

Shinique Smith and Sarah Lewis Discuss Permeating Spaces with Empathy

Introduction by Lameah Nayeem

Shinique Smith's practice, spanning calligraphy, collage and grandiose fabric sculptures, transposes the embedded histories of found materials onto communal acts of remembrance. For Smith, this crosshatching between past and present, individual and collective, constellates a path to archive our lives within the boundaries of time, race and gender that so often divide us. Influenced by Eastern esotericism, dance and experimentation with graffiti while studying at the Baltimore School for the Arts, Smith's practice is deeply attuned to multiple states of being, visibility and Black femininity.

Sarah Lewis is widely recognised for founding Vision & Justice, a research initiative that examines the foundational role of art in advancing equity and justice in America. She currently holds the position of John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the Humanities and Associate Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University. Interrogating both the history of Black cultural production and the disciplinary contours of art history itself, she critiques the field's engagement with the hyper-visibility of racial injustice in the United States. Lewis' work compels a methodological reappraisal that centres the experiences of those denied self-sovereignty, while reconsidering the historical placement and interpretation of their artistic legacies.

In a rich and deeply personal conversation, Shinique Smith and Sarah Lewis explore the transformative role of art in shaping narratives of race, identity and justice – centring themes of enchantment, softness and resilience as acts of resistance, healing, and collective becoming.

Sarah Lewis: Your art explores themes of personal and collective identity. How do you see the role of art in shaping or challenging narratives of race and identity today?

Shinique Smith I've been building this body of work – odes to enchantment, forgiveness and belonging – around the ideas of rejuvenation and transformation. I guess I'm trying to create some kind of frenetic leaning toward joy, even if I don't always get there. Within that, I dance between the figurative and the non-figurative. Is it becoming? Is it slipping away? Is it bound? Is it unravelling? I think that

dance for me speaks a lot to my experience as a Black woman or as a woman in general. There's that triple consciousness that exists as a Black woman where race and identity, the personal and the communal, interweave. For me, it starts here in the personal, and it radiates out through my work, hopefully channelling the viewer.

The viewer may discuss the work; perhaps they will talk about what they dislike about it. Some things are more overt, or, to put it more explicitly, they speak to moments of race and culture. In relation to shaping and challenging the narratives of race and identity today, it's so fluid and ever-changing. It all comes down to that same core of belonging versus ignorance. Do I belong? Do I not? And we're all answering that question in multiple ways.

SL: I love hearing the animating force behind your practice laid out as a drive towards enchantment, towards truth, towards joy, which for some can also be a vehicle for understanding race. It's such a foundationally important way to frame the answer to that, it resonates with me. Many people view Vision & Justice as a thesis for the work I do, examining the relationship between art, race and politics. In terms of my curatorial work and writing, though, I really began looking, instead, far more broadly at creativity and art as a way of crafting a life. I wrote The Rise well before this work.

SS: I love that book.

SL: Thank you. The Rise was a way to think through and write about so much of what you just said. How is it that we craft a life? How do we find our way when there might also be no guide? How do you create out of the improbable? How do you find affirmation and joy in your pursuit on the most unlikely of grounds? The book was about that, and that's really what animates my practice: thinking about how we become who we know we should be, despite any obstacle, despite any probable foundation.

SS: I remember you speaking about failure and the importance of that in the work, which is so important to me, and to be able to give oneself permission



Shinique Smith, *Breathing Room: Moon¹ Marked Journey*, 2022. Performance video still. Running time 13:08. Courtesy of the artist



Shinique Smith, *Torque*, 2024, custom printed and hand-painted textiles, found hubcaps, hula-hoops, ribbon, rope, yarn and sound collage, scale variable. Courtesy the artist and Newfields/ Indianapolis Museum of Art

to fail and to understand that there is a process of evolution, and that goes to mind, body, spirit and intellectual pursuits. I think it also really crosses over to the idea of race, vision and justice, because we fail so much. Everybody wants to know that they've defined it.

SL: Thank you for that. You see the stitching between the projects. There was this moment in writing about the irreplaceable role of failure in creativity and innovation that I began to think about societal failure, collective failure, and how we've overcome that, and how indispensable the arts have been for that. That's all justice is; it's a move after collective failure, after the recognition that we have been wrong.

SS: Right, yes, because then there's also that recognition of the construct, understanding it, seeing it, but then also having to navigate living within it and having it be constructed around you.

SL: Exactly.

SS: How to persevere, permeate that space with some level of empathy and understanding is the goal – maybe even the goal and challenge of art.

SL: I think you've just put your finger on why the artist is so important in moments of justice. Art can expose society as effectively a failed construct. To think of someone like [Constitutional Law Professor] Charles L. Black Jr, who is living in a period of deep segregation in Austin, Texas in 1931, hearing Louis Armstrong's horn at a dance, and realising, 'My God, the world around me must be wrong. It's a failed construct because there's genius coming out of the body of this Black man, and segregation has told me to denigrate him, told me that he is not equal to me'. How do you then live in that condition? You speak into existence the possible, and live the possible, potentially before it arrives.

