. But I also thought about the designers that I knew of when I was growing up. That's why Bill Blass is in the show." Also included, and juxtaposed against Smith's and the students work, are pieces by Geoffrey Beene, Rei Kawakubo, and Yves St. Laurent.



Reflecting on exactly when it was she discovered that she wanted to work with kids, Smith says, "Maybe it was about thinking back to when I was a kid, and about the things that worked out for me."

She came to the realization, very early on, that she did not want to teach in an everyday situation. "I want to work with kids when they *choose* to be there, not when they *have* to be there," she said.

"It's been amazing to have her here," said school principal Irene Worrell. "The students have responded so well to Shinique. They show me their art and I love seeing their eyes light up. It's esteem building. Everyone is successful." The school's primarily Hispanic students are not strangers to art instruction. Charles White is one of the few LAUSD elementary schools to offer art, music, and dance. But getting to the museum can be another matter. Says Worrell, "It's funny, LACMA is only ten minutes away, but for a lot of these kids, it's a world away."

Top and bottom two photos for LA Observed by Iris Schneider. Photo of This Year's Girl, 2009 by Stephen Brayne