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BAZAAR



CULTURE > ART, BOOKS & MUSIC

Sable Elyse Smith's "Clockwork" Reveals the Machinery Behind America's Horror Show

In the Brooklyn artist's institutional solo show at The FLAG Art Foundation, everyday objects reveal the systems behind America's violence

The Brooklyn-based artist clarifies that she's not referring only to this "hyper-contemporary moment where everything is crazy and horrific," but to a long, troubled history in the United States. The true horror is the opacity of power, where we, as onlookers, struggle to see how various forms of oppression feed into each other. In her work, Smith uses media ranging from video to sculpture to break down what lies behind these systems of power—and to create a visual vocabulary with which to articulate it.

These ideas were already occupying Smith's mind when the artist won the Suzanne Deal Booth / The FLAG Art Foundation Prize in 2024. The award granted Smith solo shows at Contemporary Austin and New York's The FLAG Art Foundation, along with \$200,000, which she used to embark on a new project she privately called "American Horror Show." The title has only continued to ring true over the two years since, following Donald Trump's presidential win and the swell of conservative policies that came with it. But then, Smith decided it felt too blunt.

"It hit all of the registers that I was interested in, but 'American'—the word—would be empty in a way," she says. "There was no equivalent to that that actually had the same bite and punch, so then I had to think about how the show is operating."

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Alex Boeschstein

Installation view of "Sable Elyse Smith: Clockwork" at The Contemporary Austin – Jones Center on Congress Avenue, Texas, 2026.

Smith ultimately chose "Clockwork" for the exhibition, which opened at The FLAG Art Foundation on September 24 after its stint in Austin earlier this year. The artist lifted the title from a sculpture featured in the Austin show (and the Whitney Biennial in 2022), a towering, slow-moving Ferris wheel made of prison furniture. In her view, this machine, made of mundane prison furnishings, aptly symbolizes America's circus of structured violence, in which oppressive powers are propped up by a dense network of smaller economies. (The artwork, however, will not travel to New York.)

"['Clockwork'] is about a monotonous mechanical production, system, or cycle," Smith explains. "All of this language and thematics can be held in it. I felt that would do enough without being hyper specific, reductive, or superficial. I think about language a lot, so I thought, 'I need something that is still open and provides enough abstraction where it's not a lens where everything in the show is reduced through some tight, literal container.'"

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Photography by Steven Probert Studio
Installation view of “Sable Elyse Smith: Clockwork” at The FLAG Art Foundation, 2026.

“Clockwork” is Smith’s institutional solo show, following shows at Los Angeles’s Regen Projects and New York’s now-defunct JTT. The first edition of the exhibition in Austin featured a larger selection of work than the New York iteration, which was culled down due to spatial constraints. This also gave the artist the chance to place works a New York audience might be less familiar with at the forefront of the presentation. Ultimately, this allowed the artist to hone her investigation of power and unchecked violence. As soon as you enter the FLAG, a neon sign sets the tone for the show: “Someone smashed the policeman’s radio / And finally silence.”

The first iteration of the exhibition featured a large selection of Smith’s coloring book series, which appropriates cheerful illustrations from a children’s book designed to introduce kids to the concept of criminal courts. When Smith first encountered the book in 2015, she realized just how many moving parts it takes to uphold America’s carceral system. That’s why Smith used repurposed furniture from prison visitation rooms as material for several of the sculptures in this show—in one case, a giant game of jacks and in another, two massive crucifixes.

“They were designed by a corporation that produces them for a specific context,” Smith explains. “That context has different needs that include surveillance and a show of strength. There is an economy around the production of these objects.”

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Steven Probert

Installation view of "Sable Elyse Smith: Clockwork" at The FLAG Art Foundation, 2026.

Smith's sharpest indictment of the American nightmare unfolds in two video works, titled *LAUGH TRACK, OR WHO'S THAT PEEKING IN MY WINDOW* (2021) and *skin suit* (2026), the latter of which was created specifically for this exhibition. The latter draws on the television phenomenon *Cops*—a serialized, sensational look at police work across the United States. At one point, Smith became fixated on the show, mesmerized by how the showrunners edited stories and camera footage to create a "chase and capture narrative" built from the perspective of the police officer.

"[As viewers,] we are very much in the positionality of the authority—the state authority figure," Smith explains. This inspired the title *skin suit*. The cinematic video installation stitches together various POV scenes from *Cops* and similar spinoff shows to indict the series's obvious prejudices. For instance, one clip shows a white police officer letting two drunk, white college kids free, while several others show unnecessary violence being used on Black men. Most of all, Smith's video work emphasizes how the docu-style reality format fortifies an audience's prejudice by literally inserting them into the position of power.

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Courtesy of the artist
Sable Elyse Smith, still from *skin suit*, 2026

“It’s between docu-form and reality television, but serves this entertainment purpose,” she says. “If we think about how it’s edited together and the narrative arcs that are created throughout, and then the socioeconomic demographic and the types of crimes that producers are choosing to include.... This show that doesn’t have any ‘law enforcement purpose,’ it’s for another thing.”

A television show like *Cops*, coloring books, and the stools in a prison visitation room share one thing in common: each is a seemingly benign mechanism for upholding the reigning system of power. Smith’s “Clockwork” deftly retools these otherwise innocuous items to reveal their complicity—and, implicitly, ask us to consider ours.