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Museum Studies

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Exhibition Review: “Ordinary Violence” by Sable Elyse Smith

Introduction

The Haggerty Museum of Art’s willingness to exhibit a show focusing on black incarceration rates and injustices in the black community is a breath of fresh air given the gentrified location of the museum in a predominantly black community. The exhibition “Ordinary Violence” by Sable Elyse Smith comes to the Haggerty not only at a time of heightened awareness of the racial and gender inequalities in America, but also just prior to Wisconsin’s general elections. In this exhibition, Smith presents conceptual art through the mediums of sculpture, photography, video and text in order to pull our focus toward the invisible yet painful realities of black life in America.

7666—Nights Falling and Untiled 17

Smith’s work has a subtle way of presenting harsh truths to its audience. Even the cover of the exhibition booklet mirrors the text erasure style of Basquiat. This technique is reminiscent of the erasure of black society and its experiences (Image 1). Her lighthearted childish delivery contrasts with her heavy messages of the prison system. Instead of hitting the audience over the head with dark images, Smith draws us in with playfulness, asking us to dig into the works and

correlate their meanings. This investigative work forces us to make the intellectual connections that then demand the realizations of her messages. After reading quite a lengthy text panel describing the exhibition, one of the first two pieces we are confronted with is *7666—Nights Falling* (Image 2). Here, a small photo collage is centered in a very large sea of black velvet. The photos seem to float in this darkness while threatening to sink into its softness. On the adjacent wall is *Untiled 17* (Image 3). For this piece, Smith has glued black letters, reminiscent of children's magnets, directly onto the gallery wall. Her use of text in this format is not unlike something you might have seen in the works of Jennifer Holzer. The text combines to form a perfect square of unpunctuated sentences that from afar resemble brail. The sentences are an accordion of randomly spaced letters, which require a presence of mind in order to decipher. Upon a closer look, Smith gives a lyrical list of what visitors can bring into the prison. This conceptual use of text and timing creates a story and a rhythm that draws you in and forces your engagement.¹

Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors

To our right, Smith's video, *Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors* (Image 4), is projected on a back wall of a small darkened room. The film begins with a man on a bus being screamed at by another man out of frame. The absence of the aggressor leaves us wondering who is behind the camera and why they focus on the victim. The artist is clearly interested in the psychological affect that this berating evokes. The video progresses onto flashes of questionable and undecipherable images. This random assortment of flash images resonates as a disarray of snippets of memories. Some of the explosion of images that we can make out are: the interior of

¹ Sampada Aranke, *Everyday Exposures in Sable Elyse Smith's Ordinary Voices* (West Allis, Wisconsin: The Fox Company, 2018)

an office, dirty plates, a frozen lake where men practice gun shooting, a black man riding in a car, a black man running up the Hollywood sign hill, a black man falling out of the sky with no sign of a parachute, a suburban neighborhood from a bird's eye view, a white family picnicking, images of police with batons. We finally end our voyage with an up-close image of the top half of the head of the artist's father as he shaves it with the ceiling in the background.² Is this the recollection of life? Are these found images, pieced together to tell a story? Is this the artist's life as she sees it and the ordinary violence that she experiences on a daily basis? Are these her memories and lived experiences or are they imagined experiences of others whose story she tells? For the majority of the film the sound is indecipherable, yet while the artist's father shaves his head you can hear Al Green's song *Love and Happiness* in the background. However, only the two lines of "Make you do right, love'll make you do wrong" repeat, asking us to question the song's significance in this context.

Landscape II

As we turn to exit from the projected film, we are drawn to the next room by the glow of a neon light. This light forms the underlined words "Planking or the Lying Down Game" on the gallery wall, reminiscent of a Joseph Kosuth piece (Image 5 & 6). The rigid font of the text in *Landscape II* calls up images depicted across social media of bodies lying stick straight, arms at side, in random places in the name of play. In contrast, black bodies on the news, lying on cement, in poses of submission or death come to mind next and pose a parallel that is hard to

² Sampada Aranke, *Everyday Exposures in Sable Elyse Smith's Ordinary Voices* (West Allis, Wisconsin: The Fox Company, 2018)

deny. The contrast of realities between those of Facebook fun and Black life is one worth pondering.³

Coloring Book series

In the same room, we are confronted with what appears to be four enlarged and framed coloring book pages. They look as though they would have been colored and scribbled on by a small child who either hasn't quite learned to stay in the lines, or who just isn't concerned with the idea of it yet. These are four images from the artist's *Coloring Book* (Image 7) series, made of screen printing ink and oil stick on paper. The images remind us of pages ripped from a coloring book. At the bottom of the page it tells a story of a bird named Pat who gets a tour of the courthouse by Judge Friendly. Here we are asked to imagine what a day at a courthouse would be like for a child and to then question the effects that an experience like this would have on them.

