

# Los Angeles Times

## In Shinique Smith's 'Refuge,' bits of past make for a compelling present

By LEAH OLLMAN

JUL 03, 2018 | 7:30 AM



"This Year's Girl" (detail) by Shinique Smith, 2009-2018, clothing, fabric, accessories, ribbon, rope, steel elevator gate and sumi ink. It's part of Smith's show at the California African American Museum. (Brian Forrest / California African American Museum)

Call it activist assemblage. Shinique Smith has set up a "Donation Center" in one corner of her stirring show at the California African American Museum. Bins of travel-size toiletries, pillows, tarps, socks and toys load the shelves.

"Be an American," declaims the plastic cover on a plush red, white and blue blanket. The command rings hollow as a packaging slogan, but Smith lays it out there as a pointed provocation, part of the show's larger assertion that acts of nurture and nationhood, art and humanity are profoundly linked.



"Donation Center," 2018, by Shinique Smith at the California African American Museum. (Brian Forrest / California African American Museum)

Smith works across media, typically in combinations of painting, sculpture, collage and installation. Fabric is the constant throughout — swaths of cloth and fragments of garments, cut, glued, tied and bundled. Much of the material Smith uses has already played a role in the world, sheltering or adorning a body. In its new context, the memory of its prior purpose merges with the promise, mostly metaphorical, of a new function.

One 2018 work hangs by its corners along one long wall like the true flag of our planet. Huge and heavy, it's a patchwork of quilted moving blankets, plastic tarps, denim jeans, printed fabrics, recycled shopping bags and the nylon skin of an umbrella. The sky above us all is continuous, knowing no boundaries. Its emblem here is pieced together with scrappy dignity, stuff of the earth repurposed as the roof of heaven.



"Sky Cloth," 2018, by Shinique Smith. Clothing, fabric, tarp and blankets. (Brian Forrest / California African American Museum)

"Refuge" is the title of the show (organized by independent curator Essence Harden) and its pervasive theme. "The Watcher (Moon marked she walks in starlight)" (2018) looks to be in search of it, a vagabond figure fashioned of all sorts of cloth hued to the night's palette, stuffed, ribboned and roped. In the manner of a homeless soul wearing all of her belongings, she is lumpy and oversized, a potent presence — part shared ancestor, part common fate.



"The Watcher (Moon marked she walks in starlight)," 2018, by Shinique Smith. Clothing, fabric, pillows, ribbon, rope and found objects. (Brian Forrest / California African American Museum)

Smith provides an allusion to the solace of refuge in "Love Resides" (2018), an installation that lines one wall with domestic bits and pieces skewed into symbols: a pedestal sink littered with small bars of soap; a sheer black dress on a hanger; a cushioned milk crate; a child's drawing wrapped in plastic. At the opposite end of the gallery, the installation continues in the form of a nook snugly fit with a cardboard box, outfitted like a miniature home with a rug and fake plant. The private sanctuary of a child resourced with wonder, and close kin to the provisional abode of a street-bound adult, driven by need. Nurture and nationhood converge again, and clash anew.