Sara O'Keeffe in conversation with Sable Elyse Smith. *Vanishing Points*. Mousse. Summer 2019.

VANISHING POINTS

Sable Elyse Smith in conversation with Sara O'Keeffe

In a sequence from SABLE ELYSE SMITH's video *Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors* (2017), a boy plunges from the sky, plummeting toward tidy plots of land lining the ground just beneath. W. H. Auden described a related scene in the poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1938): "About suffering they were never wrong, / … how well they understood / Its human position: how it takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just / walking dully along; / how everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster … the expensive delicate ship that must have seen / Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, / had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on." Like a series of adjacent rooms, Smith's works present scenes from rapidly shifting vantage points. Her work across video, sculpture, and photography revels in the frictions that emerge as radically divergent scenarios are spliced together and must be understood alongside one another. Interrogating the seductive allure of the horizon, that expanse where ground and sky collide, she turns to the violent colonial legacy of landscape painting and the carceral state. Her work asks us to not look away.

 swear it cloud, closes it, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University, Milwaukee. Photo: Myrica von Haselberg

 Landscape III, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and New Museum, New York. Photo: Maria Hutchinson / EPW Studio

SARA O'KEEFFE
In your neons, all titled *Landscape*, a single line runs beneath the text, which you've called a horizon line. The horizon serves as an axis where elements converge and disappear. One- and two-point perspective drawings are constructed by locating "vanishing point(s)" along the horizon. It is an organizing agent, one that is associated with the brutal project of Western humanism. How do landscape and the horizon line function in your work?
SABLE ELYSE SMITH
There are two landscape images serving as shadow archives, especially to the neon work but to a number of other projects as well. The first is a collection of aerial photographs that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation produces of all the prisons they operate. The second is the iconography of prison visiting-room murals. A majority of the murals in California prisons are of an ocean scene or some tropical landscape, all littered with multiple hues of blue, an aesthetic akin to photo backdrops on Caribbean cruise ships—a nod to tourism. According to the prisons, these images and the production of photographs in front of them are supposed to be a form of escape and fantasy for the incarcerated individual. Obviously this rhetoric is bullshit. I'm obsessed with the production of these images and the immaterial labor embedded in them.
In the neons, the line below the texts is a minimalist gesture that conjures the landscape image or iconography, and the color furthers this. It's so easy for green to be pastoral or tropical and blue to be oceanic. For me blue is doubly loaded, vibrating back and forth between the blue and green screens of video production. The horizon line never serves as a solid ground. The text cannot rest on it. It is fragile. In the neons, I'm in-terested in that instability, in a coy sliding between abstraction and representation.
SARA
Your wordplay seems to further this slide between abstraction and representation. The title of your sculpture *Cornering* (2019) not only suggests the geometry of two converging lines, but also alludes to the idioms "being cornered" or "having your back up against a wall." The sculpture reminds me of the text you wrote in your studio years ago: "We are a weird triangle of silence. And smiles. And pauses. Of stepping backwards one foot after another after another until we've found the cold corner of a wall. It straightens my back. I try to stand flat against it. Knowing that my body holds a weight way before my memory and I can only thank it for not creating the language around it." In some ways the work seems in dialogue with Bruce Nauman's series of exercises from 1974, including *Body Pressure*. When first staged, performers had panic attacks. They described feeling as though their bodies were becoming absorbed into the wall or floor. How are you thinking about the relationship of body to wall?
SABLE ELYSE
Certain bodies are always bound up or tied to perimeter. There are imaginary lines, like the "vanishing" points along the horizon line—that moment of vanishing is spot-on. You don't know who has already been banned or vanished, right? Has a body already disappeared? Whose body is disappearing? These vanishing points are not in a fixed space or location. If we're talking about the carceral, just because there is a brick-and-mortar prison, that is not the only prison. That's not even the beginning of prison, or the end. Sometimes I talk about an actual prison and show an image, and people get fixated on that. But I'm saying "prison" and meaning the world.