Untitled: Father Daughter Dance

Exiting the playful colors and subjects of this room, we enter the final room in this exhibition. In contrast, this room echoes the cold bareness of life behind prison walls. Here there are only two sculptural pieces, nothing on the walls, and no pedestals for presentation. Standing maybe ten feet tall in the center of the room is a large blue sculptural arch, resembling something out of a spaceship. In the right corner, sitting directly on the floor, is a small silver Magnavox box T.V. The T.V. loops a 10-minute video with no sound, titled *Untitled: Father Daughter Dance* (Image 8). In order to view the video, we are asked to stand facing the corner, looking down at the T.V. while the large overbearing blue arch looms behind us. Looped on the screen

³ Ibid.

are images of a person from the chest down, sitting in a waiting room from what appears to be footage from a surveillance camera. The images move to different angles around the waiting room and then to other rooms in what we can assume are also areas within the prison. We are then confronted with flashes of colors and distorted shapes followed by an image of a black man being pinned down on cement with his arms behind his back (image 9). We see more security footage of what we assume are the artist and her father visiting one another in prison, along with items that she has brought in to share, including photographs. Almost out of context, we see what looks like the artist cutting and snorting a line of coke on a cold metal table before going back to images of her in a what appears to be a different waiting room. Here there are words written in red on the wall behind her. We make out “Who comes to visit a murderer” among other fragmented sentences. The video ends with the woman assuming a variety of vulnerable positions, as though preparing for a security pat down (Image 10).

swear it closed, closes it

With images of security pat-downs in our minds, we are asked to turn around and address the “elephant” in the room that has been watching us from behind (Image 11). There is something overwhelming and intimidating about the giant blue arch, yet familiar. Upon a slow look, it becomes clear that what we are seeing are repurposed metal “lunch room” or “visiting room” tables and stools, which are standard in prisons and schools. The artist has welded together nine tables and bent them to create an overpowering structure, simulating a metal detector, that dwarfs you as you pass through it. This is the last piece of the exhibition and is also the only piece that asks you to directly engage with it. The arch “*swear it closed, closes it*”

provides one last experience that will leave you feeling stripped of your own power and presence, much like that of the black experience in America.⁴

Successes

Smith's work in this exhibition successfully delivers a heavy-handed message wrapped in the packaging of a new toy. I found it refreshing to be asked to investigate her messages through play and interaction. I questioned initially whether the average visitor would grasp the gravity of the message here, but found that Smith has delivered just the right amount of intrigue through vague clues that successfully draw the viewer in and ask for contemplation and interpretation.

Problems

If there is a problem with this exhibition, it lies in the museum's floor plan and layout. Upon entering the museum, deciphering which gallery space showcases which exhibit and then determining the entrance versus the exit of those exhibits, is not made abundantly clear. The easiest solution for the visitor is to stop and ask the gallery attendant for an explanation of the layout. In this particular layout, there are three gallery exhibitions on the main level. You are asked to move clockwise through them entering one from the other. You will find a half set of stairs leading down to the beginning of *Ordinary Violence* only after walking through the Nohls Foundation exhibition. These divided up gallery spaces would be better served with clear signage and text panels placed in a location that draws your attention and guides you through. The text panel for

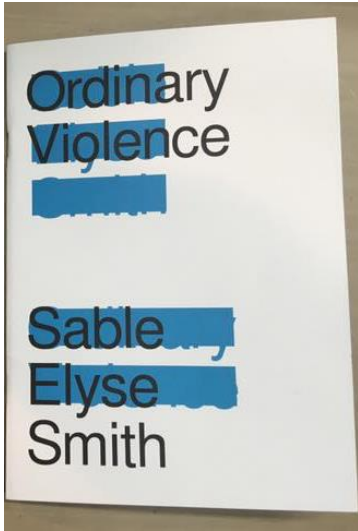
⁴ Sampada Aranke, *Everyday Exposures in Sable Elyse Smith's Ordinary Voices* (West Allis, Wisconsin: The Fox Company, 2018)

Ordinary Violence is on the left wall tucked opposite the side of the staircase leading down to it, creating an unnatural wrap-around to the beginning of the show.

