

Clothes Connections

Shinique Smith transforms piles of garments destined for export into eye- and thought-provoking installations

BY BARBARA POLLACK

Smith's wry *Thank You Come Again*, 2007, features an ex-boyfriend's clothing, a jar of change, and lots of other stuff. **TOP** **RIGHT** The artist and her painting *Especially in the Afternoon*, 2008.

In an industrial building near the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Shinique Smith maintains an extremely tidy studio, with her new canvases lining the walls and a collection of fabrics of every hue neatly folded on metal shelving in the center of the space. It is somewhat unexpected to find such an orderly arrangement, in light of the exuberant chaos of many of this artist's best works: towering piles of discarded clothes tied into rectangular bales, and expressionistic curlicues of calligraphy spilling across museum walls. Smith defies the label of hip-hop artist that critics sometimes use to pigeonhole her creations.

"I am blown away by Shinique Smith's sensitivity toward material, how she brings materials of such different qualities together and works with them in almost a painterly manner," says Christoph Heinrich, the new director of the Denver Art Museum. When Heinrich was the museum's curator of modern and contemporary art, he invited Smith to participate in "Embrace!," a program in which 17 artists were asked to respond to the new and unusual Daniel Libeskind-designed museum

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building. Smith chose a particularly tall niche adjoining one of the gallery spaces for her site-specific installation *Twilight's Compendium*. "A more predictable artist would say this space was a mistake," Heinrich remarks, "but Smith was interested in the funny corner that shoots up like a chimney." The exhibition is on view through April 4.

Smith, who looks more like a fashion designer than an artist, sports a haircut that immediately calls to mind Josephine Baker. Soft-spoken, almost lyrical in her use of language, she is very different from the teenage graffiti artist she once was. The artist grew up in Baltimore as the daughter of a single mother and was arrested at age 15 for possessing cans of spray paint. She was asked to leave the prestigious Baltimore School for the Arts because she belonged to the graffiti group TWC (The Welfare Crew) and wound up at Frederick Douglass High School.

"My foray into tagging was very brief, and it was over 20

years ago," says the 38-year-old artist. Last spring Smith created *Like it Like that*, an installation covering four walls of the Project Space at the Studio Museum in Harlem. A collage of clothing, photographs, paint, and drawing, her huge scrawl was in some ways reminiscent of both graffiti and Abstract Expressionism. "Graffiti still influences my work, but in a nostalgic way, reminding me of my youth and the brash, fearless way you have as a teenager. Creating art re-creates that energy for me."

While Smith never downplays the impact of growing up in urban Baltimore—"the hood," as she calls it—other aspects of her upbringing were equally influential. Her mother was a fashion designer, and Smith was raised by her grandmother in a fairly strict, education-oriented household. "I wasn't allowed past my front porch until I was 13. If I was rebelling against anything, it was probably that and school in general." She studied ballet throughout her high-school years, attending performances of *The Nutcracker*, and at one point aspired to a dance career, until a knee injury interfered.

Bale Variant No. 0011, 2005, gives new social and esthetic life to recycled material.

She attended the Maryland Institute College of Art on a scholarship, where she studied anatomy and assemblage and made several video pieces. After graduating, in 1992, she took a few years off from art. During that time she founded an African American film festival in Seattle and worked on

screenplays in Los Angeles, but she ultimately decided movie production was not her vocation. In 2000, to qualify for teaching jobs, she enrolled in the arts-education program shared by Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. A year later, she returned to the Maryland Institute, studying Japanese calligraphy and creating performance pieces in which she bound herself in layers of fabric and photographed the results. She graduated in 2003, the same year she got a fellowship to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine.

"I definitely see the influence of dance and motion in the way I use my body on my canvases," says Smith, pointing to the swirl of black lines that decorates one of her paintings. She remains very interested in music today; frequenting dance and karaoke clubs is among her favorite pastimes. When asked how her five years in the film industry informed her visual art, she says, "I am addicted to all those Jane Austen adaptations—costume dramas—and superhero movies, for sure." Her appreciation of the way clothing can communicate a character and a time period is certainly reflected in her work.

As an emerging artist, Smith experimented with three-dimensional constructions, making cutouts of her calligraphic strokes and assembling them in accumulations that spilled off the surface of the paper and onto the wall and the floor. She then began to make work that involved layering fabric on the wall, forming a kind of unstitched quilt. One day, she read a magazine article about companies shipping cast-off garments from the United States to West Africa. "The article described the journey of a single T-shirt from a woman on the Upper West Side to the African man who bought it," says Smith. "The idea of the transference of the shirt across the Atlantic was really attractive to me." Inspired by the way people bundle recyclables, as well as by the way the homeless—





JEFF WELLS © SHINQUE SMITH/COURTESY DENVER ART MUSEUM

whom she refers to as “urban bedouins”—carry their belongings with them, she began to stack materials and bind them together with colored cords. “These different shapes came out, and I explored them as much as I could,” she says.