SARA
It seems related to the way you deploy the first and second person in your work. You invoke "I," but the "I" you cite is entangled in such an expansive way with others and other forces. It both is and isn't actually you, just like "prison" is and isn't the brick-and-mortar space. By employing "I" and "you," you point to the violence of interpellation. But there's also an intimacy.

SABLE ELYSE
Prison *is* "I" and "you," actually. I'm fascinated by language's ability to deploy a subject position, to create a closeness. Third person, second person—what does it do in a very practical way? Wu Tsang uses the term "nearbyness" to describe her understanding of filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha's work. I like speaking from a nearbyness. First-person singular—I—has become an interesting subject position for me to exploit, especially knowing how my personal subjectivity operates in the apparatus of the art world, tethered to and untethered from my artwork.
I'm interested in the expectations and assumptions the viewer might be thrust into when reading "I." Whether you say it out loud or in your head, you are slipping into a position, and then you make a decision as to whether you want to distance yourself or refuse based on the way the narrative is unfolding against and in front of you. Even if the scenario becomes too uncomfortable, you've already tried "I" on, dipped your toe in the water, and that can't be undone. That's a really tense space to be in. I want to put people in a tense fucking space. I'm interested in a kind of tingling sensation in the body. When I make an object, I want you to tingle. That tingling slips the body into a different "I," right? A kind of interpellation is happening.
People want to slip into other people's experiences, other people's subjectivities. That is our entertainment, and there's violence in that. But then there comes a different type of awareness or a kind of uncanny or jarring moment when language is laid out this way and you suddenly realize where you are, and you're like, oh fuck—I shouldn't be trafficking in this territory.
SARA
The notion of consuming others' subjectivities reminds me of a line you wrote for your show at the Queens Museum in New York: "We are woven into this kaleidoscopic memoir by our desires to consume pain, to blur fact and fiction, to escape." I'm interested in the way you weave scenarios together. *Landscape III* (2017) opens with a simile—the phrase "like the hands of the correctional officer on my abdomen"—and shifts from touch during a prison visit to that during an erotic encounter. In some ways your newest video produced

with Shaun Leonardo and Melanie Crean, which is premiering at the New Museum in New York this summer, uses a related conceit, or maybe I should say sleight of hand, by zooming in on hands—often in moments when bodies are touching—and cutting on motion, so when the camera zooms out, the viewer is thrust into an entirely new context. Can you speak about this mode of construction?

SABLE ELYSE

This is an important question for me, because it is foundational to how I arrive at making anything. I think the most important part of it is taking something understood as "solid," something you think you understand, and destabilizing it. Rendering it as dissolving. We can't deny what the word "sun" refers to, but "sun" next to "kiss" next to "rabbit" next to "rig" creates all this slipperiness—produces this interesting future space. I'm thinking about what it means when you graph that mode of construction back onto video and moving images. Music and images can be tied to stereotype, or images that come with a set of assumptions. In my video and writing, the imagery or language I present suggests that the scene is about one thing. You feel you are inside that framework, then suddenly you're wrenched out of it—it's about another thing. And it keeps changing. It keeps changing. It keeps creating a confrontation with you. What emerges when the stability of the picture dissolves in front of you? What is the other language or the other space that you haven't yet been given a possibility to imagine?

SARA

Your work nods to modes of display and distribution taken from commerce—illuminated glass cases, neon signs, even pallets stacked with merchandise. In your titling, the erotics of these forms is underscored. So for instance, in your upcoming exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, a pallet of ramen is titled *Spread*, and a scale with bills is titled *Weight*.

SABLE ELYSE

It's interesting to see the language floating around the work. As much as people will talk about incarceration and prison, that's only the inside. The work is about inside *and* outside. It is about a carceral space, interior head space, or ideological space, but it's also about what is outside of that. It's funny you bring up erotics because I've said "inside," "outside," a bunch, right? For me, the interest has always been in slipperiness—literally a slipping or seeping of language—especially in the way that I think about titles.

