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Kherbek, William. "The Carceral Sublime: An Interview with Sable Elyse Smith." [Berlin Art Link](#) (May 16, 2025) [ill.] [online]



The Carceral Sublime: An Interview with Sable Elyse Smith

Sable Elyse Smith's works explore the strange dimensionalities created by the American legal system. The nature of contemporary carceral culture is totalizing, from a media sphere dominated by everything from sensationalized manhunts to prison furniture designed to enforce and reify a vulgar order of violence. Smith's works explore the uneven terrain of hypervisibility and enforced disappearance that these dynamics create, determinedly locating the human beings who lie at the center of processes of dehumanization. Her 2021 kinetic sculpture 'A Clockwork,' for example, is a motorized wheel that references a perpetual loop, "doing time" and the reliance on incarceration to produce capital. In our interview, Smith incorporated a range of artistic, cultural and philosophical references in discussing the ways in which the totalitarian cultures enabled by the carceral system are reproduced. We began by discussing the fissures between the rhetoric of a "justice" system and the reality of a system concerned with notions of legality, but not necessarily the consequences of the hierarchies inscribed within it.



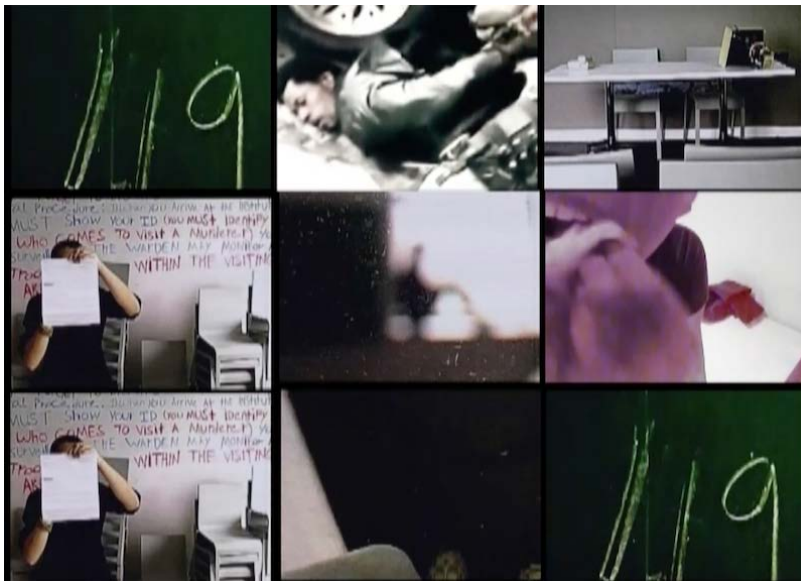
Sable Elyse Smith: 'Landscape V,' 2020, neon, 94 x 452.1 cm // © Sable Elyse Smith, courtesy of the artist, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Carlos/Ishikawa, London

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William Kherbek: Your works often address the ways in which law (as a philosophical system), the legal system (as a regime of rules) and in/justice interact. How do you conceptualize these fault lines when making work? Clearly, they all overlap, but they often work against each other, as well.

Sable Elyse Smith: In the US, “we” like to think of law as fixed, cemented structures that bear weight, the thought that they might hold us. Law is also language that creates an apparatus, which holds people in opposition to each other. “Free” and “unfree” is just one such framework. “Legal” and “illegal” another. And the list goes on. The list bombards us actually. As we know, bombardment is a tactic.

What you triangulate as law, legal system and justice/injustice do not work against each other. They work in concert. Allow me to draw a diagram that contains ellipses: the prison is made to suspend people in time. The law is made to protect the property rights of specific groups—like those that fulfil the archetype of a group of people who called themselves founders, never mind the people who already existed in this country. Then they were anointed “Founding Fathers,” and [the] father is in the business of breaking people. That’s it. I look for ways that established language creates the space for this breaking. I look at objects or designs that slip through the cracks, that appear not to take the “normal” or assumed shape of the machines used to break, but they do [slip through] nonetheless. I like to find things hidden in plain sight or so deeply embedded that their original intent might no longer be known or questioned or legible.



Sable Elyse Smith: 'Untitled: Father Daughter Dance,' 2013-17, nine channel video, no sound, 10:13 minutes // © Sable Elyse Smith, courtesy of the artist, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Carlos/Ishikawa, London

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WK: ‘LAUGH TRACK, OR WHO’S THAT PEEKING IN MY WINDOW’ (2021) uses footage of police arrests. I was struck, while watching it, how much of American television has consisted of what could be called “carceral spectacle” over the years (e.g., ‘Cops,’ ‘Real Stories of the Highway Patrol’). I wanted to ask your thoughts on the ubiquity of such images, how distorting their presence can be and the inevitable racialization and brutality they create as a kind of background noise?

