



ANONYMOUS EXCHANGES

A Conversation with

Shinique Smith

BY KATHLEEN WHITNEY

Opposite: *The whole realm was his*, 2010. Acrylic, rope, and found objects, 91 x 91 x 61 cm. Above: *No dust, no stain*, 2006. Mixed media, dimensions variable.

Shinique Smith's sculpture, paintings, and collages reflect the belief that possessions reveal identity, create personas, and confer power. She is a student of the social totems represented by clothing and furnishings, observing how they perform along a spectrum of duty, beginning with function and ending as narrative. A determined bricoleur, she places a range of mass-produced things—including clothing, household items, aluminum fencing, shoes, and furniture—in symbolic ensembles that replace original meaning with a subversive new identity that re-creates or resurrects memories and perceptions.



Left: *Swaying Beauty*, 2007. Clothing, foam, rope, and twine, 60 x 22 x 22 in. Right: *Bale Variant No. 0017*, 2009. Hand-dyed clothing, fabric, binding, and wood, 183 x 132 x 132 cm.

Smith gets materials from a variety of sources, including her own wardrobe; at one point, she tore up the wood floor from her apartment to use in a piece. She also takes advantage of that oddly urban phenomenon, the anonymous exchange. In New York, where Smith lives, it's common to find unwanted possessions left out for passersby to claim. Her work is not only about changed and charged meanings, but also about the sequence of use, reuse, and repurposing that forms the life cycle of things: how clothes travel through time and space, their voyages through secondhand boutiques or thrift shops and on to resale and the scrap trade in third world countries.

Thoughtfully constructed in terms of relationships and arrangements, Smith's freestanding sculptures, suspended objects, collages, and wall paintings are based on a formal approach to color, pattern, and design. Her works take on a number of related forms—totems, bales, swooping decorative gestures, and figures. Although the work is carefully orchestrated, it seems improvised and spontaneous. Smith has said, "I'm not attached to the final product, but I'm attached to the process of making it." Both abstract and literal, her work involves viewers in three levels of evaluation: reading the materials as the raw things they are, estimating their social value, and considering their transformation and new juxtapositions.

Smith earned her MFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art. Her work has been exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami; the Studio Museum in Harlem; the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC; the New Museum, New York; Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin; and MoMA PS1, New York. She has received awards and fellowships from the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the New York Foundation for the Arts, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council.

Kathleen Whitney: *What led to your interest in using clothing as a material?*

Shinique Smith: My mother was a fashion designer, and I spent a lot of time with her in fabric stores. She introduced me to the world of couture and high fashion; the formal qualities of the clothes had a big influence on me. Many years later, I wanted to start using color and pattern in my work, and I liked the ready-made quality as well as the meaning of clothes.

KW: *How do you go about making work?*

SS: I save stuff like crazy, and I also use my own clothes and shoes. I have collections of clothing, toys, shoes, and furniture. I even collect gift wrap and ice-cream-cone wrappers. I have chain-link doors and an elevator gate, which I use like picture frames. Because my work involves a lot of color and pattern, I use paint and also dye and bleach the fabric. I'm always taking something from one piece and adding it to another. The work is bundled, tied, stitched, wadded, and stuffed together. Things are held in place by fabric shreds or ribbons or rope; the furniture parts use harder connections like screws and nails. With the chain-link pieces, I just stuff clothes and whatever else I'm using in the holes. In all of my pieces, the clothing is compressed to some degree, especially in the cubes.

KW: *Does the function of a piece of furniture or clothing influence what you do with it?*

SS: I use materials that carry strong associations—suits, wedding gowns, sneakers. I want the message of the garment to come out, but I also want it to have a new meaning. I use clothes because they are more than just their function, and they are so personal.

KW: *Is your work driven by thematic interests as well as process?*

SS: I always have a starting point—a shape or a concept—but then, I work spontaneously. I'm always stepping back to see how things are progressing, and I stop at the point where everything I put into an object comes together in a resolved way. Everything I do has a consciousness about it that relates to how we deal with possessions and what happens because of those relationships. There are many connections in my work to cultures that use bundling and tying for spiritual reasons.