I'm more interested in literary references than art history. At the Studio Museum, there aren't text-based works or neons present, even though people expect them of me now. I recently heard someone mention that that's the work I'm known for. The outside perspective is always curious. But this show *is* about language. In *Spread* (2019), there are words all over the ramen. I chose chicken flavor because it's the most ubiquitous, but also because "chicken" can be a slang term for money. I'm referencing stacks of money and putting "chicken money" on top of bricks, slang for drugs. They are individual objects, but together they operate like an essay or paragraph. The "chicken on a brick," all weight, all money.

If we're talking about prison, everybody seems to want to put the stamp of prison on things, right? They're taking, capturing, and cataloging black bodies in a space. And historically that fear, that need and desire to possess this, is tied to a certain type of presumed eroticism, a dangerous eroticism and a kind of racist projection.

SARA

I'm curious about how moving between interior and exterior operates in your sculptural work. In *swear it closed, closes it* (2018) you used stacked prison tables to construct an archway under which viewers would have to pass. We've talked about how there was a Roman, and later Italian, tradition of having prisoners pass beneath a makeshift and very low arch, often comprised of three swords. Before you enter the archway you are free, and as you exit you are symbolically rendered a prisoner.

Just like in the United States—a prisoner before you ever get to brick and mortar.

SARA

Yes, and it is from this ritual that we derive the word "subjugate." The tradition was described as *passum sub iugum*, which means "pass under the yoke," and it is from the phrase *sub iugum* that "subjugate" emerges. In a new sculpture with these tables that you're producing for the show at the Studio Museum, you fused six together in a different formation, making a self-enclosed hexagon. In this construction, a kind of passageway or orifice emerges in the center. How are you thinking about thresholds, interior spaces that you have to pass through?

SABLE ELYSE

In those works, I'm specifically pointing to the design of tables ubiquitous in the prison visiting room, a space deep inside the prison only regularly accessible to incarcerated people, prison guards, and other people who work there. The same table design is used for school furniture because some companies—surprise, surprise—manufacture furniture exclusively to both entities. The table became a kind of obsession and fascination of mine, because you're assigned a table and you're sort of fixed there. Even though you can get up and walk around a tiny bit, go to the vending machine or the photo booth, you need to come back there eventually. It becomes a space of intimacy. A space of touch. A space of interior life. But it is a limbo interior space, where free and unfree mingle and where one's condition of freedom—for either party, visitor or incarcerated person—is in a precarious state.

Because the tables are modular and super weird, when you put them together they start to look like systems or structures. They become about a type of exteriority—a weird facade that does something frightening and striking. And they illustrate their own mass production.

SARA

They are such strange structures! Seen from above they look like hexagons with spokes coming out from all sides. In many ways they mirror the hexagonal design of Millbank Prison, invoking the violence of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. And when the hexagon

S. E. Smith, S. O'Keeffe *Mirror/Echo/Tilt* (stills), 2019. Courtesy: the artist and New Museum, New York

Mirror/Echo/Tilt (still), 2019. Courtesy: the artist and New Museum, New York

Mirror/Echo/Tilt (still), 2019. Courtesy: the artist and New Museum, New York

(Above and opposite) *Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors* (stills), 2017. Courtesy: the artist and JTT, New York

is multiplied—as it is in these works—they appear almost as honeycomb cells. Charles Darwin described the hexagonal honeycomb shape as "absolutely perfect in economizing labor and wax," so notions of productivity, efficiency, labor extraction are wrapped up in the form.

