

# MoMA

## The Weight of Objects

Sable Elyse Smith shares her mixtape and discusses the brutality of ordinary things.



Sable Elyse Smith installing *(nigga) nomenclature* (2019)

Instant ramen, Hennessy, the color blue; Sable Elyse Smith spent a yearlong residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem investigating the inherited violence of mundane objects and details. Drawing on the personal and historical narratives carried in ordinary things, Smith highlights the fraught economy of the prison industrial complex and other insidious structures of power. Her use of language, scale, sound, and color is carefully crafted to provoke viewers to examine their own biases. We sat with the artist to discuss the significance of her materials in the works currently on view in the *MOOD: Studio Museum Artists in Residence 2018–19* exhibition at MoMA PS1, and documented her hands-on approach to the installation process.



Sable Elyse Smith installing *Spread* (2018)

### **Hanna Girma: How do objects function in your work?**

**Sable Elyse Smith:** Some of these ready-made, mundane, banal objects are items that might seem like throw-aways or low culture. So what I've been obsessed with is this notion that potentially some objects or some words or some environments can be neutral. If you look at a packet of ramen, some might say it's a fundamentally neutral object. There can be an inherent violence or a stereotype thrust on an object, but generally there is a belief that an object is kind of free of that. I know that's completely false.

## **There is a belief that an object is free of violence or stereotypes. That's completely false.**

In thinking about some of these larger conversations around violence, the examples that people point to are always the most extreme things that are undeniably violent. The objects, words, or conversations that I'm interested in are those that become a lot more murky. Things embedded in an infrastructure, invisible, or that people have difficulty in immediately labeling as part of a system that is operating against certain individuals, or creating a den of oppressive structure.

## **Can you talk about the titles of some of the works in your show, and the way music is being considered with each object in the mixtape you've created as a "sonic counter-narrative"?**

The mixtape is also basically a readymade. It's a collaboration with Henry Murphy. It's not just music, there are other sounds and effects from real life, like a walk signal, or a money counter sound; there's a sample of Rodney King's voice. One thing that led to my interest in making visual work in the first place is an interest in things that are a residue of my own environment. So music and language have played a very important role. Literature, specifically poetry, films and different kinds of pop cultural images and icons or artifacts.

One reason why those things are so important to me, why I want to privilege them, is because they're readily accessible. Growing up, it's not like I had access to art-historical references, or theory, or any interest in cementing relationships to works in this way until later in life. It's become incredibly important, especially with the kind of topics that I'm interested in speaking about, that those [accessible, personal things] become the set of references that actually hold a lot more weight than the art references that might also be in dialogue with what I'm making.

It's also necessary for me to think about the multiplicity of audiences that I want to talk to, not just the perceived, museum-going patron.

Once I started to finalize the checklist, Henry and I met a couple of times to talk through the conceptual framework of each object, what vibe each object had. What kind of life did it have, what kind of personality? The works that I make are mostly heavy, sometimes dark, sometimes serious, but there are also moments of humor embedded in some of these objects, tongue-in-cheek puns. That was something that we wanted to play up.

## **I'm interested in things that are a residue of my own environment.**

The ramen piece is specifically titled Spread. One of my references for that piece is the photographs police officers make and sometimes publish in the newspaper. Once they raid somebody's house, there are these trophy pics. It reminds me of when motherfuckers go fishing, and they're holding the big ass bass, like, "Look at my spoils." So they have the money, or the drugs, or the dope, or the guns all stacked up on the table, and they're posing in front of it. Which is such a bizarre image, and also an image produced basically

by the state. Because the police are representing the state. Who are they speaking to with this image?

And so, for me, the ramen piece is basically mimicking stacks of money or stacks of drugs, and it's sitting on bricks so there is the money and the drug pun both at play. Then choosing the chicken-flavored ramen of course feeds into that more linguistically.



