

ARTIST SHINIQUE SMITH EXPLORES SPIRITUALITY & TRANSFORMATION IN 'STARGAZERS'

By Amanda Vasquez | May 4, 2022



Exploration, transformation, and ritual lead viewers of Shinique Smith's artwork on a journey through materials that range from fabric to breath and collage. The LA-based artist grew up surrounded by her mother's clothing designs and spiritual practices, inspiring much of Smith's work.

Smith's *STARGAZERS* exhibition at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas runs through July 31, 2022, and features large-scale calligraphic paintings, bundled sculptures, and smaller-scale, more personal works.

Amongst the collection is art Smith created while blindfolded amid the Black Lives Matter protests. In addition, the pieces were woven together with indigo cloth – once a cash crop alongside cotton – further investigating her use of fabric as a narrative tool.

The artist shared with *EDITION* more about her brand, art, exhibition, and even her once-in-a-lifetime encounter with the Dalai Lama.

Transformation and spiritual awareness seem to be a big part of your brand. Can you tell how these big pieces of your brand play a role in how you create your art?

For me, art-making has always been both an intellectual and spiritual exercise, and ideas of transformation permeate everything from my materials to the process. I transform clothing, fabrics, and language into new forms and

shapes with dying, bundling, and brushwork. Everything is in motion and evolving while maintaining a central focus, so each piece becomes a meditation.

What are some key elements we can look forward to seeing in *STARGAZERS*?

STARGAZERS is made up of artworks that I've been developing through the fluctuations, trials, and periods of solitude over the last few years. A few key elements are two installations/collections of drawings and objects that I've never shown before, as well as deity-like sculptures of dyed and painted textiles. The newest of which is titled *Stargazer*, inspired by ancestors who gazed at the stars as explorers and as slaves seeking freedom, like other artists before me.

Coinciding with the opening of *STARGAZERS*, you also have a film premiering. What inspired this film to come alive? Was this your first filmmaking experience?

Breathing Room: Moon Marked Journey is inspired by a performance work of the same name that I first presented in Kansas City in 2018. It has evolved into a visual poem, a breathing ritual with transporting sound. It is not my first video/film work, as I created several works of performance or movement in the

early 2000s and some short videos in the '90s. However, this is the first of this quality and cohesion, and *Moon Marked Journey* is inspiring a series of new media works.

A birdie told us you met Dalai Lama and your mother is a fashion designer. How have your upbringing and experiences influenced you as an artist?

My mother, Vkara Phifer-Smith, worked as a fashion designer and fashion editor of *Baltimore Style Magazine* in the '80s. Vkara was also the host of her own radio show on meditation and spirituality called *Through the Mind's Eye* on WEAA, the Morgan State Radio Station, where she interviewed leading Black minds, physicists, doctors, and indigenous elders to discuss ways we could create better lives. During this time, I was privileged to attend a gathering with her at the Tibetan Cultural Center to welcome and chant with the Dalai Lama on his first visit to the United States. All of these influences exposed me to fabric and composition and a spectrum of spiritual practices when I was growing up.

If there was at least one experience or spiritual practice you could relive again, what would it be?

I would travel all through New Zealand again to visit ancient, sacred sites on both islands and share ceremony and song with my adopted uncle Mackie Ruka. It was a magical time with family and friends, with whale bones and skydiving that transformed me and reset my path in 1997. During the pandemic, I was awarded an SMFA Travel Fellowship to return to New Zealand to create a new body of work, and now that travel is finally opening, I am planning a new journey to Aotearoa.

'STARGAZERS' is currently on view through July 31, 2022, at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art. [Click here for more details.](#)