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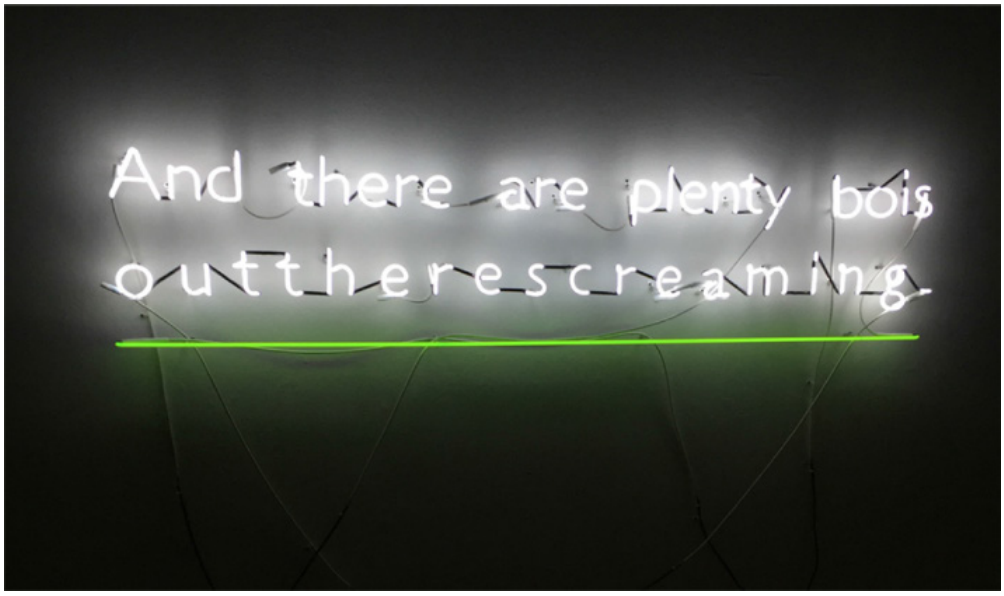
An Artist's Bond with Her Imprisoned Father

In Sable Elyse Smith's exhibition *Ordinary Violence*, the artist's father is both muse and specter.



Sable Elyse Smith, "Landscape I" (2017), neon, 36in x 96 inches, courtesy the artist (all images courtesy the Queens Museum)

Sable Elyse Smith's expressive powers are both subtle and direct. One is to imbue a shadowy side into an otherwise crisp, nonchalant aesthetic that combines photography, text, neon, and video installation. Another, found in her filmic montages, creates connective tissue between pop/internet culture and autobiographical experience. Here, she nods stylistically to a black cinematic genealogy that includes Arthur Jafa, the LA Rebellion generation, and media-artist peers interested in an emotional and empathic confrontation with the black experience as images of violence on black bodies proliferate. Among her most compelling strengths as an artist, as attested by Ordinary Violence, her solo exhibition at the Queens Museum, is the way she wrestles with the father-daughter bond.

And wrestle she must; the work in this show is marked by her father's 19-year incarceration — the majority of her life — which has left an indelible absence. Though he goes unnamed, we are told in the introductory wall text of their relationship and the length of his time served to date. She writes in the show's epigraph: "And violence can be quotidian, like the landscape of prison shaping itself around my body. The images are made so that I can see me. I am haunted by Trauma. We are woven into this kaleidoscopic memoir by our desires to consume pain, to blur fact and fiction, to escape."

The possibility of escape certainly does not come for him, or entirely for her, though many visitors enjoy the privilege. The "we" who are "woven into this kaleidoscopic memoir" suggest the tenacity of father and daughter to endure separation and, more broadly, speak to the many black communities and communities of color, immigrants, and the poor, disproportionately riven by the prison system.

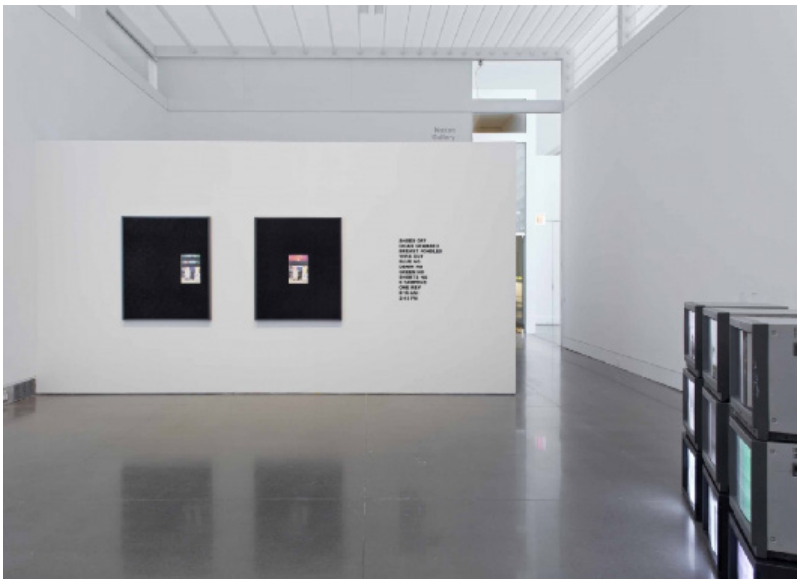
In the main room of the show, "Untitled: Father Daughter Dance" (2013-2017) consists of a bank of nine TV box monitors that shuffle an assortment of brief vignettes. These include the artist re-enacting physical positions one assumes when entering a penitentiary; chalk writing on a blackboard; ambient colors; an explosion; and the head of a black man being forcibly pressed to the pavement, presumably by police out of frame.

