

# Shinique Smith and the Politics of Fabric

by Brooke Kamin Rapaport



COURTESY THE CALIFORNIA AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM



**Mitumba Deity II,  
2018.**

Clothing, fabric, pillows,  
ribbon, rope, and  
found objects with  
collaged foam pedestal,  
78 x 60 x 68 in.







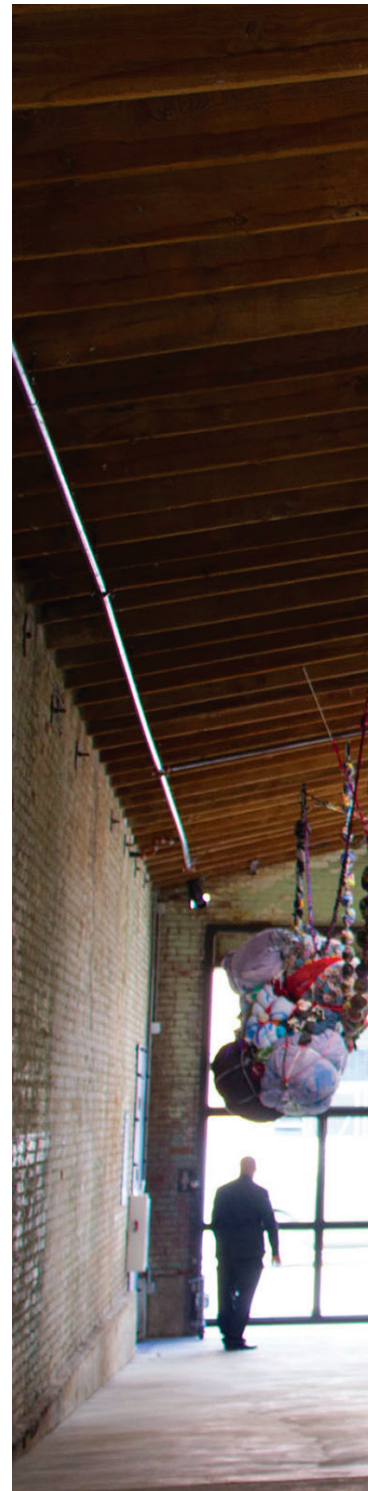
hinique Smith has often related how reading a 2002 article in *The New York Times Magazine* prompted a new sculptural language in her work. “How Susie Bayer’s T-Shirt Ended Up on Yusuf Mama’s Back” traces the journey of a used T-shirt from the Upper East Side of Manhattan to Jinja, Uganda—part of a global trek of donated clothing from rich to poor countries.<sup>1</sup> Smith focused on the clothing, on the opposing politics of excess and need, and on the method whereby thousands of pounds of cast-off garments were gathered into neat layers, forced into four-foot-high bales, shrink-

wrapped, and cinched with metal straps. The tightly uniform vocabulary of these parcels—each one composed of apparel once belonging to and then discarded by countless individuals—fascinated the artist, and the imagery lingered in her mind. For her, the symbolism of the bales didn’t stop with current social and political systems, however. She also homed in on the bales of cotton that were the economic driver of systematized slavery in the southern United States. More than 150 years separate the cultivation of cotton by enslaved Africans from the export of used clothing in today’s system, yet their parallel histories form the warp and weft of Smith’s sculptures.

“It is undeniable and inescapable,” she said recently. “It is a mirror image of what is happening with clothing now and who the clothing is going to...There are whole cultures existing off of our used things. It’s even more complicated now. Now there are so many different people who are oppressed. Fast fashion goes right into a ditch and into another bale.”<sup>2</sup> In the physical act of gathering colorful found materials for her work, Smith enfolds layers of dark history into beautiful untidiness, conjuring pasts and presents of labor and toil.

Smith has also cited Robert Rauschenberg’s *Bed* (1955), one of his first combines, as having an outside influence on her when she was a teenager. “Seeing *Bed* changed my life,” she reflected. She particularly observed the duality in the materials: “The blanket was still a blanket, the quilt was still a quilt, but also functioning as color and pattern and maintaining its identity, its objecthood.” She considered this method in her own work: “I like to make things complicated. I am more intrigued by the fact that a piece of fabric that I use has a history of where it came from. Was it mine? Did it come from clothing? Was it purchased on travels? There is a history in its pattern, the meaning of what, for example, a paisley is...Cloth brings the globe together still.”

