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Harris, Jeremy O. and Sable Elyse Smith. "Sable Elyse Smith and Jeremy O. Harris on Horror, Hope, and Clockwork." [Interview Magazine](#) (March 12, 2026) [online]

Interview

Sable Elyse Smith and Jeremy O. Harris on Horror, Hope, and Clockwork



Photos courtesy of Sable Elyse Smith.

Sable Elyse Smith wants to unsettle you, kind of. Really, she wants the physical experience of her work to wash over you before you start trying to make sense of it. So if your eyes begin to ache while staring at the repeating forms and bright lights, or you start hearing phantom sounds from her kinetic sculptures, don't panic. Just sit with it. In *Clockwork*, her largest institutional exhibition to date, the New York-based artist pulls together ideas that have animated her work for years: time, spectacle, and the quiet brutality of the prison industrial complex. But as she told her old friend Jeremy O. Harris last week, the imagery has to be pushed just far enough that it never quite settles into something legible. Taking a quick break from installing at The Contemporary Austin, Smith joined Harris on Zoom to talk through *Clockwork*'s delicate balance of horror and hope.

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JEREMY O. HARRIS: Where are you right now?

SABLE ELYSE SMITH: I'm in Austin, installing.

HARRIS: Oh, nice. This show sounds so cool.

SMITH: Thank you.

HARRIS: Before we jump into that, a good place for us to start is, where have you been the last couple of years? What's been going on?

SMITH: Where have I been?



HARRIS: I mean, you're a Time 100 person, you've had shows all over. How have you found yourself settling back into whatever we call this life that we're living?

SMITH: That's a good question. I feel like the past couple of years have felt very dense and quick, partially because of the different projects that I was trying to explore, but then also teaching at the same time. I did a big show at Regen Projects in L.A., and then I worked on this huge opera project, collaborating with a bunch of different people, and it was made at warp speed. So I was in this new world, in this new making space, and trying to catch up to some of my ideas and ambitions around it. It has felt like a circus, almost.

HARRIS: Well, it's apt that you're talking about temporality, because your new show is called Clockwork. I do think that we are in this moment where it feels like time has

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stretched out and condensed very quickly. Do you feel like that's a marker of the age we are in, or the age that we are right now, late 30s, early 40s?

SMITH: I don't want to say we're in a unique time period, because the world has always been crashing around us. But now, it is incredibly visible and accessible to us, and not just our localities. There aren't too many smoke and screen narratives happening from the government anymore, so that makes it feel a bit more palpable. I do think it is about the age that we are. Somehow it feels like there's just a slight shift in perspective and grounding has happened, which definitely makes me look at time and life very differently and with a different type of urgency.



HARRIS: How have you been looking at it specifically when it comes to Clockwork and this show? How did some of the ideas that are included in the video work and the objects come to be?

SMITH: I mean, there are so many layers and registers of time happening, and what's exciting for me is how that's possible, or how you can adjust the volume of it depending on the material or the medium that you're using. The video work is super dense, it's visceral, it is quite sharp and jarring, and that is manipulating time in a way that we're not expecting it to function in that format, so that's hyper-accelerated. And then some of the objects are static. I'm also dealing with all of these repeating forms to talk about accumulation, to talk about scale, to talk about "doing time" in the carceral space.

Those different material collisions and questions about time are also spread across these two different floors in the museum. One is super frenetic and dense and one is "quiet," but then once you're up there, everything becomes loud, and the static-ness also animates in a way. There is this kinetic ferris wheel that moves incredibly slow, and is

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almost indiscernible upstairs. I think it's topsy-turvy, how these different times manifest through material and sound.

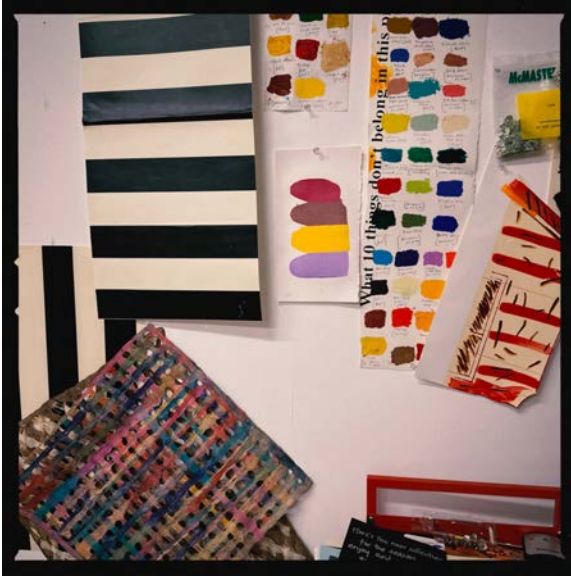


HARRIS: That's amazing. It also feels very Austin to me. How much has doing your first Texas show informed the work?

SMITH: Well, when I was first conceptualizing the show, the title was "American Horror." Obviously, I'm interested in the tropes of horror and suspense, and using those as different mechanisms, but I didn't want to recreate that. So, I tried to find ways to stretch it as far as possible so it doesn't look like the trope, but being inside of it you still feel it. We can say that's a metaphor for Texas, or a metaphor for the US, or that it's a metaphor for our global experience. I definitely like the word lollygag, because I've also been thinking about it as this carnival space where all these grotesque caricatures can be pulled out. But again, stretched so far that they aren't legible as that, but are felt.

HARRIS: One of the things that I love about horror is that it's one of the rare art forms where if it's working, you feel the atmosphere change in the room. People literally take in more breath and that changes the atmospheric pressure. What do you want the room to feel like for your audience?

