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Review: "Sable Elyse Smith: Clockwork" at The Contemporary Austin

A sterile quiet first meets the museum-goer as they step into The Contemporary Austin – Jones Center downtown location. The cavernous concrete interior emphasizes this initial experience of silent tip-toeing until the theme song from the '90s reality show *Cops* suddenly jolts the viewer back into their body, rupturing the presumed sacredness of museum quiet. Herein lies the first example of bait and switch, a delicate tactic that Sable Elyse Smith exercises throughout her most expansive institutional exhibition to date, and her first solo exhibition in Texas. Through deceptively simple artistic forms, she deconstructs the behemoth that is the American carceral system and the network of institutions that sustain its logic. Smith investigates the more inconspicuous residues of institutional violence rather than its spectacular forms.

Smith is the 2026 recipient of the Suzanne Deal Booth / FLAG Art Foundation Prize, making her now a part of a recognized cohort of outstanding artists. *Clockwork* is presented as a five-month exhibition at The Contemporary Austin before traveling to the renowned FLAG Art Foundation in New York, where Smith has been artistically and professionally based for more than a decade. Smith is known for working across a range of visual forms, including sculpture, painting, text, and video, to demystify how systems of power function. Despite the plurality of media and formats she utilizes, the precision and singularity of her aesthetic language remain clear. Throughout the museum's two floors, Smith uses scale, seriality, assemblage, and sampling to emphasize the subtle contradictions inherent within the "mundane" presentations of violence.

The first floor gallery initially registers as a kind of fun house: the bold use of primary colors, optical illusions created by the carnivalesque black-and-white stripes on the wall, and sculptural objects interspersed on the concrete ground create a spatial landscape that feels both playful and disorienting. The scenography sets the atmosphere for several works on paper from Smith's Coloring Book Series, which hang at eye level in a recognizable format. The source text found in these illustrations have a didactic quality, originating from a coloring book designed to instruct children on the workings of the American justice system.

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An installation view of "Sable Elyse Smith: Clockwork" at The Contemporary Austin – Jones Center on Congress Avenue, Texas, 2026. Artwork © Sable Elyse Smith. Photo: Alex Boeschstein, courtesy of The Contemporary Austin



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A recurring character called "Judge Friendly" appears as a smiling white woman with one hand held across her chest in a penitential gesture, the other embracing a bird. In another work, the text reads: "All types of people are judges. The only important thing is that they are fair and honest." Another insists, "If we all work together, we can make the world a better place." The images and phrases begin to read as a white-washed

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catechism of institutional benevolence as they are repeated across the series. Palimpsests of color start to emerge with the use of frenetic mark-making in watercolor, ink, and oil stick. As Smith adds, layers, and subtracts visual and linguistic forms, the intended cheerful moralism of the source text curdles with every repetition. In their seriality, the absurdity and horror of the carceral logic is revealed.



An installation view of “Sable Elyse Smith: Clockwork” at The Contemporary Austin – Jones Center on Congress Avenue, Texas, 2026. Artwork © Sable Elyse Smith. Photo: Alex Boeschstein, courtesy of The Contemporary Austin

What is particularly cogent about Smith’s strategy here is the way individual works accumulate to unsettle structures that otherwise register as mundane. Much like in a funhouse, her formal approach mirrors and intentionally distorts the logic of accumulation within the systems she interrogates. Where the frameworks that perpetuate systemic dispossession may be unrecognizable in a single iteration, they become jarringly visible in aggregate.

Smith continues to unpack these concerns in two new video works commissioned by The Contemporary. Situated in the back of the gallery, a dark room leaks a sample of Travis Scott’s GATTI. Inside, two video works are projected on opposing walls, divided by back to back viewing couches, an unsettling configuration that leaves the viewer feeling like they need to watch their back.

The term “circulation” is often used to discuss the distribution of mass media and entertainment. It also precisely defines Smith’s approach to looping and editing where cases of violence are presented as both event and cyclical conditions. A series of successive clips that insinuate domination, pursuit, and masculinity loop: archival footage of cop chases, bucks in a rut, violent policing of Black men, white men in a wrestling match, and instances of cops’ racialized camaraderie with white subjects.