Rauschenberg’s work was one catalyst. Other artists have used fabric—notably, cotton fiber—as a means to acknowledge the politics of excess, the symbolism of







MICHAEL JULIANO, COURTESY THE ARTIST

***Forgiving Strands,***  
2014–16.  
Clothing, fabric, artist-  
made textiles, accessories,  
pillows, and bedding,  
yarn, ribbon, rope,  
acrylic, bleach, spray  
paint, and fabric dye,  
960 x 240 x 180 in.



mass-produced garments and their fraught histories, and the exploitation of people working on assembly-line production. Leonardo Drew's wall reliefs and freestanding sculptures made from piles of white batting not only allude to and contradict Minimalist elegance, they also reference the American cotton industry and African American history—subjects that come to prominence in works such as *Number 24* (1992), where cotton, rusted iron, and wood tightly commingle and the materiality of cotton becomes a pointed reference to enslaved labor. Like Drew, Smith makes her bales by hand, underscoring the association with the value of labor. But she also shares an interest in contemporary communities, as well as personal and collective dynamism, with younger artists like Kevin Beasley, who molds used and purchased clothing with resin to create ghostly memories of past wearers and histories, and Natalie Ball, who reflects personal identity through intermingled materials, including found

THIS PAGE:  
***Breathing Room:  
Bound and Loose,***  
2018–ongoing.  
Still from performance  
at the Baltimore  
Museum of Art, 2020.

OPPOSITE:  
***Cathedral Street,***  
2013.  
Clothing, pillow, wood,  
string, ribbon, and rope,  
19 x 26 x 17 in.

quilts, synthetic sports jerseys, and rattlesnake skins.

Smith's objects, like those of Beasley and Ball, confound standard associations of heritage and force the viewer to assess complex narratives. Fabric—from cotton and quilting to polyester and nylon, purchased apparel and street finds—serves as a key to unlocking personal and collective histories. In Smith's case, sculpture, performance, and painting intertwine. Her recent sculptures reckon with the way that common, recognizable materials can be individual and societal markers.

Critical attention to Smith's work has focused on certain paths. Though she is often linked to graffiti art (as a teenager in the mid-1980s, she wrote graffiti in Baltimore), to the aesthetics of hip-hop, and to a closely framed take on what a Black woman artist should choose as influences, she pushes beyond all of this.<sup>3</sup> As she explains, "There is a tension at times in understanding my place in the world of artistic classifications. If the work doesn't explicitly talk about Black pain and suffering or the past, then to some it may not appear Black enough...Can the work evolve to be what it wants to be? Isn't it more powerful when the work is a hybrid? Those ideas can be stifling, so I have to shake them off in the process of making."

Rather than appropriating the mechanical production of clothing bales, Smith sorts, layers, ties, and knots each sculpture. Her work evinces the messiness of the human hand that has clutched, gathered, and culled materials into shape. Her bales can be head-size or human-scale, tightly geometric volumes or unkempt expanses, overhead and lingering.

When Smith first installed the complex assemblage *Forgiving Strands* (2014–18) at Hauser Wirth & Schimmel in Los Angeles as part of "Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016" (2016), it consumed the upper register of the space. In 2018, in the group show "Out of Easy Reach" at the Stony Island Arts Bank in Chicago, she stretched and amplified the bales of fabric, hanging them from the ceiling of a passageway so that they resembled puffed necklaces. A vast sculpture, *Forgiving Strands* consists











THIS PAGE:

**Bale Variant No. 0023**  
(*Totem*),  
2014.

Clothing, fabric, accessories, twine, and wood,  
96 x 18 x 18 in.

OPPOSITE:

**Bale Variant No. 0024**  
(*Everything*),  
2017.

Vintage clothing, specialty fabrics, ribbon, rope, acrylic mirror, acrylic, fabric dye, and wood,  
103 x 33 x 30 in.

of multicolored segments of an American flag, blue jeans, and bedspreads—all made by gathering, tying, knotting, and binding fabrics collected from Smith's personal life and connections. It is a protracted work, packed with layers of associations. Each strand becomes a line on a road map, leading the viewer across physical space and across reflections. Several of the strands are white, suggesting flour sacks and labor or bedsheets and the entanglements of intimacy; others have joyful floral and butterfly patterns recalling a teenager's room; yet others are printed with paisley patterning, an ornamental style linked to ancient Persia and India that also recalls 18th- and 19th-century Scotland and mod fashion in 1960s England and America. So what does all this coalescing in one work mean?

