

CAULEEN SMITH  
BY LESLIE HEWITT



STILL FROM REMOTE VIEWING, 2011, DIGITAL FILM FOR PROJECTION,  
COLOR / SOUND. TOTAL RUNNING TIME: 15 MINUTES, 24 SECONDS.  
ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



Some images in life and art remain seared in one's memory because of their sublime effect and power. Such images are found and masterfully constructed in the films of Cauleen Smith. For over a decade, Smith has developed a lyrical visual practice, weaving in and out of the independent film world and occasionally gracing the art world with breathtaking film installations that upend traditional forms of narrative filmmaking. Working as a director, screenwriter, cinematographer, and, at times, producer of her films, positions her independent practice firmly in the language of Third Cinema in terms of its politics of self-reliance and its affinities with the work of the LA Rebellion filmmakers.

Born in Sacramento, California, in the late '60s, Smith is definitively a West Coast filmmaker, who in the '80s also spent a great deal of time soaking in the dense international urbanism specific to places such as Brixton in south London. Her travels, intellectual rigor, and desire to tell stories contribute to each detailed and highly crafted frame in her films. Her play on narrative conventions and her unique photographic impulse work in tandem and continue into her installations in spaces outside of the classic movie theater.

The visualization of Afrofuturism and an interest in black diaspora identity formation as well as in modes of agency, rather than oppression, are common in Smith's repertoire. An exploration of landscapes both real and imagined also propels her experimental cinematic narratives.

For *The Fullness of Time* (2008), a joint project with artists Paul Chan and Kalamu ya Salaam, Smith used the

limitless terrain of science fiction to focus on resistance to historical erasure in the New Orleans posthurricane landscape. Her use of montage, gestural drawing, and sound made for a richly layered form that mirrors the conceptually nuanced story line.

*Remote Viewing* (2011), Smith's film installation at The Kitchen, provided a platform to engage with her recent, more architectonic work. Her momentum is strong, and her use of space and timing, inspirational. The opportunity to interview Smith came to fruition during the run of this exhibition and allowed for elaboration on her practice as a filmmaker and artist.

—Leslie Hewitt

LESLIE HEWITT Do you consider yourself an artist? A director? A filmmaker?

CAULEEN SMITH I didn't go to art school; I went to film school. The cultures are so different. The hierarchy of film production is very clear. You have to be sensitive to the constituencies you're working with. In the art world, it's about the individual making the rest of the world a stage for observation. The filmmaker is embedded in and exploiting that arena, thinking of everything in it as *material* and being omnivorous about what those materials could be. I love the public, open-arena practice, but I find it depleting.

LH What's your relationship to the medium of film in terms of collaboration?

CS Man, it's a profound thing. When I ask someone to be in a film or to work with me on a crew, I don't just need the person's body to be there, I need there to be this totally dynamic relationship. Even if I'm the camera operator and there's only one person I'm shooting, it's a whole intervention into public space. That's been making me think about social practice. What if the entire process becomes the film? But I'm also suspicious of this. I have no money or status, so when I roll into a neighborhood to shoot, I have to be very polite



STILL FROM REMOTE VIEWING, 2011, DIGITAL FILM FOR PROJECTION, COLOR / SOUND. TOTAL RUNNING TIME: 15 MINUTES, 24 SECONDS.



and apologetic—and I have to get what I want. I have to negotiate, maybe trade favors with folks. Filmmakers do this just to get an image on their film. When the documents of such exchanges are exhibited, we call this social practice. I'm interested in this as a mode of investigation, but not to put these engagements on display. All these intense relationships are private, they're not exploited—that's the part of filmmaking I actually like, you know what I mean?

LH I do.

CS But maybe filmmakers have the opportunity to expand the invisible aspects of production into different realms and forms. Perhaps in the past I didn't fully appreciate the potential of what I'm doing when I'm colonizing a

neighborhood to make something.

LH *Colonizing* is too strong a word. You're generous; you're attributing to all filmmakers *your* specific ethical stance regarding subject matter and engagement with place.

CS Well, I'm extracting resources—images, no? Sometimes when documentary filmmakers talk about what they do, I get very uncomfortable. I feel like, Oh my God, you got a \$150,000 grant to follow around a woman who has, for instance, drug-addiction problems, a history of sexual abuse and criminal activity . . . You're observing all of this with your grant that's paying your mortgage. I mean, really? I don't get chunks of money that size. What I do with any money I happen to get is *not*

going to be a call to action. And I'm not doing anything for anybody by pointing my camera at them; quite the opposite. I'm interested in what it means to take a picture.

