

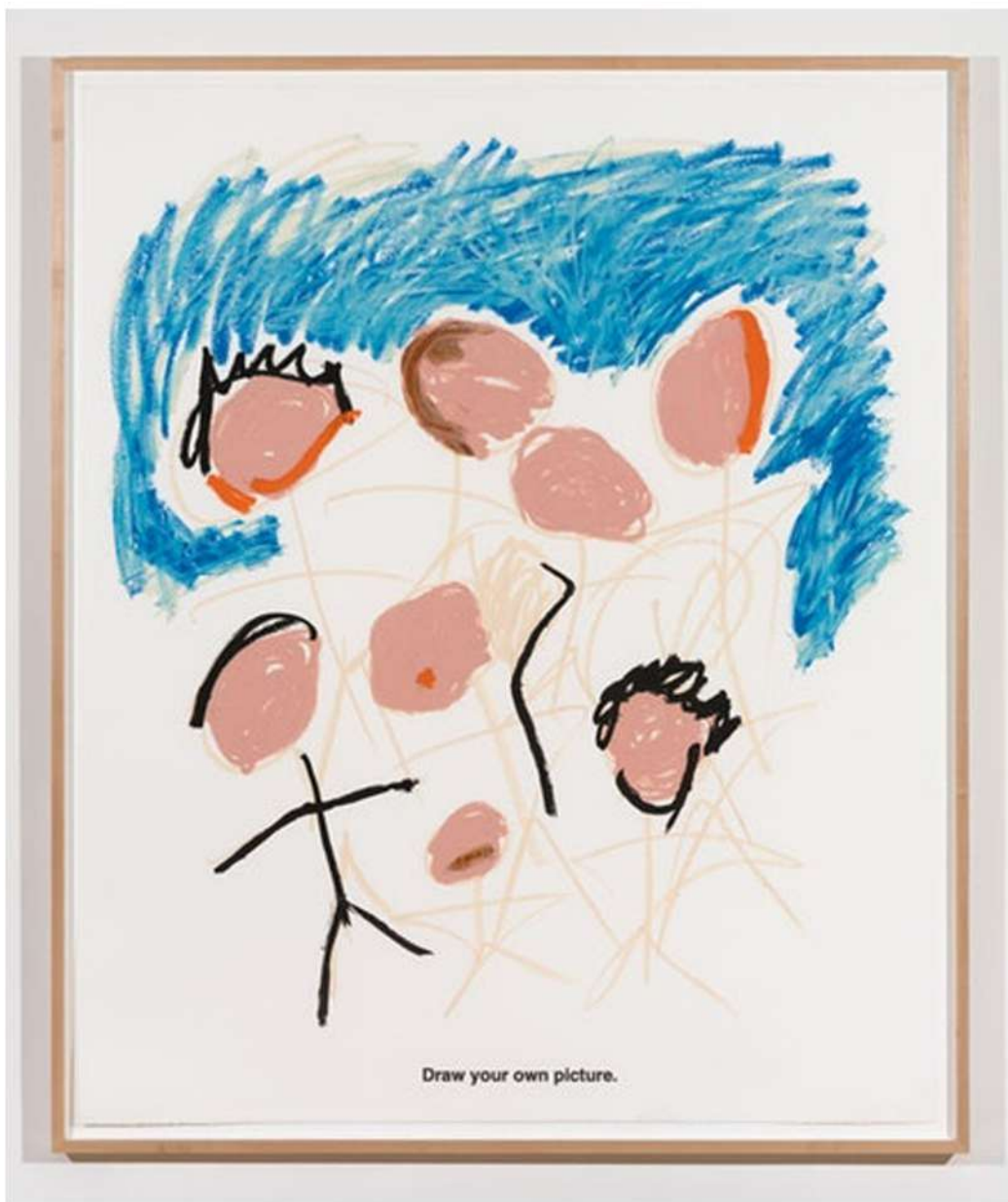
Sable Elyse Smith: *BOLO: Be on (the) Lookout*

JTT | OCTOBER 28 – DECEMBER 16, 2018



Sable Elyse Smith, *Room One: The Watcher*, 2018. 6-channel synchronized video, monitors, sound, custom floor, paint in timid white, dimensions variable. Courtesy JTT New York.