SES: Your question is reminding me of the tactic of demoralization in warfare. Maybe because I’ve been revisiting the Soviet/Cold War era lately, but I think there is an interesting conceptual linkage. The commitment to a “re-education” process, which takes at least 20 years to “re-educate” an entire generation. That commitment is enormous. Look at that scale. So, your use of the phrasing “background noise” is appropriate; as in, the images are always with us. These programs create a ghost image, such that you reproduce them on your own, when you are in public, shuffling and categorizing all the people in your line of sight.

The American project is a project of othering. I’ll just keep coming back to this. Also, the most essential tool of a political movement is propaganda. Sometimes our “entertainment” is working overtime, or double time, so to speak. [The show] ‘Cops,’ which premiered in 1989 on Fox, right at the end of the Reagan era, was just one example—the moment when reality television really became a distinct genre. A line that stuck with me from Theo Deutlinger’s ‘Handbook on Tyranny’ is: “death sentences are forms of cultural expression as well as public events.” The police chase is a precursor to death. And to be “marked” as a criminal is a precursor to vigilante empowerment, a precursor to death. The only difference here is where on the timeline it comes.

The material possibilities of video, for me, felt like the best way to deal with this. These cop shows become quotations in the video, they are separated from their narrative arc, they do not get to fulfill the set-up. Then, maybe we have time to remember again that these are real people, these are real police officers justifying their actions through impulses, bias, adrenaline and absurdity. We see the actual lawlessness in how they behave. One officer from the video is describing a man near his car in a parking lot, whom he said was agitated and didn’t want to leave the area “so the next course of action was to just take him to jail.” But there is no explanation or description of the “law” he broke. And actually, the audience doesn’t want that. The premise of the show is chase and capture, chase and capture, chase and capture.

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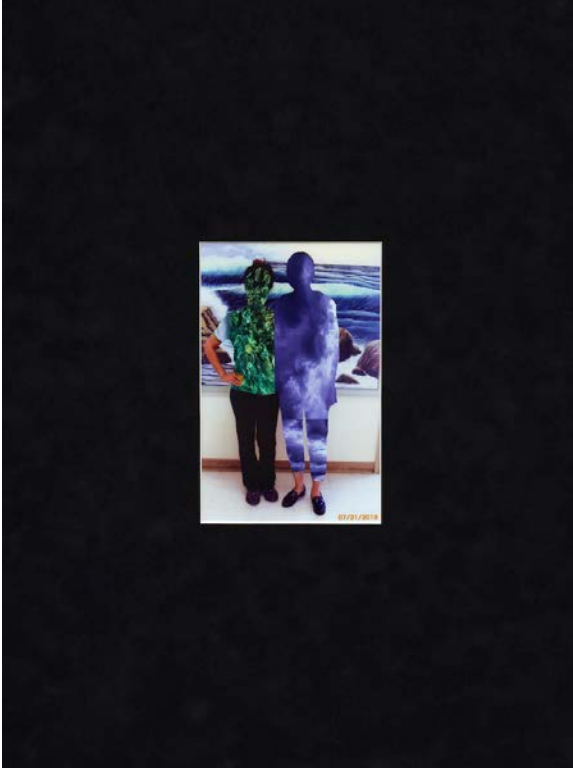


Sable Elyse Smith: 'A Clockwork,' 2021, aluminum, steel, and motor, 445.8 x 419.4 x 248.3 cm // © Sable Elyse Smith, courtesy of the artist, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Carlos/Ishikawa, London

WK: In a work such as 'A Clockwork,' for example, you also deal with the ways in which the architecture of prisons (mis)understands the body. In a certain sense, the body is a kind of obstacle to their regime of surveillance and seeing. I'm interested in how you've observed or thought about these notions of physical embodiment in relation to the creation of the works derived from these experiences and understandings of "prison logics" in architecture and language.

SES: Prison is many things, not just the physical building in which people are held in captivity, but it is also that. What a work like 'A Clockwork' tries to get at is an architecture of capital, and the means by which temporary sites are constructed. What happens within the bounds of a site, are governed by the site's very definition, its assertion that it is distinct from other sites. The body is the ultimate opponent of the state and its extensions. Freedom, thought and will are located within an individual; there is the potential of individuals to come together and organize; which means become bigger, which means world-build on their own, in opposition to the parental orchestration of the state. I think one-way the body or embodiment comes up is: prison is about disappearing people, physically and geographically, or flattening individuality into a marked group. 'A Clockwork' is made in the image of objects that require people to exist, in order to produce value. The company requires objects to be mass produced to profit (i.e. the corporation demands incarceration, people equal dollars). The work explores all the ways people are entangled in these machines. The pervasiveness of the banality is important to emphasize.