LH Why are you drawn to the visual narratives that film produces more than to exploring your thoughts through other means, such as writing, for instance?

CS When people read, the images conjured in their heads come from somewhere, right? Now more than ever, people process the world through visual iconography, so that's where the intervention has to happen. As a young person, what I *saw*, not what I read, affected how I felt about myself. So I want to control that space, even if it's in my own little sphere. You know that too, as a photographer.

LH Yes. I came to photography through sculpture, but images have always played a strong role in terms of how I think about history and memory. I see your use of film in a similar way; your films challenge my understanding of the construction of time, history, memory, and the future. The '70s was an era in which your personal memory was informed by the way filmmakers were constructing a future. In your work, you explore the combination of the historical imaginary and Afrofuturism. And you build a distinct visual syntax to compliment this exploration. What has informed your aesthetic?

CS *I Want to See My Skirt* (2006) was an opportunity for me to finally work on portraiture, the way that black people around the world like to take control of their image when they can. I was looking at Seydou Keïta. Malick Sidibé came soon after—I was struck by the way in which they facilitated play with people who needed an image of themselves, and also by their real empathy for what that image's use and context would be. This linked up with James Van Der Zee, whom I had been obsessed with years before. I shot a film in grad school that was about James Van Der Zee and his backdrops, thinking about the photographer's studio



STILL FROM *THE GRID*, 2011, DIGITAL FILM FOR PROJECTION, COLOR / SOUND. TOTAL RUNNING TIME: 15 MINUTES, 24 SECONDS.

as this magical porthole in which black women and men are beautiful, creative and generative. At the core was this idea of how to make an image of someone, *with* someone. And also, cinematically, the question of how to put a body into a frame so that it has agency. It's funny, that strategy doesn't come out of documentaries; it comes out of fiction films where you have to build a world. I looked for that in directors who are really good at world building. In *Point Blank* (1967), for instance, John Boorman gives LA its own intense psychology. Robert Altman can literally create a whole geography of a city through a character, making them walk through space, over time, as in *The Long Goodbye* (1973). And Charles Burnett is the master of placing figures into the landscape or cityscape, like in *To Sleep With Anger* (1990). I guess I'm investigating the use of a combination of psychogeography, cinematic space, and portraiture to wrestle with the issue of who has control over the image. I want the people in my films to have that control. I don't know if you would agree with me, but I have the sense that in my films there's always a slight contrivance, a self-consciousness in the characters and the tone, that comes from my wanting them to be the ones deciding how they look and feel inside of the frame. Makes sense?

LH It does. In your films there's never this moment where we're completely absorbed and passive.

CS Narrative-movie audiences are becoming more passive; they're refusing to meet images halfway. My students will say things such as, "That didn't look realistic." I'm like, If you thought the movie was real, you would be insane! As if it's 1895 and you're seeing the train approach on the screen and you run out of the theater because you think it's going to run you over. Really? (*laughter*) I can't believe our expectations of cinema haven't come any further than that.

LH Could you address your film lineage in general? I am interested in how you come to make images and narratives the way that you do.

CS Well, yeah, I ended up going to UCLA for film school because of the legacy of the LA Rebellion filmmakers.



STILL FROM *ELSEWHERE*, 2010, DIGITIZED 35-MM LOOP. TOTAL RUNNING TIME: 7 MINUTES, 30 SECONDS.

It's this label for a generation of filmmakers who went to UCLA Film School from the late '60s to the mid-'80s. It's about two generations starting off with Haile Gerima, Charles Burnett, Larry Clark, Billy Woodberry, Julie Dash, Barbara McCullough, and so many more huge talents. Zeinabu Irene Davis (another one) is currently making a documentary about them. I got to tag along one day while she did some interviews—amazing. Anyway, out of the several dozen filmmakers that UCLA produced during that period, Charles Burnett and Julie Dash are the two whose work I was able to see early on. They had a major impact on my desire to create images and the kind of stories I wanted to tell. Julie Dash does something that *no one* else does: she makes people in her films look beautiful. Black women, in particular, in her films are stunningly gorgeous.

LH Why is that so important?