New Museum Theory

We must, however, take under consideration the nature of this museum and its institutional goals. The Haggerty was built to assist in the Marquette University's goals of education under the paradigm of the Ignation Pedagogy. This is to say, they aim to see the world with a deeper understanding through experience, reflection and then action.⁵ Given these goals, this exhibition very much falls in line with their mission and I am interested to see what action may come of this and what ripple effects it may have on its students and outside community. Can one small exhibition which is squeezed between two others, in a museum that itself is tucked away on a wealthy Jesuit campus, make much of a difference inside this gentrified black community? Only time will tell.

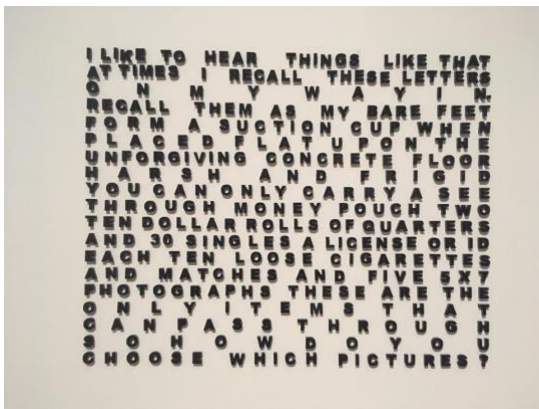
⁵ Lynne Shumow (Curator of Academic Engagement, Haggerty Museum of Art) in discussion with the author, September 2018.



(Image 1)



(Image 2)



(Image 3)



(Image 4)



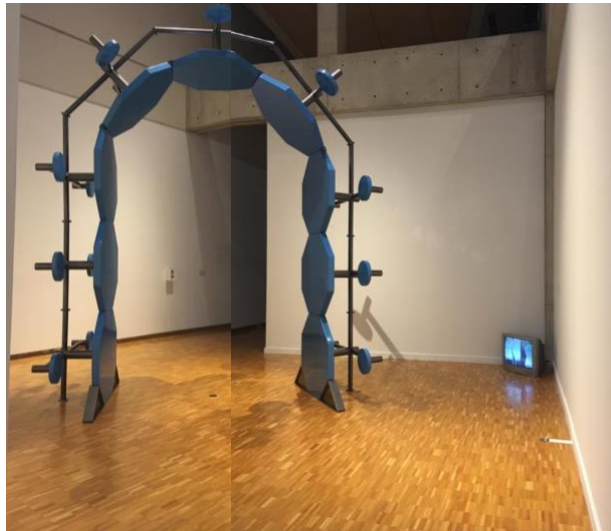
(Image 5)



(Image 6)



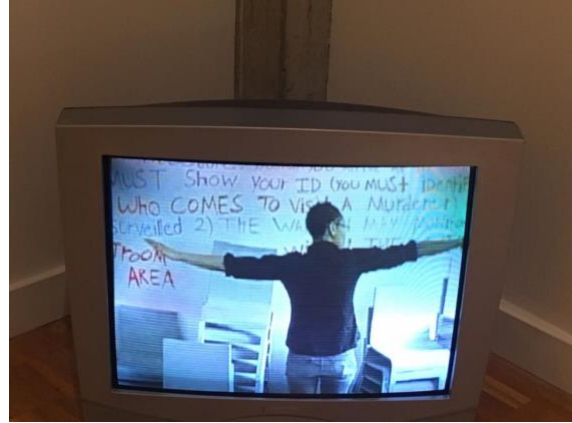
(Image 7)



(Image 8)



(Image 9)



(Image 10)



(Image 11)

Bibliography

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Allis, Wisconsin: The Fox Company, 2018

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