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Sable Elyse Smith: '9861 Nights,' 2023, digital c-print, suede, artist frame, framed dimensions: 124.5 x 104.1 x 5.1 cm // © Sable Elyse Smith, courtesy of the artist, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Carlos/Ishikawa, London

WK: Your photographic montage 'Suede' works are another example that I think very interestingly examines the different ways in which the incarcerated, the incarcerator and the artist see. I wanted to ask you about how these images also speak to forms of "interiority"? Those who are imprisoned are often denied any kind of interiority—or assigned one of total malevolence—and the artist's role is very much about a valorized interiority. In bringing these forms together in the work, did you feel that audiences were able to meaningfully connect those (unjustly) disjoined forms of interiority?

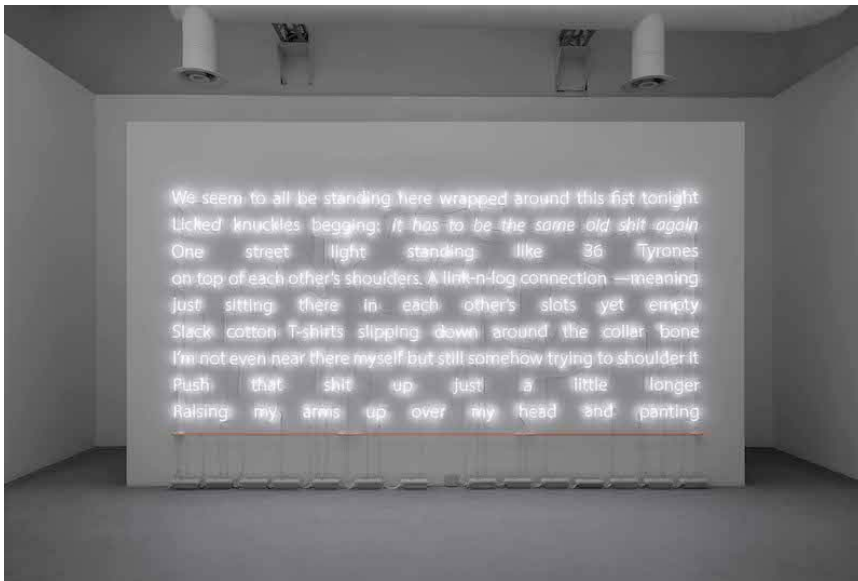
SES: It's interesting that you have focused in on the different points of view of these three actors, as you outline them. Of course, there are mechanisms which work to deny—or rather extinguish—interior life, but, also, one's engagement with the interior is private and one's own—one's own mode of resistance and possibility. I'm struck by the mention of this "figure of the artist" and its having a valorized interiority. I understand the sentiment but I don't think this is a position granted to me, nor one I take. I'd say probably 9 times out of 10, my interiority is challenged, and then valorized. And my thinking about art, the artist and making may have always been a bit "fringe."

For me, what's really at play here in that series, are the tensions in which a subject might find themselves held, at any given moment. The double meaning of an object and its

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production; and yet how, despite that, [the object] can be transformed. This is a family photograph, a souvenir in a way, a record of time, a document of evidence produced by the state, a mechanism of association and something to be cherished. And something to be withheld, and something to exploit, a small economy and a tool to assimilate and flatten. That's the web of contradictions and tensions that the subject wades in, and, as pointed out, there are multiple subjectivities implicated here.

Formally, those works are referencing various formats of carceral visibility. Photos of prison exteriors; the architectures and the formats of image production that happen in their liminal spaces; i.e., the visiting room. An intervening space. And so, the space of the "image" can occupy a kind of active present tense, as well. And yet, I wanted them to be beautiful too, because within all of these mechanisms the people find their own ways of resisting. But maybe the first thing that comes through in those works is the quiet.



Sable Elyse Smith: 'Landscape VI,' 2022, neon, 220.98 x 506.73 x 10.16 cm // © Sable Elyse Smith, courtesy of the artist, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Carlos/Ishikawa, London

WK: You've spoken elsewhere about prison photography and landscape, the idea that images are produced to almost "advertise" carcerality. They evoke in some ways romantic imagery and seem to create a kind of "carceral sublime," built out from a concept of a natural sublime. This is something that I think is being recapitulated in the recent images of large scale deportations, in which the evocation of the sublime is present, the overwhelmingness, the implied danger contrasted with the (ostensible) safety of the approving viewer. I wonder if you could speak about the ways in which your works relate to a notion of a carceral sublime, perhaps especially regarding scale as a factor?

SES: These images of mass deportation, disappearances, incarceration and precursors to death are all the same. The system is self-replicating. My work is looking at image and

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language. The creation and delineation of various categories to break, remove, isolate, disappear and persecute. And these “images” have existed since the formation of the colonies themselves. Obviously, through different means and different technologies, because the “image” is a warning. And once we get to the advent of the camera, there were photographs and postcards of lynchings. The scale is also the entire life of the American project.