CS Because it never happens. In the short film that she made at UCLA, *Illusions* (1982), she has this close-up of a beautiful brown-skinned girl singing, and there's an eye light—it's a technique you use in film to make sure there's a sparkle in the eye, you put in a kicker to do it. She's fully separated from the background. There's a diffused key light

so her skin is soft and dewy. The framing flatters the shape of her face. I'll never forget that frame. When I saw it I thought, A filmmaker has never asked me to look for this long at a black girl, has never applied this much attention to her appearance. I see *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), 12 black women lit with the setting sun in white dresses on the beach looking like goddesses and I think, *That's* how we should look in movies all the time. I don't want to see us look any other way—not until it becomes normal. I need this image in my everyday life. In cinema, the icon is everything. It's the portal through which empathy is produced. And the more seductive you make that, the more care you put into its construction, the easier it is for people to enter and identify with that image.

LH What do you see as a recurring context or theme in your projects?

CS Well, everything is always about memory, about excavating and then speculating upon history and images. I kind of make the same thing over and over again. I excavate my own memories and I insert myself into memories and histories that are not mine to try and recuperate them. *Dark Matter* (2006), *Elsewhere* (2010), and *Remote Viewing* (2011) all have different strategies. *Elsewhere* is an anomaly in that I didn't even know why I was making that image. Through processing and editing it, I realized it was about recuperating that memory of the quintessential *Essence* magazine cover. I'm talking about those amazing covers from the mid- to late '70s when they would do the summer Black Love issue where the cover would feature a chocolate couple, nude, embracing, Afros in effect. Then that wonderful font for *Essence* in lavender, vermillion, or safflower emblazoned over them. These magazine covers were, I've only recently realized, enormously impactful on my little, prepubescent imagination! *Elsewhere* was installed at the Blanton Museum of Art last year for the group show *Desire*. You had to approach it through a corridor; the projected image was folded into the far corner. You could enter it when a pile of lavender yarn gathering on a bed of corn husks is all that's being projected,

and you're surrounded with the sounds of nature, birds, grasses, winds. Then—OMG!—a giant nipple appears. At this point a lot of people bolted out. A giant black areola isn't something people are prepared to gaze upon...

Then there's the strand of my work that is Afrofuturist. Afrofuturism, for me, is about speculating on the potentiality of what is known about technology and physics to create metaphors that allow me to explore an African diasporic past and generate possible narratives for the future. *Dark Matter* is part of this. I had constructed an alien narrative—not an alien-abduction story, but one about alien assimilation. Aliens are never caught. Nobody ever notices them. The conflict is that the world that they land in doesn't work for them; it's toxic for them. But Afrofuturism is also a rumination on memories to which I have no access. My investment in it as a production strategy has run its course; Afrofuturism provides a way to investigate trauma very explicitly. But we only reenact traumas, don't we? We don't reenact prom night, or our favorite birthday party. This is a problem—it doesn't seem to fix things; it amplifies them. There's gotta be something else, the after-the-trauma.

**LH** *Dark Matter* was shot sculpturally. The decision to shoot in an interior space, with the composition stressing the centrality of the male character, is masterfully orchestrated. It sets up interesting relationships with the viewer and



STILL FROM *I WANT TO SEE MY SKIRT* (A COLLABORATION WITH A. VAN JORDAN), 2006, VIDEO INSTALLATION WITH FIVE LOOPS, SUPER 8 TRANSFERRED TO DIGITAL VIDEO, COLOR / SOUND.

space and proximity. A familiar scenario becomes extremely unfamiliar.

**CS** It was very much about what you're seeing formally: a surveilling claustrophobia. You go into that bungalow and then when you come out it's very disorienting and bright. There's this contrast between the white walls and the actor's very dark skin, which the HD video can't handle. It's difficult to project that piece because most projectors can't deal with that level of contrast—racism is engineered into the technology. Video cameras are not calibrated for my favorite actor to be there. I kind of love the way that HD video reveals the antagonistic relationship that an alien has with

alien technology. This whiteness and blueness and blackness in folklore, or in materials like Ivory soap or coal—all of these things have metalayers. You can tell there is repulsion, desire, fear, and attraction underneath their banality.

**LH** By using technology (in terms of how a camera renders subject matter) you explore your content beyond the story structure. The way the story is imagined *through* the lens is extremely intriguing. You explore black subjectivity *formally*. Is this new terrain?