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A standout moment shows two, separate bodycam shots placed side by side, atop a blurred clip of a shadowed figure exercising in the foreground, an American flag billowing in the back. This clip occurs so frequently in the montage, cut with bodycam footage, that its variety and frequency start to replicate the way digital media is presented (e.g. the experience of scrolling through your TikTok feed). By using formats that feel recognizably contemporary, juxtaposed with decades-old media, Smith implies little has changed.

Yet through usage of cuts and superimposition, Smith challenges this assertion of cyclicity. The overwhelming presence of cuts in the footage seems to act as intentional glitches in the simulations of violence. They act as an interruption to a cyclical condition. These cuts in the engrossing montages suggest that there is an exit out of the loop, acting as a window onto an alternative view of what the system could be.

The viscerality of the lexicon on the first floor shifts in the second half of the show. The floating central staircase at the Jones Center carries the viewer from funhouse to fane. The second floor opens onto a more sobering body of work, announced by a sonic encounter. Before the eyes have a chance to adjust to the large neon work at the entrance of the upstairs gallery, a flatline buzz begins to resonate in the ears as you make the pilgrimage upstairs. The sound permeates the head and body as a grating one-note hymn.



An installation view of “Sable Elyse Smith: Clockwork” at The Contemporary Austin – Jones Center on Congress Avenue, Texas, 2026. Artwork © Sable Elyse Smith. Photo: Alex Boeschstein, courtesy of The Contemporary Austin

The first neon text work invokes a kind of fantasy of action in its verbiage. The bright light induces palinopsia in the retina, which along with the buzzing enhances the feeling

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of disorientation. This experience carries as the body registers the enormity of the other sculptures inside: *Gravity* and *Vanilla Wafer*, two sculptures in the shape of a cross; *Clockwork* (the eponymous work of the show), a slow-turning ferris wheel-like sculpture made of replicas of prison furniture you might see in a visitation room; and *Backbend*, *Barricade*, and *Barrier*, similarly constructed of prison furniture, but made into what looks like a playscape set for children. The sculptural objects at once invite and resist the body. Suggesting sport both in text and object, the body feels an opposing urge to act and freeze, creating a sense of embodied liminality.

Hidden among these large sculptures hanging flat on the wall is a series of images titled *Young Thug I*, *II*, and *III*, which repeat a found image of a young white boy in an American flag durag. The miniature images are a shift in scale. Hung in a vertical series of three — a suggestive number — the arrangement requires a kind of contorted looking. While one image hangs at eye level, your neck must crane up and crouch down to view the other two, as a kind of gestural and comic relief. There's something tongue-in-cheek about the young white kid rendered in the architecture of the Holy Trinity. The seamless ability to intertwine humor within the seriousness of thought on structural violence is Smith's forte.

But even her humor is attentive to form. If the cheeky word play in her titles leave room for the viewer to fill in the gaps, her use of minimalist forms allow her to communicate with absolute precision. Smith conscripts simple industrial design to present us with her assemblages, which recall toy jacks, playscape equipment, or a ferris-wheel, but the objects remain devoid of real use value. Her appropriation of the traditions of minimalism and post-minimalism operates as an art historical backdrop to the show. If we understand minimalist art through painter Frank Stella's dictum, "What you see is what you see," Smith's work invites us to See with a capital S. The invisible architectures of carceral capitalism that hide in plain sight are made legible here.

Throughout the exhibition, the dexterity of Smith's visual lexicon shines through in her ability to present forms that invoke the effects of, and tension between, accumulation and segmentation: of capital, of bodies, and of space, sometimes within a singular work. If downstairs addresses how carceral capitalism and its institutional accomplices mediate our perceptions and definitions of justice and violence, upstairs lays bare the procedural realities and infrastructures that sustain it. Across these registers, Smith's understanding of violence is no longer exceptional nor a singular event, but rather an ambient condition embedded in the "quieter" mechanics of a system. And by the end, it is precisely these quiet mechanics that make the exhibition feel so loud.

Sable Elyse Smith: *Clockwork is on view through August 2, 2026, at The Contemporary Austin – Jones Center.*