The lilting voice of white actress Julie Hagerty permeates the gallery while we see her image flicker across six screens in a 1994 excerpt from *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*. Hagerty reads a line from Richard Price's novel *Clockers* as Striker, the main drug dealing character: "Did I ever tell you about the first time I killed somebody?" Hagerty reads, pauses, rolls her head back, the audience laughs, and she lets out a suppressed giggle. The joke relies on the overt differences between Hagerty and Mekhi Phifer, the black actor who played Striker in Spike Lee's 1995 film adaptation. The humor only works here because of the presumption of innocence that surrounds white femininity even as it simultaneously produces black masculinity as perpetually presumed guilty.



Sable Elyse Smith, *Coloring Book 20*, 2018. Screen printing ink and oil stick on paper. 60 x 50 inches. Courtesy JTT New York

In its presentation of innocence that isn't quite, Sable Elyse Smith makes criminality the absent center of the show; it haunts, but is not depicted. In the Hagerty clip, black criminality emerges as a structure produced by white innocence. Through its incessant repetition, we see that Hagerty's shield of innocence is its own form of violence in that it naturalizes the association between black men and criminality. In addition to Hagerty's embodiment of innocence as white, feminine, and oblivious, other moments in the show also bear witness to the ways that white women have weaponized their words to turn others into criminals. *Coloring Book 20* (2018) for example, is an enlargement of a coloring book page that asks the reader to "Draw Your Own Picture." Within the limits of the page, Smith scrawls a narrative in black paint and outlines it in peach—a white skin tone. In the story, a white woman teaches her grandchild to fear black men by squeezing her arm when they are nearby even as she reaches out to give the artist a gesture of reassurance by reaching out to touch her.

In this regard, Smith's use of enlarged pages of a coloring book meant for children visiting the incarcerated mirrors the cartoonish quality of justice. Smith even notes in an artist statement for the show—available online and at the gallery; the physical similarities between Hagerty and one of the recurring characters in the coloring book, Judge Friendly. Smith's recreations of these coloring book pages are filled with lines of color that veer outside the lines, words that are underlined and crossed out, and stick figures. In one world, this would be a typical childhood artifact, but in this world, where the pages of the coloring book teaches children how to identify metal detectors, asks them to color in the judge's robe, and tells them to be patient, the intertwining of state discipline and childhood unruliness is striking. It underscores the ways children of incarcerated family members (predominately black and brown) are not allowed to be children, but are awaiting indoctrination. In fact, the way that the children are interpellated by the coloring book, we see that they are presumed to exist in direct relation to criminality—such that these lessons about avoiding it are necessary.



Sable Elyse Smith, *Coloring Book 6*, 2018. Screen printing ink and oil stick on paper. 60 x 56 inches. Courtesy JTT New York.

When we think further about the coloring book pages, we also see the violence of incarceration for families and children, in particular. One is denied a relative and childhood innocence in one swoop. However, Smith, might also be giving us ways to read aslant. We might, for example, imagine that the insistently large coloring book pages are a reclamation of childhood, if not innocence. This reclamation of the ability to just be is something that is not usually extended to black and brown children—given the racialization of innocence and childhood. In addition to this, Smith’s invocation of childhood allows us to see the ways that art helps to bring families fractured by incarceration together, which is what Nicole R. Fleetwood’s discussion of Deanna Lawson’s photographic series *Mohawk Correctional Facility: Jazmin & Family* (2012 – 14), makes clear. Fleetwood writes, “prison portraits become a powerful archive representing the enduring struggles of black Americans to claim citizenship, kinship, love, and even hope in the face of multiple forms of racial injustice—poverty, profiling, failed economic policies, and mass incarceration. They also document important forms of self-expression for the many millions who have been locked away and whose images and profiles are otherwise strictly managed by bureaucracies enforcing criminalization and incarceration.”¹ The ability to imagine otherwise that Fleetwood points to is precisely what Smith’s mobilization of childhood does. Through these acts of rewriting and redrawing, Smith remakes, in paint, familial bonds that have been severed. Trauma gives way to self-expression, connection, and critique.