**CS** I'm interested in forcing form to override narrative as much as possible in the experimental works, in formal ways of narrating a black subjectivity. Looking at a Martin Puryear sculpture, for instance, I just get so excited that, in this beautiful abstract form, I can feel and identify a shared lineage. When you have narrative, you rely on the structure of the story to do the heavy lifting for you. In my experimental sci-fi films—*The Changing Same* (2001), *The Green Dress* (2005), *Dark Matter* (2006), and *Not The Black* (2008), for instance—I count on the fact that everybody knows the alien assimilation story: they come, they hide, they suffer, they love, they die. It never works out well for the aliens. The alien is the agent that creates estrangement from the viewer's understood reality, leaving me free to deal with landscape, figure, and interiority. I don't have to deal with the story; we already know it.



FRAMEGRAB FROM *THE FULLNESS OF TIME*, 2008, MINI DV AND DIGITIZED HAND-PAINTED 35-MM, COLOR / SOUND. TOTAL RUNNING TIME: 52 MINUTES.

LH I saw *Remote Viewing*, your exhibition of interrelated video works curated by Rashida Bumbray at The Kitchen. I was blown away when I walked into the gallery; it was an environment of projections. Can you speak about your experience working on this installation?

CS The Kitchen was a perfect context for it. With experimental filmmakers, the debate of the latter half of the 20th century has been: White cube or black box? Art world or microcinema? I want to do certain things with film right now that I still need a cinematic space for. I still need people to enter the womb, that secular cathedral of the movie space. The Kitchen doesn't have a problem with sound or high ceilings or with painting walls black—they understand theatrical space there. I didn't have to engage in a battle about blackness. *(laughter)*

LH Working with a curator who did not place obstacles in your way must have made the process generative.

CS I needed the monumentality because the piece deals so much with scale in terms of land, land art, machines and their relationship to the body, buildings, structures, etcetera. It's terrifying when you're dealing with a gallery and they want your piece on a flat screen with some headphones. You would never say to a painter, It would be so much easier if we could just show some digital slides. All that shipping is so expensive . . . Yet video- and filmmakers are forced into those conversations all the time.

LH What was your research for the project *Remote Viewing*?

CS It started with coming back to California. The West always makes me deal with land and space. And then teaching in an art school at which I wasn't always able to talk about film as the intersection of craft and semiotics. Craft is not important in their curriculum; in fact, it's viewed with suspicion and disdain. A simple example would be the predominant belief that video is preferable to other time-based media simply because it is cheaper. For me, it's a material embedded with signs and signifiers. Using video is not solely an aesthetic preference concerning economic expediency; it is the foundation of content for me. But in a conceptual



'NAUTS, PRINT FROM THE GREEN DRESS PRINT AND POSTCARD PROJECT, 2005, 22 x 24 INCHES.

school this argument is futile. So I was looking for something to talk about with my students that had the same stakes, scale, and formal dynamism as film—that ended up being land art. I decided I'd really look at it. The more I did so, the more annoyed I became at the alienation between the idea, the actual land, and memory. It's the fundamental question about the stewardship of the Earth or to whom the land belongs. In '70s land art, this was not considered; the important thing was the tension between the monumental and the immaterial. Given the social upheaval of those times, this is difficult for me to comprehend.

The more I learned about Michael Heizer's position and Robert Smithson's, the more I watched Smithson's films and read all he wrote, the more frustrated I became with this erasure of human beings in relationship to the land. Except for the artists themselves, of course; they could be embedded in their work. Smithson films himself walking on the *Spiral Jetty*. That land just echoes and vibrates with its own history of genocides and migrations and all kinds of things,

but he talks about dinosaurs. I became fixated on Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) and Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969–70). What does it mean to dig into the earth in this monumental way, for no fucking reason, really? I was getting tired of this blind romanticization in land art discourse.

Then, on a StoryCorps segment on the radio, I heard the story of a man who as a boy watched the whites in his town try to erase every trace of the black community by digging a deep hole and burying the Negro schoolhouse in it. There was this horrible intersection between the sublime and the obscene in the man's description. What does it mean that your need for erasure would be so intense that you would dig a hole and bury a whole structure underground? That took me right back to the land art guys. So, that was the beginning. I had to work very quickly—the scale of the project was so huge that once a piece of land and money became available, I had to make the film or never make it.

LH In the installation for *Remote Viewing* there were two center screens.

## I WANT TO DO CERTAIN THINGS WITH FILM RIGHT NOW THAT I STILL NEED A CINEMATIC SPACE FOR. I STILL NEED PEOPLE TO ENTER THE WOMB, THAT SECULAR CATHEDRAL OF THE MOVIE SPACE.

