

The *Scene* talks to artist Shinique Smith about her exhibit at the Frist Black Wonder and Rainbows

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PHOTO: JOHN SCHWEIKERT

"Black, blue, green, yellow, orange, red, pink" (installation view at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts), Shinique Smith.

While she was in Nashville for the installation of her exhibit *Wonder and Rainbows*, currently on view at the Frist, artist Shinique Smith sat down with the *Scene* at a cafe inside Houston Station to discuss the exhibit. Smith's work was last in Nashville as part of 2013's *30 Americans* exhibit, also at the Frist, which put her in company with contemporary-art heavy-hitters like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Glenn Ligon and Kara Walker. In interviews about another contemporary art show at

the Frist, *Phantom Bodies* (which opens this week; [see the cover story](#) for more on that), chief curator Mark Scala told the *Scene* that he'd considered Smith's work, but discussed it with fellow Frist Center curator Katie Delmez and decided that a separate dedicated gallery exhibition was an even better option. *Wonder and Rainbows* includes paintings with elements of collage, textile works that take cues from painting, and sculpture that is filled with text. As Smith explains, the message of her work can be culled from the way those methods intersect. Here's her conversation with the *Scene*:

When *Wonder and Rainbows* curator Katie Delmez was introducing you at the Frist, she mentioned that when you first discussed this exhibit one of the first things you said was that you wanted it to be about color, and you were really interested in color. In the shows I've been doing the last couple of years, I've wanted to take several influences and things going on into the work, and I wanted to take one aspect and blow it up, like a detail. That was color and how it affects me and where it figures in the work, and then the idea of wonder, and those two things combined to kind of imagination and play, discovery. An almost childhood-influenced fascination, mystery, so those things were how the works were chosen. And there were definitely things that would fit in color-wise, but didn't fit in with the same energy.

When you made "Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, Red," what's the reason you used recycled and reused objects? Just because of the layering of meaning, like "This T-shirt stands for the person who wore it and the people who made it"? Yeah. I guess there's that, and a freedom of using textile clothing and found patterns and colors, and not inventing it and using those objects as paint and collage. So I approached those sculptures as painting, and everything is kind of tied together by line and collage.

And the collages that are part of the Frist exhibit, or the paintings that have collage elements — where do you find those materials? Everywhere. All the time. I've always been collecting things anyway, just because I thought they were cool. Like peeling other people's graffiti stickers off, and ads and cards and stuff like that, and I would put them up on the wall, even since I was a kid. My era was between punk and hip-hop, and in Baltimore there were a couple of places that would have major shows. Like, KRS-One would play, and then Circle Jerks would play, and the kids that I grew up with were into both. And graffiti and skating and mixing and sampling, those things were all happening. So when I was in high school, I took to collage and started gathering bits of my life, and I think I still do that because I felt most happy and successful and challenged to make connections between things. I have to approach it intuitively, almost like a circular way of thinking.

And when you were growing up in Baltimore you were writing graffiti too? What did you write? I wrote "Zebra." I was arrested when I was 15 or 16 for having spray paint. An inordinate amount of spray paint in my possession. I didn't really need to open my bag but I didn't know that at the time. That is kind of, like, unconstitutional to stop someone on the streets and just ask them to open their bag without a warrant or anything. But my graffiti friends who were with me knew it, and they were like, "No." But they asked me before they asked them. And I was carrying a huge duffel bag for a friend, a notorious graffiti artist, that was just full of spray paint, and I didn't even know that it was illegal to have under 18.

You've said that in school you had to learn how to make a perfectly straight line freehanded, and then learn to increase your pressure just slightly to change the thickness of the mark. That sort of training seems so important in a work like the site-specific piece that you did at the Frist, because now you can make this messy scribble that looks so effortless and elegant. The whole thing took a day. And I think that within that too, that immediacy, it's like embracing imperfection, and when it's that immediate it can come from my gut, and I can allow myself to be open while still thinking compositionally about the space and the room and the intensity of things. And then when you come into it, you see that I'm writing thoughts. And I used pencil. I knew I wanted to use pencil when I first came in, because I wanted to just use the wall. That corner is like my little notebook.

So the things that you wrote, are those just things that sort of come to you, or things that you've been thinking about? They're things that come to me, and things that are recurring.

One of the things in that piece that I was able to make out was something about love and hate ... "Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." It's a quote from Martin Luther King. It's been sticking in my head. I'm working on a project in L.A. for the L.A. Metro — I'm doing a large mosaic at the MLK Station. We haven't gotten to the production aspect of it, but because it's the MLK Station, and maybe because of all the things that are going on in our country and the world — the intolerance and the violence — it's making me aware of myself even more. You know that sculpture ["Open Word Lattice (Black & Rainbow)"], that's why I painted it black. It was originally white. When Katie and I were talking about the show, these ideas were coming up. Phrases in reference to me being young, gifted and black, and I am midlife almost. I'm 44. So I'm in a show called *Young, Gifted and Black* in South Africa, and I was just thinking about that and about wonder and rainbows, and I had kind of flippantly thrown out an idea that in the moment felt jokingly, but not, at the same time — *Black Wonder and Rainbows*. But the phrase's stuck in my head, and I'm like, "What does that mean? What does that mean?"

You know, wonder is the same for everyone, but black is always present in my work as a color and always present in the perception of who I am in this world. So thinking about those relationships and being enamored with the idea of a rainbow emanating from that color, I painted the sculpture black in different layers, and I wrote onto it, adding more. The cutouts are phrases, too. It says, "Love conquers all," and "forever strong," and different phrases that kind of repeat, and they're cut out but then when I went into it, I started writing those words and, "Black lives matter." This is all we want to do — live, all of us, and live well in some way. And my work, the objects I use, are basic needs. What we have, what we don't, what we desire, who we want to be, who we're representing ourselves [as] to the world. All those things come into play, so those words very simple from a speech: "Hate can't drive out hate, only love can do that." It's like, "Darkness can't drive out darkness, only light can do that." It's so simple, it's like a formula. It's just so simple and so powerful to me.

Thanks to Scene intern Sean Pritchard for transcribing this interview.