



Worth a Bundle

Artist Shinique Smith wraps memories of Baltimore, as well as her grandmother's sheets, into unique sculptures.

By Ericka Blount Danois

Sitting in Starbucks on Charles Street, Shinique Smith speculates that she may be the first artist to paint directly on the walls and ceilings of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.

"It felt historical," says Smith, 37, whose installation, *No Thief to Blame*, is part of the Portrait Gallery's exhibit, *Recognize! Hip-Hop and Contemporary Portraiture*, which is on view until the end of October.

Much like hip-hop, Smith's art is loud and irreverent, demanding to be seen and heard, as it samples material from different sources. Her sprawling installation includes fabric, cardboard, a picture of Tupac Shakur, an errant high-heeled shoe, and graffiti tags. It's also elegant, with Japanese calligraphy and abstract paintings crawling up the corner and onto the ceiling.

Gathering, recycling, and pulling together seemingly disparate items and images are part of Smith's artistic process. She often draws upon her memories of growing up in Baltimore and filters them through her unique artistic vision. Like the times when she was a precocious student at Park School who skipped a grade. Or when, as a little girl in Edmondson Village, she listened to jazz with her grandfather as he tended his garden in the backyard.

"My work becomes about popular culture, about my past, about personal things," says Smith. "I don't waste anything, I try to be concise."

Born and raised in Baltimore, Smith, who currently lives in Brooklyn, now circulates in the upper tiers of the art world. "Major curators are approaching the gallery all the time for access to Shinique's work," says Molly Klais, associate director for New York's Yvon Lambert Gallery, which represents Smith. "Her momentum is only just getting started."

"She participated in our opening exhibit," says Laura Hoptman, senior curator at the New Museum in New York. "About 40 artists were part of the exhibit. Shinique's works were very much front and center. They were among the most remarked-upon in the entire show. What makes her work stand out is that it has a narrative to it."

And much of that narrative is rooted in Baltimore.

WHILE GROWING UP, SMITH AND HER MOTHER, Vkara Phifer-Smith, moved around the

city—Mount Washington, then Eutaw Place—but Shinique calls Edmondson Village home. There, they shared a modest house with her grandparents on Mount Holly Street, and their influence is apparent in Smith's work. As an undergraduate at MICA, Smith even recorded a video of them, swinging on swings and talking about their lives together.

Her grandfather, a Bethlehem Steel employee, told her stories and played jazz recordings for her; her grandmother had a knack for interior design, using fabrics and patterns to brighten the house.

"I still use a lot of fabrics and things from my grandmother's house," says Smith. "She had really good taste in sheets. Sometimes it was like an eclectic mix of florals that really didn't make sense, but it made sense to me."

"I do remember her dressing up in my jewelry and gloves, like most children did, and then later she would ask me if she could use those same things in some of her art," says her "Grammy," Vernessia Smith. "And I often discover a sheet or towel, with some pattern or colors she has admired, curiously 'missing.'"

At the opening of Smith's show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, her grandmother exclaimed, "Those are my sheets!"

Smith's mother became seriously interested in fashion when Shinique was a youngster. She became the fashion editor of the now defunct *Baltimore Style* magazine, writing about luminaries like Yves St. Laurent and Gloria Vanderbilt and traveling with her daughter to New York. She had shops in Baltimore and Ellicott City where she sold clothes that she designed, like suits and evening gowns. She also studied at the Paris Fashion Institute and befriended Erté, the fashion designer known for his iconic work in *Harper's Bazaar*.

"I'm sure her work was influenced by Erté," says Phifer-Smith, who now works as an executive coach, traveling around the world helping corporate executives with career and life issues. "I saw early that she had an interest in art, so as much as I could I tried to get her into things that enhanced that."