*Installation view of MOOD: Studio Museum Artists in Residence 2018-19 at MoMA PS1*

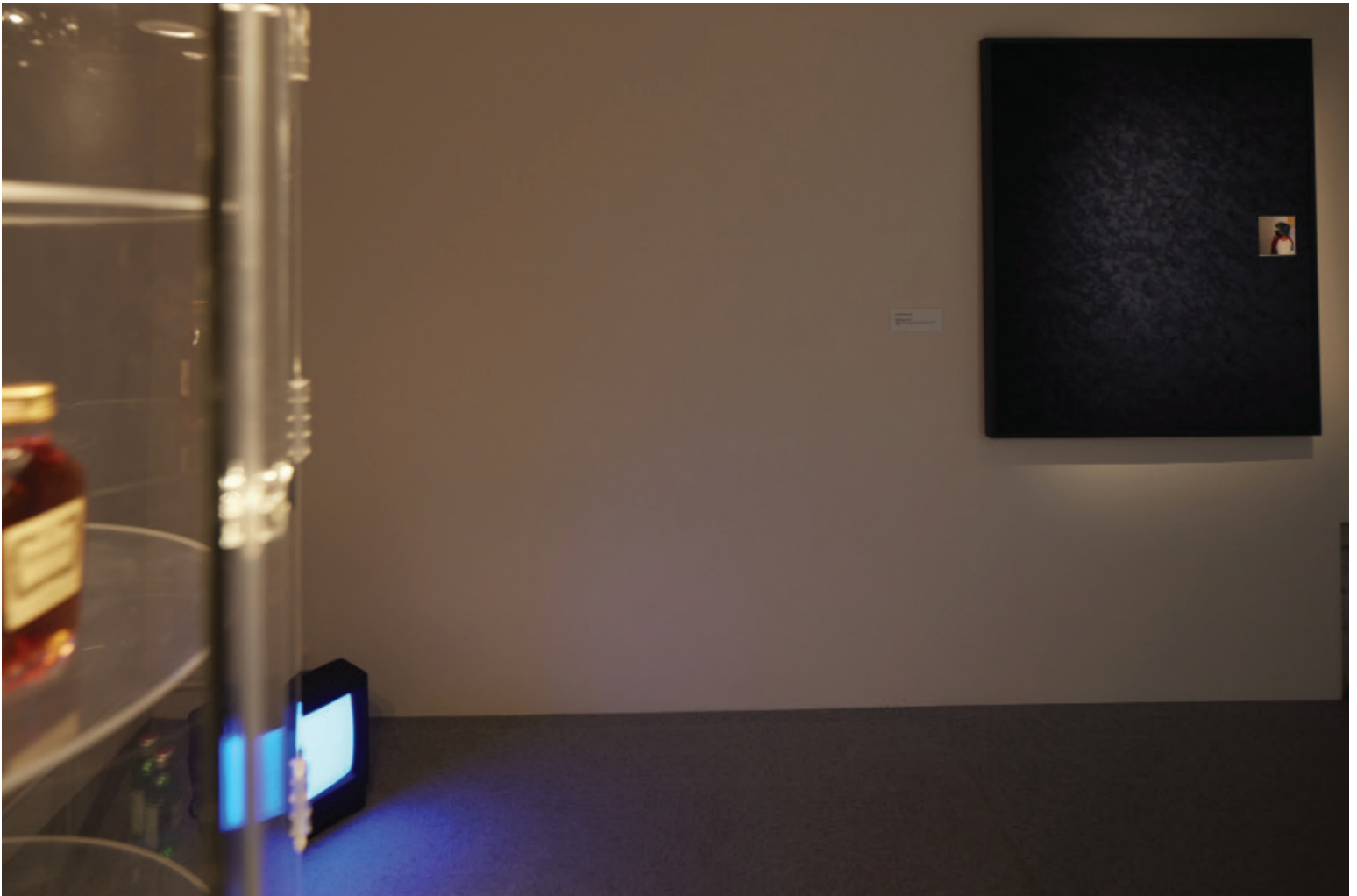
**In a lot of your work, you play with scale in a way that makes everyday items overpowering and threatening. Take for example your work *Weight: currency*, which has such a “weight” in our society, is now made tiny and fragile in juxtaposition to the other works and its physical weight on the scale.**

Especially with this show, there's so many ways that scale is operating. It's kind of like the main topic in a weird way. I thought it would be an interesting art exercise to think about the different scale of these objects in a physical space, and what that relationship is to the average scale of the human body. That initial physical reaction is important as your first

entry point into the work. Then you can start to consider what other notions of scale are at play.

