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The Boston Globe

Shinique Smith exhibit wild and welcoming

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 28, 2014



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"Splendid."

There's a video in "Shinique Smith: BRIGHT MATTER" that the artist started more than 10 years ago, at work on her master of fine arts degree. "Breath of Life" is in many ways the simplest work in the show, less audacious and chatty than subsequent pieces, more self-contained. Yet it captures the essence of Smith's aesthetic.

In the short black-and-white video, a column of Smith's trademark tangle of inky gestures spills down the middle of the frame, as the artist, in a double exposure, dances through and around it. As she fades and reappears, the message becomes clear: Painting is dance. Spontaneous, deeply felt, eruptive, delicately nuanced. It comes from the body, seat of our joy and sorrow.

Smith will be in Boston a lot in the coming weeks, presenting dance-based performance art, leading family art-making sessions, and installing a mural in Dewey Square. "BRIGHT MATTER," the first New England solo show for this artist, whose star is on the rise, proceeds, riotously, with that wild painted gesture as its engine. Equal parts calligraphy, graffiti, and

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Abstract Expressionist bravado, that signature reaches out like a raucous laugh. At first, the experience is akin to being warmly greeted at a party by a gregarious host: You feel touched, seen, pulled into the gaiety.

Look, after all, at “Splendid,” a sweet explosion of painterly loops and nests of ribbon, rope, and fabric against a brilliant turquoise ground. Smith based the color palette on her 1980s childhood. That, plus its come-hither tactile quality and the exuberance of its gestures, galvanize the senses, and viewers might grow pop-eyed, like a toddler in a toy store.

Sensuous, gaudy, open, these paintings have a lot to say. “When Shadows Fall (Home)” could be a portrait of someone enticing yet defiant, with bunched and knotted fabric where the head would be, surrounded by an iridescent smokiness, over a fall of fuchsia tulle in the shape of shoulders.

After a while, though, all that gushing expressiveness cries out for containment and quiet. Smith seems to sense this. She has lately edited “I am a child of the age of mixing and scratching” to make the dancer softly fade out, giving us a spacious moment before she reappears.

Then Smith reins in the garrulous gesture in one of the best paintings on view, “Seven Moons,” the model for the mural she will paint in Dewey Square in September.

That black calligraphic burst appears near the center, but other forms occlude it: a diamond of red-patterned fabric, a black round marked with white almond shapes and dots, like a pattern of scarification. The painting revolves around circles; the eye travels in and around in delicious loops. It’s no less vibrant than other paintings here, but it is more measured.



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“When Shadows Fall (Home)”

Similarly, “Belly Button Window” (named after a Jimi Hendrix tune) is anchored by a central image recalling a cathedral rose window. Smith surrounds it with imprints of her own body, smeared and grainy, just barely readable. That window at her navel, filled with light, imagery, and pattern, asserts the body as source of enlightenment.

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There's a trace of the body in the textiles she collages, scrunches, ties, and drapes. Used clothes carry the histories of those who wore them. They show up in "Bright Matter," bundled and bursting off the panel like a bouquet; the knots and flourishes in the fabrics echo the painted gestures in her other works.

In the "Bale Variant" series, great rectangular columns of clothes make a canny counterpoint to the paintings. Smith collects used clothes intended for export, evoking a worldwide network of comfort. Like the paintings, her "Bale Variant" pieces are messy and colorful, but they're bound up in twine, their softness compressed into something upright and soldierly.

"Parade," a forlorn but plucky series of tightly bound soft sculptures suspended from the ceiling, drifts like the floats in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Dr. Seuss's Cat in the Hat is here in the form of a stuffed animal, but twisted and tied nearly beyond recognition.



CHRISTIAN PATTERSON/YVON LAMBERT, PARIS/MFA

"Bale Variant No. 0021 (Christmas)"

While the sculptures make a clear balance to the paintings' brashness, they are not as fully and intricately realized. The exhibition often presents us with polarities — containment versus expressiveness, loud versus quiet — which Smith sometimes resolves more effectively than at other times.

You can see her striving toward resolution in a sculpture just outside the gallery, "Open Word Lattice," a box made of cut wood in which she simplifies her swerving line into letter-like forms. It's white on the outside, eye-candy patterns on the inside. But in cut wood, the irrepressible fluidity of her line is compromised.

Then there's a magical installation, "Breath & Line," in which Smith fills a shadowy room with mirrors written over with black paint in her elegant graffiti. Oblique lights cast reflections of those liquid gestures over the walls. When I was there, a spoken-word soundtrack was not playing, and I enjoyed the quiet, the feeling of a chapel with stained glass that looked like street art.

"Shinique Smith: BRIGHT MATTER," in the end, could have been a smaller show, better modulated, with fewer wild notes of exuberance and fewer pieces from the "Bale" series, which gets repetitive. Because amid it all, there's some juicy, inviting, brilliant work.

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“Bright Matter”.

533 WEST 26TH STREET NEW YORK 10001 TEL 212 714 9500 FAX 212 714 9510 WWW.JAMESCOHAN.COM



DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY/MFA

“Seven Moons.”

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CLIFF DOSSEL/MFA

“The Step and the Walk.”