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SMITH: A driving interest of mine is wanting an embodied experience first. That's the first register. Then there can be intellectual, discursive, analytical conversation, but for that you actually can't take your body and your experience out of it to just look at the thing from a distance. I am putting everybody inside of something that actually is quite difficult, or it could even create physical discomfort. There are all these optical illusion techniques in the show that literally hurt your eyes the longer you look at them—

HARRIS: Oh, fuck.

SMITH: And you're left with all of these ghost images and these registers of sounds, like the silence and other types of kinetic information that slowly creep into your physical experience moving through the architecture. And then, you're looking at the objects or the images and trying to parse those two things together.

HARRIS: I love that people get to walk away hobbled by your work, so they really have to feel it. Are there any references that inspired this work that have seeped their way in? Or do you not work referentially like that?

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SMITH: I think it's hard for anyone to say that they don't work referentially. Maybe there are some people who are directly quoting or trying to metabolize that type of material. But I'm taking in information and media all the time, and it obviously always shifts my position. There are some anchors that have haunted my practice for a while, and maybe there are some that are coming up more specifically in this show.

HARRIS: "There are some anchors that have haunted my practice," is such a golden line. I love that so, so much.

SMITH: Thank you. The video work, and particularly the new video, is based off of police reality chase shows, so the docu-form where it's basically chase and capture. I'm appropriating some of that footage and then building it out into this other thing. So, that's obviously a direct reference. Even just deciphering the entertainment references that go into the production of this thing that is meant for audience entertainment is super fascinating to me. There are ways where I try to pull out and think about where the climax is, where there's ideas of catharsis. There's also a slapstick, physical comedy in the way that the people who are actually being pursued by the police are portrayed through editing and the narratives that they choose. That is, I think, a filter over all of the work. And then, Christina Sharpe and her essay, "The Weather," is thinking about the idea of a pervasive climate. That's something that definitely comes up and sticks with the way that I try to point to all of these different types of invisibilities in my practice and the ongoing research too.

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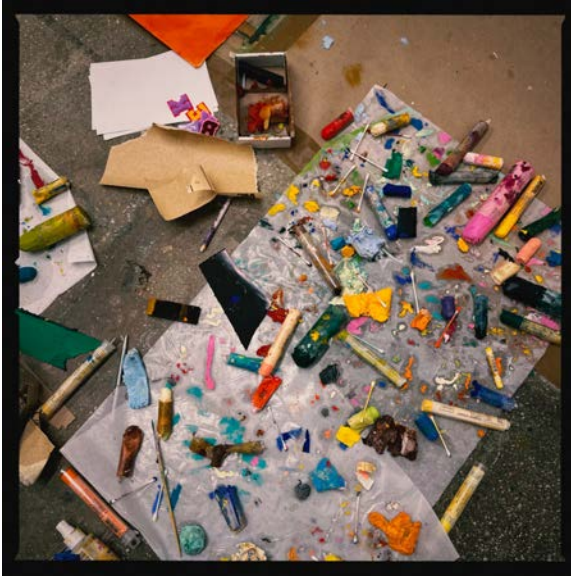
HARRIS: That's amazing. "The Weather," is an evergreen text for our generation. I don't want to leave it on a harsh note, but it's hard for me to think about the excitement I have to come to Austin and see your show and to make my own next show, but I'm literally looking at the news every five seconds, I'm like, "Is there going to be a show to go see?"

SMITH: Yeah.

HARRIS: Are you navigating the moment with a sense of hope or a sense of despair, or something else? I'm trying to figure out what engines are driving other artists to make right now.

SMITH: I feel like I always maintain a sense of hope and dread simultaneously. Making things has always been for myself, so it's a catalyst to process, to turn things over, to try to analyze, and it just so happens that somehow that's entered the public space. But I would be doing it without the public space and the recognition and the public discourse around it. Making is almost like a second language, and reminding myself of that helps me think through the immediacy, and also in trying to be future-oriented with other people and creating new languages, but for however long we are here or any of it is here for.

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HARRIS: Yeah. I love that. I got this lightning bolt when you were talking of a thrill, thinking about how young we were when we met and how ambitious we were, and still are, but how I think I would be shocked by the things that I've been able to accomplish in basically a decade. I feel like I meet a lot of young artists right now who are like, "How do I get where you are?" I wonder what you might say.

SMITH: Oh, this is the advice for young artists part of the interview?

HARRIS: We love the advice for young artists part of the interview.

SMITH: For real.

HARRIS: I have to give the kids hope.

SMITH: I guess I can just speak from my own experience, which was that I remained curious and urged to participate in something. That could look very different. It doesn't have to be what we all classify as the art world, there are many different types of art world, but it's that active presence. Showing up and participating, and a generosity in thought and making. But you also have to know what's actually driving you outside of all the external chatter. You have to constantly check in and know why you're being driven to do the thing that you're doing, and it has to be more than some kind of external validation or marker of success or a goal. Those things come because of a commitment to it, but you've got to be doing it for yourself first, and I feel like sometimes people can lose that.

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HARRIS: I love that. That's a reminder even for me sometimes. It can become this thing where you're doing it for everyone else but yourself. Well, it was very fun to catch up with you.

SMITH: Same. Thank you so much for doing this also.

HARRIS: Of course. You go have some good barbecue for me today though, because I'm missing it.

SMITH: I got you.

HARRIS: I can't wait to be down there and have some. I'll talk to you later.