SS: This is why I also stay in a realm of utopian vision, trying to see the beauty in the everyday through whatever materials I use. To be able to imagine a better reality, and to see the empathy and connection between human beings, but also to critique it. It takes a nuanced hand, and some of us are stronger and more attuned toward critique.

SL: Do you see collaboration between our arts spheres – the visual and the academic? I don't see them as separate at all, actually.

SS: I guess sometimes the art world also involves sales and glamour...

SL: Well, the Met Museum Gala featured [Professor and Curator of African Studies at Barnard College, Columbia University] Monica Miller's scholarship as the foundation for the show – Slaves to Fashion, her book that focuses on Black style. I met you when I was a curator at MoMA, and before that I was at Tate Modern, and then I surprised myself by choosing Harvard over the job I'd been offered at the Met. I felt the need to focus on scholarship, contemporary art and historical practice because I began thinking about what work would endure – what might last beyond our generation. Exhibitions matter, but without the book, without the writing, things can get lost to time. It's a reality many artists don't want to face, but I believe it's true.

SS: It is true. Two things come to mind when you say that: one is influence. As an artist, there's the immediate hurrah. [American artist] Fred Wilson said years ago that there are several kinds of love that you get as an artist: the love of the gallery, from the viewer, from the museum, from the press, from the critic, and the love of your peers, and that it's rare that you get them all at the same time. I would add another, the love of educators. Sometimes I receive emails from teachers saying they've used my work in the classroom as a vehicle for their students' own creativity – and that means a great deal to me.

SL: There is an act of justice involved in the decisions around art and writing. I think there is an under-theorisation of the work of many African-American artists and many Black artists, and over-indexing on the exhibition and display of the work, and that creates a potential path towards erasure, for artists and the subsequent generation. If there's not enough writing on an artist, you have the preconditions to not teach the work.

SL: What is happening in your practice right now? What currently energises and focuses you?

SS: I'm continuing this ode to enchantment, or allowing myself to be. There's an underlying and overlying conversation with mending, with bundling, with love, loss, recycling, rebirth and repetition. Right now, I'm also returning to plushness – soft things that are touchable. Sound has permeated my work significantly, which isn't often discussed. Since grad school, I've used my breath. Initially, it involved sampling to create sound for dance performance collaborations. You may know, I bundled myself. I have this ritualistic gesture in the work that I first applied to my body early on, but it was only documented in photos. I performed it live for the first time in 2018 with yoga instructors doing different types of breath. We did it again in Baltimore – it evolved. It didn't land the way I needed in Kansas City. Then, in January 2020, I performed it in my hometown, Baltimore, with three Black women yoga instructors, and it became a different ritual. Breath took on new meaning.

Between the earlier performances, the deaths of Freddie Gray and Eric Garner had occurred, so breath – this shared, meditative act – shifted again. And then it changed once more, right after, because it was just before Covid. I wanted to share it more broadly, so we made a film. That's when the idea of not just transformation – taking objects and changing their use or meaning – but of transportation entered the work. I have to send you the link. I've been meaning to. It's funny how the algorithm doesn't always show things to the people who really need to see them.

SL: I can't wait to see this. This focus on softness, bundling – and I wanted to say 'rapture', but it is actually 'enchantment' – is so needed now; it is the destination for so many, spiritually. I wonder what the touchstones are for you in thinking of these ideas as part of your practice. Are there architects you're looking to? Are there mythologies you're thinking about?

*SS: Some of the underlying influences in my work come from experiences with Indigenous cultures throughout my life. My mother hosted a meditative show, *Through the Mind's Eye*, on Morgan State's radio station in Baltimore in the '80s, and she also worked in fashion. So early on, fabric, esotericism and a search for meaning were intertwined. She'd bring in Black thinkers to speak, like Dr. Robert Powell, a physicist who lectured on sacred geometry. Architecture as universal geometry, lines of poetry and these experiences with elders across cultures helped me begin to see how people connect.*

SL: It's important to hear these foundational sources. You're so singular with this invitation to, or even a reclamation of, softness within us.

SS: The permission to be soft. I have permission to be strong, angry, magical and fearsome, but not soft. Now people talk a lot about joy, more recently, Black joy and self-care, and vulnerability, but the softness is something I want to pass on, like sharing hugs. I feel like we need to be held.

SL: We do.

SS: There is a movement in Japan of being swaddled, being bound. There was a Lakota man who used to perform a ritual in which he bound himself in the darkness of this cave. I didn't attend it. My mother did, and people talked about it. It was a myth. I've explored the act of tying and its significance in various cultures. In Japan, people go to yoga classes, and someone comes along and will swaddle you in fabric, because being swaddled reminds you of being a baby and safe. So, providing something for people that's not entirely swaddling them, but that gives that same feeling of safety.

SL: There was a mantra I would say to myself after a miracle of an experience: 'Softness only'. It transformed how I went about interactions, exchanges and responses to invitations in every scenario. Even just this morning on my walk, I was thinking about softness while admiring the flowers that have exploded in Cambridge's spring.

Sarah Lewis is an art historian and curator based at Harvard University, whose work explores the intersections of art, race, and justice.