KW: *Sometimes the work seems abstract, sometimes figurative. Do categories matter to you?*

SS: I'm working with a lot of abstraction, but I don't set out to make something figurative or non-figurative—everything depends on what I'm working with and what happens as I go along. I want my work to be as open as possible. I have many pieces with furniture, dolls, and stuffed animals in them; sometimes those elements become part of a pattern of fabrics and colors, and sometimes they remain what they started out to be. I don't believe in categories because they hold you back. I'm not avoiding reality, but I want transcendence and transformation. I want the viewer to see something new.

KW: *There seems to be a strong political and social narrative running through your work.*

SS: I'm concerned with three different things in my work: making something that's beautiful, commenting on the social relationship people have with their possessions, and dealing with the politics of clothing. I'm not interested in irony; I want to have direct access to the viewer. Much of my work is politically motivated, but my intention is to make that interest ambiguous and subtle. I'm especially interested in the idea of "surplus value," because the value of the worker's labor and the value of the finished product are way out of balance.

KW: *How is fashion relevant to your work?*

SS: The relationship that people have with their clothes is complicated. Clothes can give a false identity, but they also represent a desire for self-expression. Sometimes the way people

Mamificent, 2007. Clothing, climbing rope, stool, plastic, doll, ribbon, and carpet, 122 x 91 x 76 cm.





Above: *Perfect from the waist...*, 2009. Clothing, fabric, found objects, twine, and ribbon, 38 x 22 x 22 in. Right: *Bale Variant No. 0022*, 2012. Clothing, fabric, binding, and wood, dimensions variable.

use their clothing is like karaoke—sometimes it's pathetic, sometimes inspired, but it is always using other people's words to find social standing and identity. Sneakers like Nike Air Jordans are a good example; they signify a number of things, including the owner's affluence and feeling about and involvement with sports, all above and beyond function.

KW: *Do any of your works make a direct link to the politics of clothing and possessions?*

SS: The series of rectangular cubes represents a fairly direct comment. The bales replicate how clothing is transported to the third world by resellers and charities. They compress the clothes into tight bales so that they can be easily shipped. There's a lot of exploitation in reselling clothing, especially in African countries. Usually the clothes have already been used at least twice. I use this form, in a modified way, to talk about out-of-balance exchanges and the connections between the things we consume and what we desire.

I've made red, white, and blue flag bales and African flag bales. I made one bale out of used wrapping paper, ribbons, and tags, thinking about the kind of gifts you return. I made a bale piece for the Battery Park sculpture park that reproduced how resellers move the bales around on dollies.





Above: *Untitled (Whistler's Mother)*, 2009. Clothing, fabric, ribbon, rope, twine, and chair, 132 x 112 x 86 cm. Right: *This Yellow Shell*, 2013. Clothing, fabric, bamboo, ribbon, rope, and twine, 165 x 41 x 30 cm.

At the National Portrait Gallery, I did an installation inspired by a Nikki Giovanni poem that involved collecting dead rock star memorabilia — Kurt Cobain, Tupac, Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes — and also paid homage to Basquiat and Keith Haring. I used all kinds of star-related stuff, including lunchboxes, T-shirts, a Cobain flask, and china plates. It was part shrine and part teenager’s bedroom. I did a lot of graffiti-style painting on the walls, had things hanging on the ceiling, and included a soundtrack of Giovanni reading her poetry.

KW: Tell me about “*Firsthand*,” the show you did with students at Charles White Elementary School in Los Angeles.

SS: The L.A. County Museum of Art has a program that gets the museum involved with the community. My show was the fifth one they’ve had at the school. The first time that I met with the students, I talked to them about finding beauty in everyday things and showed images of my work. Then the kids met with their art teachers and made little three-dimensional collages using some of the ideas we talked about. The show featured the students’ work and my work, including a piece inspired by the school’s location and things I found in the area. I wanted to include things that inspired me, so I picked a number of hats and outfits from the museum’s collection.

It was a great experience; I believe that mentoring is very important. What I loved about the kids was the exchange of energy and their lack of judgment. I’m incorporating children’s drawings of flowers into a painting that’s being used as the basis of a huge tile mural. It will be on the wall of a bus depot and is a memorial to the Mother Clara Hale School in Harlem.

Kathleen Whitney is a writer living in Los Angeles.

