

McLean, Matthew. *Sable Elyse Smith Responds to the Rigged Logic of the US Criminal Justice System*. Frieze. January 28, 2020.

# Frieze

## Sable Elyse Smith Responds to the Rigged Logic of the US Criminal Justice System

A recent exhibition at Carlos/Ishikawa, London, conjured an experience of being controlled within a carceral capitalist state



It is 2020, 2.3 million Americans live inside prisons and at the centre of Sable Elyse Smith's solo exhibition, 'Or the Song Spilling Out', stand two metal sculptures: *Riot I* and *Pivot II* (all works 2019). Both comprise six long rods, affixed via a plate to each of the faces of a central cube, from which they radiate in perfect symmetry. Each rod terminates in a circular disk, riveted in four places. The forms have an institutional quality and, in fact, the sculptures reference standard-issue prison furniture.

'We had a real issue with visitors and prisoners rearranging the furniture to get more intimate,' reads the website for custodial-furniture manufacturer Pineapple. 'The weight and design of the new furniture prevents this.' Lacking a single grounding base, however, *Riot I* and *Pivot II* upset this logic: they rest on the thin outer edges of the disks, like toy jacks tossed in the air by a giant and left on the floor where they fell. At the same time, they parodically extend the logic of carceral design. In her 2019 essay on Smith, 'Universal Gravitation', Hannah Black interprets the typically knee-high design of tables and chairs for prison visiting rooms (militating against the exchange of contraband beneath them) as 'the state protecting itself against the exchange [...] of intimacy'. *Riot I* and *Pivot II* share this prohibition: though formed of furniture, they are unfit for bodily use; their abundant surfaces, enveloped in 2K acrylic paint, dramatize an absence of haptic contact. Positioned metres apart, they don't even touch each other.

Indeed, in their rigid, abstract symmetry, the sculptures register less as objects than as diagrams or technical apparatus: like illustrations of molecular geometry or satellites stuck orbiting the world on a



Sable Elyse Smith, 'or the song spilling out', 2019, installation view. Courtesy: © the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London and JTT, NYC

terminal trajectory. Space is cold as hell; Black Panther activist Eldridge Cleaver wrote his prison memoir in 1968, he titled it *Soul on Ice*. The images in Smith's work agglomerate, overwhelm.

The epigram to Black's essay includes a quote from Smith's 2018 Aperture Foundation talk: 'I won't distinguish language, land, body and prison.' An artist who also practises as a poet, Smith proceeds like the Metaphysicals, via a series of repeated associations and assonances, to 'torture one poor word ten thousand ways', as John Dryden wrote of George Herbert. Note the layers of symbolic reference in the colours Smith uses here. (Smith said in an interview last year that 'different blues in a room rhyme with each other'.) *Pivot II* is gunmetal grey and fake sky blue; *Riot I* is deep-space black. Black and blue are the colours worn by the Los Angeles Crips, of a brutalized body, and the colours of the 'Thin Blue Line' image, with which police forces imagine their enforcement of order against chaos.

No justice, no peace: that's the deal, say some. In the corner of the gallery, a monitor – suspended, somewhat perilously, on two long chrome poles – screens *Untitled*, a looping 38-second video comprising a single shot of found footage of an empty stretch of pavement, on which a burning vehicle blazes, but unconsumed, like the Biblical bush. (Cleaver called his 1978 follow-up memoir *Soul on Fire*.)

On the gallery walls hang six large screenprints, in which Smith has worked over illustrations from an educative handbook for juveniles exposed to the justice system in vast, waxy multicolour scrawls and scratches. They offer, to coin a phrase, a travesty of justice. In *Colouring Book 38*, a jury bench is engulfed in black strokes and white washes, overseen by an obscured radiant sun, while in *Colouring Book*



Sable Elyse Smith, 'or the song spilling out', 2019, installation view. Courtesy: © the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London and JTT, NYC

39, the brightly robed 'Judge Friendly' addresses a pink bird, although with one eye obscured by a patch of red, the magistrate more closely resembles a ridiculous pirate. *'This isn't a costume', says the judge,* reads a text below the image. With a newly apricot face and colourless robes, the Judge reappears in the diptych *Colouring Book 36* alongside a blacked-out police officer and two faceless children who loom beside a globe. Like the motto on an imperial crest, a legend runs along the bottom: 'If we all work together, we can make the world a better place.' For all its childish simplicity, this series conjures the experience of a system in which the rules are unknown and the odds are stacked like loaded dice.

The toy jacks that *Riot I* and *Pivot II* evoke are the precursors of dice. Used for playing games since antiquity, jacks were originally made from the astragalus bones of slaughtered sheep. Violence permeates our lives, as close to and quiet as the blood beneath our skin – until moments such as this exhibition, when, like the show's titular song, it spills out, finding sudden release.