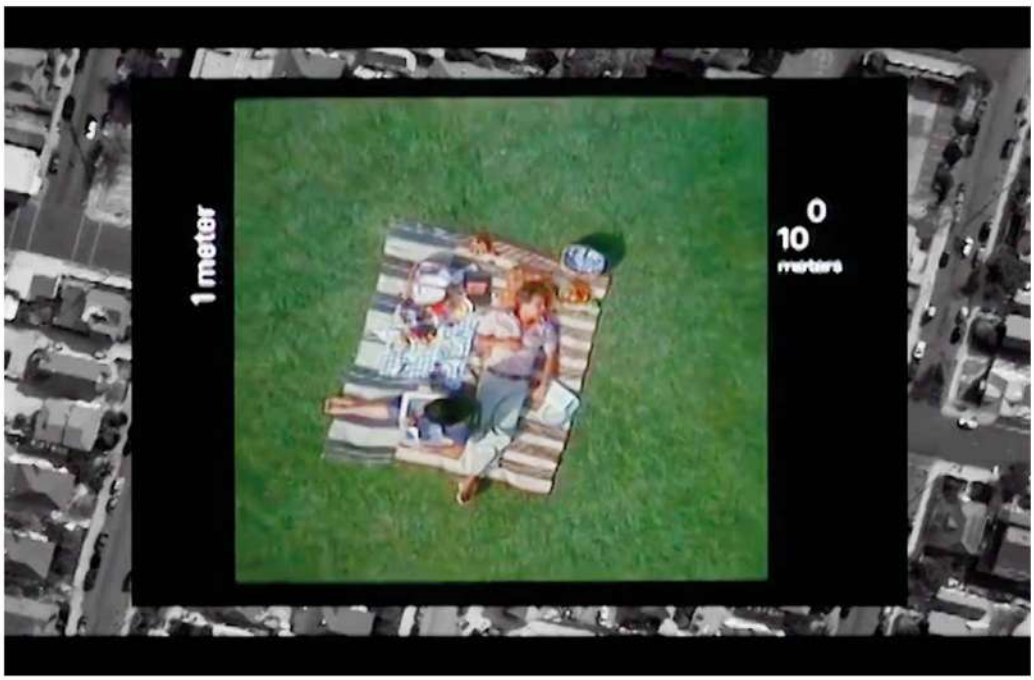
SABLE ELYSE

Yes, absolutely. There is a whole economy and apparatus of mass production behind how and why these things exist in the first place. A long time ago I stumbled upon aerial photographs of prisons, and they have always been this kind of floating apparition or shadow archive in the work. The hexagonal view of the tables as seen from above begins to take on shapes visible in those aerial photographs.

In the sculpture I'm producing for the Studio Museum show, there is a void in the center that you can peer through, but can one actually penetrate? It's still this kind of mirage, right? Which is also how I think of the horizon line in the neons—it's a mirage, a kind of vanishing point, something you can become sucked into. A kind of free fall, thinking about Hito Steyerl's *In Free Fall* (2010). The structure is open in the middle, but it is also self-enclosed. It is a complete rotation of a hexagon or circle. It is cyclical. Whatever that thing is, it is continuous. There's the suggestion that this object, this structure, could be infinite—new cells could be added forever.

SABLE ELYSE SMITH (b. 1986, Los Angeles) is an interdisciplinary artist, writer, and educator based in New York and Richmond, Virginia. Her work has been presented at the High Line, New York (2018); Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York (2018); Atlanta Contemporary (2018); New Museum, New York (2017); Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2017); Recess Assembly, New York (2017); MoMA P.S.1, New York (2016); Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and Artists' Television Access, San Francisco (2013); Birkbeck Cinema in collaboration with Serpentine Galleries, London (2016); and Queens Museum, New York (2017). She is currently an assistant professor of sculpture and extended media at the University of Richmond.

SARA O'KEEFFE is an associate curator at New Museum, New York. She was part of the curatorial teams that organized *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* (with Johanna Burton, 2017) and *Triennial: Surround Audience* (with Lauren Cornell and Ryan Trecartin, 2015). She curated *RAGGA NYC: All the threatened and delicious things joining one another* (2015) and *Screens Series: Dynasty Handbag* (2018), and co-curated *Jeffrey Gibson: The Anthropophagic Effect* (2019); *MOTHA* and *Chris E. Vargas: Consciousness Razing—The Stonewall Re-Memorialization Project* (2018); *A. K. Burns: Shabby but Thriving* (2017); *My Barbarian: The Audience Is Always Right* (2016); *Beatriz Santiago Muñoz: Song, Strategy, Sign* (2016); *Cheryl Donegan: Scenes and Commercials* (2015); and *Wynne Greenwood: Kelly* (2015), all with Johanna Burton. She is co-curating an upcoming exhibition with Melanie Crean, Shaun Leonardo, and Sable Elyse Smith titled *Mirror/Echo/Tilt* at the New Museum this summer.



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