The piece, borrowing from a '70s media aesthetic, nonetheless points to Smith's way of darting among visual fragments to negotiate feeling. The oscillation between visibility and obfuscation, visitation and absence, entry and no exit defines much of the show.

"7665 Days" and "7665 Nights" (2017) are two of the most striking works, side-by-side photos framed and mounted

on black suede, accompanied on the right by lines of prose poetry presented on raised Plexiglas letters: " SHOES OFF/DICKS GRABBED/BREAST FONDLED/WIRE OUT/BLUE NO/DENIM NO/ GREEN NO/ SHORTS NO/ 6 TAMPONS/ ONE KEY/8:15AM-2: 45PM."

In the photo on the right, "7665 Days," an image of a sunset bisects a portrait of a black family of three, replacing their torsos and faces. The same portrait photo is made more visible in "7665 Nights," partially revealing the eyes and smiles of a man and two elderly women. Still, two black bands mask the upper register of the image. Though it's hard to tell from the deliberate interruptions of the photographs, the man appears to be the artist's father, and the two women his elder relatives. The women's age makes the passage of time more acutely felt — would they live to see him a free man again?



Installation view of "Sable Elyse Smith – Ordinary Violence," dimensions vary, photo by Hai Zhang

The three family members pose in front of a picturesque painted backdrop of a blue sky, foliage and flowers, and we realize that the portrait was taken in jail, despite attempts to suggest otherwise: the man's uniform blue pants, which sport in bright letters "DCR PRISONER," are a cruel contrast with the floral skirt of the woman on the left, and the sunny yellow tee shirt of the woman on the right. A wall label explains that regulations forbid visitors to purchase a portrait on a prisoner's behalf; only the prisoner can buy one, for two to four dollars a piece, or the equivalent of five to 33 hours of prison labor.

The content of and interventions on the images of this photo-installation amplify the sense of inaccessibility and loss. Like the accompanying text on the wall, the portrait is time-stamped, here with the date "08/10/2014." The sunset and the backdrop are mirages, mementos of an idyll in nature that never happened. The family stands together with warm smiles in a scene of photographic and institutional capture.

Two untitled silkscreens enlarge pages of coloring books that were offered to children visiting family members in jail. In one, a bird, colored canary-yellow, waves a wing at the viewer: "Thanks for Visiting!" It's that ordinary violence again, rearing its chimerical head, one that seeks to normalize a difficult reality with its own spatial codes and rules.

"Landscape I" (2017), a neon text work, reads "And there are plenty bois / out there screaming," with "out there screaming" underlined in apple green, evoking the horizon line of a landscape. The piece maintains its cool composure, even as its bright white letters take on the shape of urgency.

But, by far, the most affecting works in the show are the two videos installed in a 10 by 10-foot room, Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors (2017) and How We Tell Stories to Children (2015). They are screened on adjacent perpendicular walls yet seem to cohere as a single work. Both include a flurry of cuts of found footage, including the 1993 movie Menace II Society: a hooded figure running up the Hollywood hills; a white policeman; a black body chased by a camera, just out of frame.

These videos also present a fragmentary yet intimate view of the restricted world of Smith's father. He has taken a camera into his cell to provide a visual diary and to tell stories. In one sequence, his face almost fills the frame as he gazes into the mirror to shave his head, and the opening hook of Al Green's "Love and Happiness" suddenly swells, breaks off unexpectedly, then repeats. The effect is quietly overwhelming.

Smith's father, it seems, is both muse and specter.He is the narrative glue of the two video montages, the one who haunts the other images of Smith's kaleidoscope. In Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors, a street-level view of a cityscape gives way to an aerial view of a black body falling, in slow motion, through the air above the urban grid. This nightmare

cuts to a clip of Powers of Ten, the 1977 documentary by the designers Charles and Ray Eames, in which a white man and his date enjoy a leisurely picnic on a “lazy afternoon,” as it is described in a voiceover. An overhead camera zooms out 10 meters at a time, until the picnic blanket is a tiny square amid the freeways and surrounding landscape. Through this citation, Smith contrasts spatial measures with different human experiences of enclosure and freedom.

Through filmic textures of jump cuts and music, Smith’s father recounts the time, when she was three-and-a-half years old, that she learned he owned a gun. “Why do you have a gun?” she asked. He recalls, “I told her I was a very, very important man.”

Installation view of “Sable Elyse Smith – Ordinary Violence,” dimensions vary, photo by Hai Zhang

We can’t escape the sense — at least for the moments we pass with the artist’s father in this 10 by 10-foot room — that the cellblock eclipses the white cube. And that, in the end, Smith’s passionate personal testimony overwhelms the cool aesthetic she designed to contain it. There is a measure of freedom won by these images finding their way out and into us.

Sable Elyse Smith: Ordinary Violence continues at the Queens Museum (New York City Building, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Queens) through February 18, 2018.