Smith came to New York in 2003 on a residency with the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and was soon exhibiting in group shows at alternative spaces around the city, including Art in General, the Bronx River Art Center, the Longwood Arts Gallery, and Triple Candie. An early video piece was included in the exhibition “Veni Vidi Video II” at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2004. The following year, Smith made her breakthrough presentation at that museum, in the show “Frequency,” the ambitious exhibition of new trends in African American art that launched the careers of many artists. At this time, she was supporting herself by working in the office for the Armory Show in New York, and then as a studio assistant for the artist Kehinde Wiley. “I even went for an interview to

***Twilight's Compendium*, 2009, responds to Daniel Libeskind's design for the Denver Art Museum.**

work as a personal assistant for comedian Chris Rock, but I realized I would be giving up everything, so I didn't take it,” she recalls.

Christine Kim, now associate curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, selected Smith to participate in “Frequency” in 2004, when Kim was a curator at the Studio Museum. “We had several conversations about the trajectories of clothing and fabric distribution in different areas of New York City—the East Village, Williamsburg, Fort Greene, where she lived,” Kim says, “and how what you find at the Salvation Army on 125th Street in Harlem would be different than donation centers in other parts of the city.” For the show, Smith created her first mature sculpture, titled *Bale Variant No. 0006*—a tall assemblage of clothing and accessories that looked very much

Smith offers a witty riposte to a classic in *Untitled (Whistler's Mother)*, 2009.



like the bales of fabric shipped abroad.

"I didn't have a studio at the time, so most of the piece was made in my living room, and then on-site at the museum," says Smith, who adds that an actual bale of clothing like the ones that inspired her piece would weigh more than 800 pounds.

Smith's bale weighed about 400 pounds and was built in pieces around a hollow form. "My doorway was only 36 inches wide," the artist says, "so I made it in sections, each piece weighing about 100 pounds." She incorporated her own clothes, her grandmother's, and even blankets that came off her bed. Explaining her choice of materials, she says, "Our bodies are imprinted onto the fabric that we wear, and as such it moves around into different communities and gets reformed and reused and reconstituted in these different contexts. It seemed clear to me that this form, the bale, was the ideal space for articulating these ideas."

New Museum curator Laura Hoptman chose Smith's work *Bale Variant No. 0011* (2005) for the 2007–8 exhibition "Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century." Hoptman points out, "On the one hand, it is a very colorful assemblage of discarded clothes; on the other, it is a very telling take on minimalist sculpture." Hoptman views Smith as part of the generation following the '90s conceptual artists, such as Mona Hatoum and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who intentionally select found objects with social implications or historical meaning, but who do not neglect the importance of visual impact. "She doesn't deny visual pleasure," Hoptman emphasizes, "and there is a definite narrative in the material—in this case, the way discards from wealthy nations are shipped to less well-off countries and sold by the pound." In that way, says Hoptman, "it is vaguely political, but it is also a commentary on modern monumental sculpture and geometric abstraction."

By 2007, Smith had expanded her vocabulary beyond bales of clothing, making three-dimensional works that blurred the boundaries between painting and sculpture. In her solo show "ALL PURPOSE," at Moti Hasson Gallery in Chelsea, she presented works such as *Thank You Come Again* (2007), which incorporated old socks and an ex-boyfriend's yellow-and-black-striped T-shirts. She affixed the articles to a wood panel attached to a wall tagged with black paint marks and drips; on the floor beneath it was a pile of old clothes.

Smith's talent for tailoring her work to an architectural space was evident in her installation *No Thief to Blame* (2007–8), which appeared in the National Portrait Gallery's 2008 show "RECOGNIZE! Hip Hop and Contemporary Portraiture." Smith was commissioned to respond to a poem by African American writer Nikki Giovanni, titled "It's Not a Just Situation: Though We Just Can't Keep Crying About It (For the Hip Hop Nation That Brings Us Such Exciting Art)." The poem was broadcast into the gallery where Smith's work appeared. Framing a corner



of the room, the installation wove together references to dead hip-hop artists Tupac Shakur, Aaliyah, Jam-Master Jay, and Lisa Lopes with a swooping calligraphic line that incorporated lyrics from rap songs and words from Giovanni's poem. "This piece in particular," Smith says, "honors the warrior women who have fueled me with their distinctive cries."

Last summer, Smith gave New York a double dose of her work—an installation at the Studio Museum in Harlem followed by the show "Ten Times Myself" at Yvon Lambert Gallery in Chelsea, where her prices ranged from \$20,000 to \$50,000. The centerpiece at Yvon Lambert, which now represents her, was *Bale Variant No. 0017* (2009), a tall rectangular mass of clothing, transitioning bottom to top from shades of black and indigo to bright white. The new canvases there reflected a meditative state of mind, featuring an increasingly complex use of calligraphy punctuated by swatches of fabric, as in works like *And the world don't stop* and *Mandala* (both 2009).

But the artist's sense of humor also came through in *Untitled (Whistler's Mother)*, 2009. This work is a riotous assemblage of clothes bundled around a stuffed satin pig, which takes the form of a human sitting on a chair and wears a bright yellow skirt that brushes the floor. "My relationship to my subjects and the materials is very personal, like the feeling when you are a kid alone making toys from whatever is available," she says. "You put a towel on your head to make hair, or an empty film canister becomes Barbie's side table." It's that sense of play that continues to animate Smith's elegant and unruly accumulations. ■

In *Mandala*, 2009, Smith mixes it up with complex calligraphy punctuated by swatches of fabric.