The projection on the right was the static shot of the schoolhouse, and then the projection on the left was this grid being imposed on a landscape, and then removed. You associate the notion of the sublime with land art, as something purely aesthetic, but I think your work is sublime. Does the sublime always need to refer to something that's ignoring a more complex reality?

CS Absolutely not. Thank you for asking that. The word *aesthetic* has totally been removed from the body, but it is about the body and the senses. In those works there needs to be a figure that has to be activated so that the viewer can identify with it. If you just showed the house going into the hole without a figure to give a sense of scale, and subjectivity, it would be an intellectual exercise. The piece would be about dinosaurs. I'm trying to return to the body and make the relationship between us and the land real. Palpable. The sound was really important in that room because each video was doing something different. The grid piece was all about natural sounds—wind, birds, grass. This swishing white noise. That's the sound of open space on the West Coast.

Then the spray of three monitors across the back wall. That's the urban, industrial, mechanical . . . The floor-to-ceiling projection had these low, earth-based tones. If you went into the center of the earth, I reckon you'd find this persistent, electric hum. A low *Ohm*. It's the sound that makes you feel what the images are doing, not the images themselves. *The Grid* is a failed video, Leslie, because of its futility. We were definitely in semiwild, idyllic space and I just put this male and female figure around a tree. All these icons of fertility and eternal life and regenerative ideas. Then the grid—a grid always represents death to me. I just can't get past it. It's about plots, plotting, and forensics. The figures try to make a perfect grid around an ancient tree out of pink forensic tape. I was very curious about what it means

to place people in such a vast space having this very private project that doesn't seem to be succeeding.

We weren't permitted to damage the earth, thank God, so failure was the inevitable outcome. After spending the day trying not to damage the earth in the Malibu Creek State Park, I recognized monumentality as an aggressive, imperialistic expression of power that has no real relationship to the land or people at all.

LH I feel like the film pointed to futility but not necessarily failure. For me it became about process or a journey, not only one's relationship to the land. It's not about being there forever; you're not leaving it as a marker of your existence.

CS I thought about that a lot when we were negotiating with the park rangers. They were like, You cannot impact the earth. I kept thinking about the Mbenga—also known as the Pygmies—and how they don't leave any traces as they move through the forest. You can't tell they were there. *That* is sublime, that you would be so completely invested in the natural space and its power that you don't make any marks. And that your survival depends on it—they're like this tiny little snack for a puma, probably. Yeah, we were this big, messy film crew. That's what we do as filmmakers: we come in, shit all over something, and leave. We might as well spray paint on a rock, "We were here."

As we were filming, the wind was kicking our ass. It's an open valley—the wind was pushing down at us and we couldn't win. We had the camera locked down and even that didn't work because the wind was more powerful than anything we had at our disposal. It was humbling. When we started out, it was peaceful and there was beautiful mist, but as soon as the fog burned off, we were like, Okay, let's just get through the day. Everything then became about the process of being there. That was all I had. In the end, all that the footage reflected was this idea of trying to leave

no trace. The most important part of the grid video is watching Alem Brhan Sapp, the actor, gather up all the pink tape. Man, that could have gone on for another two hours. I started calling this set of films "sculpture process videos." Now that I've set up these conditions, what will occur?

LH What's next for you?

CS Right now I urgently have to start preparing to go to Chicago to do this film about . . . it's not *about* Sun Ra. It's more about the psychogeography of Chicago as it relates to American music, about improvisational music, about radicality in the Chicago's working classes, and about how Sun Ra was able to tap into that in the process of becoming Sun Ra. It's also about contemporary Chicago musicians and artists who are still very much coming from what I think is a black working-class wellspring unique to Chicago. They're called creative musicians, not jazz musicians. As a group they create sound compositions using collaborative improvisational strategies. It's not like a traditional setup where each musician takes turns improvising. These multi-instrumental musicians, who even build their own instruments, create the composition together—in real time. It's mind-boggling. Originally, I wanted to get music lessons from them. I wanted my camera to become an improvisational instrument. But I suspect that would bore these artists to death . . . I don't have any money for this project because I didn't have time to write any grant proposals last year, and I don't know how it's going to materialize, but I'm excited about the new conditions under which I'll work. It all has to be about trade. So I'm trying to figure out how to enter that city and make something without taking something.

Watch films by Cauleen Smith at [BOMBsite.com](http://BOMBsite.com)