The scale of this table is one-to-one, but then there's a weird relationship between where the seats are and the tops are, so that scale is skewed from something that you might encounter in the free, waking world. So then the body's relationship to this kind of bureaucratic structure becomes a question.

This is also something that exists in an interior. These tables are specifically from the prison space, so there's the magnitude and scale at which prisons populate the United States, and then how many bodies have been in that space? There's a whole economy and a set of businesses that are built on the number of bodies in those spaces. So these are multimillion-dollar companies that fabricate tables, but their business, their livelihood, thrives and is predicated on the fact that there continue to be multiple bodies in the prison space. If we reduced sentences, and decarcerate certain spaces, then that industry fails.



*Installation view of MOOD: Studio Museum Artists in Residence 2018-19 at MoMA PS1*

## **Can you talk about the color blue in your work?**

Blue is an ongoing motif throughout my practice, and becomes a loaded anchor point that I can thrust a bunch of ideas on. The different blues in a room rhyme with each other. I think about the blue screen in relationship to video production, but also to this idea of a signal drop, and the space of surveillance. With old technology, when the signal literally drops, or with the absence of media, no output connected, all you get is that blue screen.

So that blue can further be this kind of meditation, or aspiration. But there's also a relationship to imprisonment: when the possibility of being able to see the blue sky is taken away. How precious something that we take for granted is when it comes to thinking about solitary confinement. But then also the relationship to the suede work because that series of work is thinking about murals inside prison visiting rooms and the topology of aerial photographs that I found in California state prisons a while ago. Basically, prison visiting room murals are weird landscape paintings; typically they're tropical, oceanic or nautical themes. The language of the institution is that they're meant to create a fantasy or this moment of escape, which is so false and fucked up.

The blue in those images also becomes precious and false. It is the color of the uniform that people in state prisons in California and other places wear. I think about color theory, and conversations about color in an art context and a theoretical context. But also personally, my "color theory" growing up in California? It's like [gang colors] of red and blue. So this color that one can theorize about for hours in one context could also be the difference between literal life and death. Trying to maintain all those tensions feels important to me.

## **In your neon works, the sound that the neon makes parodies the sound of fluorescent lighting, and this eerie industrial noise that is synonymous with bureaucratic confined spaces. Can you speak about the sound the rotating case makes and the objects that were chosen to be on display?**

There's a very subtle environment shift from the large room [at MoMA PS1] to that smaller room. That sound of the motor from the display case is like a timed rhythm, but it stutters every once in a while. And so that motor functions like a drone or buzz of the fluorescent light. It's an ambient sound that is embedded in architecture or an interior space that is a part of its fabric that we almost become numb to. Once you're in a space you don't hear the thing until something clicks or something changes or something stutters, and then you become aware of it again.



*Installation view of MOOD: Studio Museum Artists in Residence 2018–19 at MoMA PS1*

That subtle coming into awareness of an invisible structure is important to me. But in relationship to the objects placed in the display case, it's like the same thing I was talking about with the ramen: This pint of Hennessy, these tiny joints, placed in that case, this reflective glow. The display case is made out of acrylic, so it's not 100% crystal clear; there might be a fogginess or a murkiness to it. So there's a kind of cheapness that is present even though it's potentially trying to elevate these things. It begins to mimic a particular aesthetic, or speaks to the space of neighborhood liquor stores, not a fancy store where you'll go and buy nice spirits but the type of store that impairs architecture in its performance of security, the bulletproof glass.

But also Hennessy is a thing that, although it's not named as such, is perceived in a US context as inherently black. When I was doing research, I read that Hennessy is the brand mentioned the most in rap songs over the last 10 or maybe 20 years. It's the most name-dropped liquor brand in rap history. The moment someone sees it, there're all these things that are thrust upon it. Trying to trigger and confront that is super important to me. There's this moment of reckoning where the audience member looks at these things, and these

assumptions come into play. But then you have to figure out why, or what's going on in relationship to that.

*MOOD: Studio Museum Artists in Residence 2018–19*, on view at MoMA PS1 through September 8, 2019, is organized by Legacy Russell, Associate Curator, Exhibitions, the Studio Museum, and Hallie Ringle, former Assistant Curator, the Studio Museum (now Hugh Kaul Curator of Contemporary Art at the Birmingham Museum of Art) with Josephine Graf, Curatorial Assistant, MoMA PS1.