Smith—who was born in Baltimore and earned her BFA at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in 1992, an MA in Education from Tufts University in 2000, and an MFA from MICA in 2003—claims multifarious sources. For her, there is personal meaning in the binding, associated with her life and with certain subjects of her study, including Indigenous American medicine bags, Aztec sacred bundles from central Mexico, and Peruvian burial bundles. Smith cites her grandmother's use of patterned fabrics throughout the family home. Her mother, a fashion editor at *Baltimore Style* magazine in the early 1980s and the first female Sun Dance Chief within her circle in Mexico (she spent decades as a member of an international council of Indigenous elders), instilled a fascination not only with clothing and its history, but also with esoteric knowledge and ancient ritual traditions. Smith has made prayer ties in the Lakota and Aztec traditions. She is cognizant of the prayer ties that in Ireland are placed in trees as offerings to the fairies, commemorating the dead. In performance, she has wrapped her body into a



“**Smith’s objects...confound standard associations of heritage** and force the viewer to accept complex narratives. Fabric...serves as a key to unlocking personal and collective histories.”

bundle. Imbuing contemporary sculpture with historic ritual is something that rests deep within her, yet she has hesitated to comment explicitly on its significance: “I stopped talking about ritual and spirituality for a time because it was critiqued out of me.”

Smith recalls that when she lived in New York (she moved there in 2003, left the city in 2019, and now lives and works in Los Angeles), she was sampling breaths to create beats and sound in combination with movement, taking a cue from hip-hop, and bundling herself, physically using her body as the ground in a performance work: “This was combining the breath with the bundling.” Some of these performances coincided with periods of tragedy, turmoil, and protests. *Gesture II: Between Two Breaths*, which followed the death of Eric Garner on July 17, 2014 and preceded the death of Freddie Gray on April 12, 2015, was performed at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in conjunction with her survey exhibition “Shinique Smith: Bright Matter” and again at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Next Wave Festival in December 2015. “I am the bundle, the compression. My movement was constricted. My garments were constricted,” Smith said of the work. More recently, on January 11, 2020, Smith performed *Breathing Room: Bound and Loose* at the Baltimore Museum of Art, which brought these concepts into a fully realized ritual of transformation among swaths of bleached denim and indigo-dyed cloth.

*Bale Variant No. 0023 (Totem)* (2014) is an eight-foot-high rectangular prism, a colorful compilation of corduroy trousers, velour jacket, leopard-print nylon, cascading green sweater, and much more standing directly on the floor. Taking the form of a tall totem based in Indigenous American, Australian, and Melanesian cultures, this work doesn’t reflect on one typology, instead creating a nonhierarchical structure of found textiles. The selection of fabrics is boundless,







Installation view of  
"Shinique Smith:  
Refuge," California Afri-  
can American Museum,  
Los Angeles, 2018.

the detritus of lives lived and the remains of people's stories. While Smith's materials are groomed into place, they sit on the edge of escaping, pushing out to the confines of their allotted space.

*Bale Variant No. 0024 (Everything)* (2017), eight and a half feet high, presents a coherence of coloration, predominantly vintage denim. Here, Smith has stuffed the fabric—blue jeans, a denim quilt, an indigo-colored shirt—as if to permeate the material with humanity. There are references to the human figure throughout the sculpture, which stands squarely on a pedestal that holds its position on the ground plane.

After performances in which the artist's physicality became the vital embodiment of her bales and bundles, Smith's sculpture assumed the form of the human figure. *Mitumba Deity II* (2018) is a contemporary Buddha, a cross-legged female figure existing within tied bundles of used clothing. In eastern and central

Africa, the word "mitumba" refers to secondhand clothes, especially those reaching people from Western aid organizations. Such clothes are often baled into the forms that Smith first read about in 2002. The goddess who emerges from *Mitumba Deity II* sits on a platform draped in opulent silk, her physicality interchangeable with the presence of the bundles. The two merge in a play of blankets, bandanas, and a centering floral emblem. The deity is draped in mantles of meaning, bearing decorative motifs that have seeped across centuries and cultures to land in often cheesy appropriation on fabrics.

*Bale Variant No. 0025 (Good & Plenty)* (2019) is a black and white work with suggestions of pink, like the sugary licorice confection of the subtitle, first marketed in the 1890s and still sold today. In the candy box, black licorice nuggets are sugarcoated to become pink and white capsules. In Smith's sculpture, black fabric





forms the lower register and white fabric shapes the upper areas, with whiffs of pink across the whole. The sculpture, which is placed on a low platform, hovers between figure and abstraction. Are we looking at a body that becomes abstraction or piles of material that waver and eventually transform into the attributes of a human body? Smith has intentionally built contradiction into the work—the virtues of goodness coexist with the excesses of plenty. There is also a reference to homelessness: a head, shrouded in a geometric pattern, seems to carry all of her worldly goods on her person, bundled together so that figure and materials become interchangeable. *The Watcher (Moon marked she walks in starlight)* (2018), another predominantly black and white composition, with added indigo and stuffed and roped-in pillows forming the lower register of the pyramid, transforms into a woman proceeding in slow motion. Smith is also involved in

a give and take in her titles, alternating between *Bale Variants* (a clear reference to a visual, formal object) and more metaphorically based designations, based on tribal narratives, folklore, and oral traditions. Both routes are linked to her indebtedness to abstraction as a conceptual framework.

Smith has spoken of abstraction as formative to her practice: “Abstraction moved out of working figuratively.” She considered how abstract line resonated with a classically trained artist whose study was rooted in figuration. “The line that used to surround my figures in drawing then came to surround the sculpture. For me, [my works are] records of my body’s existence in space and time...Abstraction is the way of distilling multiple times and places and feelings into one space...To me, it’s not depicting life. It is life itself.”

The pandemic, with Black and brown people dying at disproportionately higher percentages, and the



“The selection of fabrics is boundless, the detritus of lives lived and the remains of people’s stories. While Smith’s materials are groomed into place, they sit on the edge of escaping, pushing out to the confines of their allotted space.”

Black Lives Matter protests have brought increased urgency to Smith’s production, as seen in the fully figurative *Grace Stands Beside* (2020). In deep purples and pinks, the figure is draped with a rope necklace that harks back to *Forgiving Strands*. While that work brought outside tresses into overhead space, *Grace Stands Beside* concentrates the lengths around and across the body, an unexpected adornment. Installed from March 15, 2020 through January 3, 2021 at the Baltimore Museum of Art, *Grace Stands Beside* is almost seven feet high. Smith created *Grace* with fabric and clothing donated from local participants, making a quilt of her past and present. She also found another local source for this work—a Confederate monument removed from Mount Royal Avenue in 2017 whose inscription read: “Glory stands beside our grief.” Smith knew the work (it was across the street from MICA and down the street from where she took ballet lessons), which represented “Glory as an angel holding a dying Confederate soldier” and at the same time “raising a laurel crown, or symbol of Victory.”<sup>4</sup>

In the online publication *BlackBook*, Smith recently wrote about the role of historic monuments and the ongoing Black Lives Matter protests: “*Grace Stands Beside*...me please, always and now...after bearing witness to willful murder and feeling the reverberations of that breathless moment—within protests and in the sad and angered eyes of strangers, who I feel akin to, through shared similar experiences of horror, disappointment, and helplessness. A moment that vibrates with the possibility for radical change and with an awareness that George or Breonna could have been someone I knew or loved or me...We are human beings that over centuries have endured more than many humans could bear, and continue to do so because GRACE is in our DNA. Demonstrating Grace is an evolved state of being—some may call it having spiritual resolve, wherein we strive to transform personal and public tragedies, losses, slights, and ‘Amy Cooper’-type gestures that have happened daily throughout our lives, into positive energy for our own individual and collective survival...”<sup>5</sup>

Smith’s work balances between descriptors. A state of opposing interpretation, which she acknowledges, has always cleaved to her sculptures, installations, paintings, and works on paper. Abstraction and figuration, narrative and non-objective, collage and mural, Black identity and selfhood—all have merged in critical dialogue over the course of almost two decades of practice. By personally collecting fabrics, binding them by hand into bales, and forming them into surrogates for the human figure, Smith summons the impact of materials on her work and across societal boundaries. ■■■

#### Notes

1 George Packer, “How Susie Bayer’s T-Shirt Ended Up on Yusuf Mama’s Back,” *The New York Times Magazine*, March 31, 2002.

2 Unless otherwise noted, all artist quotations are from a conversation with the author, 2020.

3 See “Goings On About Town. Art: Shinique Smith/Mickalene Thomas,” *The New Yorker*, May 14, 2007; Glenn McNatt, “Artist Adds Elegance to Hip-Hop,” *Baltimore Sun*, September 13, 2002; and Blake Gopnik, “Shinique Smith’s Street Art, Taking the High Road,” *Washington Post*, March 16, 2008.

4 “Shinique Smith: *Grace Stands Beside*,” Baltimore Museum of Art website.

5 “Shinique Smith on Standing with Grace and Dignity,” *BlackBook*, June 12, 2020.





***Soul Elsewhere,***  
**2013.**  
Artist's denim jeans,  
bleach, ink,  
fiberfill, and rope,  
56 x 18 x 12 in.