When Shinique applied to the Baltimore School for the Arts, many of the drawings in her audition portfolio re-

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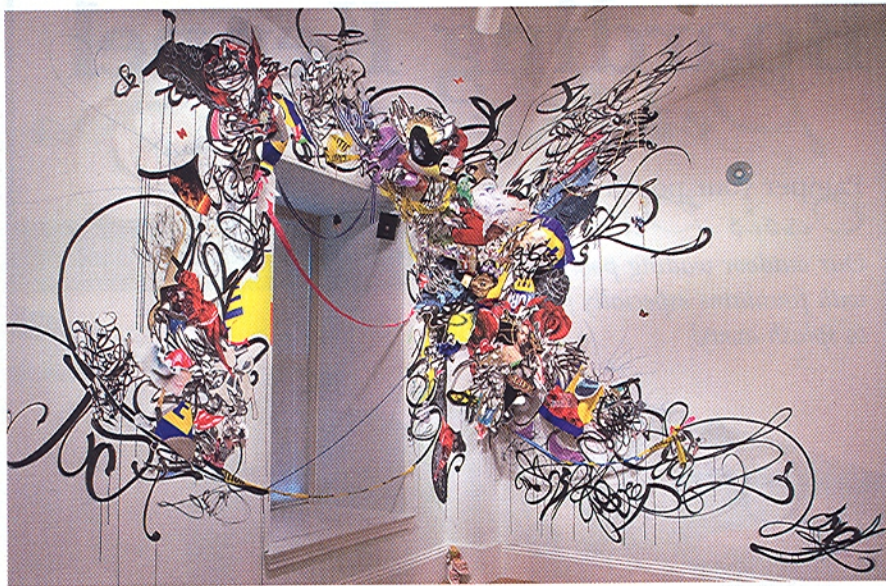
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Clockwise from left: *No Thief to Blame* installation, currently on view at the National Portrait Gallery; *No Thief to Blame* (detail); *Arcadian Cluster*, 2006; *Their First Bundle*, 2003.



flected Erté's influence. She attended School for the Arts during the heady 1980's, when hip-hop and punk rock were in their golden years, and the student body included Jada Pinkett Smith and Tupac Shakur. Smith joined a graffiti crew that tagged buses, street signs, and highway overpasses around the city and often traveled to New York, where she met artist Keith Haring.

She and her friends also hung out at the Inner Harbor, using the city as a backdrop for their adventures. "It was easier to be a grubby teenage kid hanging out in the streets than it would be today," says Smith. "The very next year people were getting shot over tennis shoes, and metal detectors started showing up in schools."

After two years, she was asked to leave School for the Arts. The reason? Failure to conform to standards. One of her teachers, Stephen Kent, now head of the visual arts department at the school, told her it was probably the best thing to happen to her, because it infused her art with a newfound freedom.

From there, Smith went to Southwestern High School and then finished at Douglass High. "At the time, it was really progressive," says Smith about Douglass. "I felt like they tried really hard, and I felt turned on, finally."

She graduated a year early, at 16, and won a scholarship to Maryland Institute College of Art, where she was a general fine arts major. "As an undergraduate, I explored," says Smith. "I tried on different forms and materials and began using fabrics, objects, and video."

After graduating from MICA, she wasn't sure that she wanted to pursue a career solely as a visual artist. She also felt a need to escape "Smalltimore." So she dabbled in film, working in various aspects of the industry in Los Angeles. She also taught art in public schools in Boston and worked at a media arts center in Seattle.

While living in Seattle, she had something of an epiphany, after an old couple that lived above the arts center died. She didn't know anything about them, but when there was an estate sale, she found out they were artists who had shown their work in

museums around the world. Still, every room of their apartment was filled with art that no one saw until they died.

That's when Smith made the decision that she didn't want to die surrounded by her work—she wanted to share it with the world. "I started doing as many shows as I could," she remembers.

SHE RETURNED TO BALTIMORE AND EARNED A graduate degree in fine arts at MICA. "I came back here because I wanted to make art," says Smith. "I think it was important for me being back here to trigger that nostalgia, that connection to that feeling as a teenager. It's about being connected to that time when you felt most invincible and free."

Her work, especially the sculptures and installations created from recycled materials and memories, evoke those feelings. She was inspired to create this type of art after reading an article in *The New York Times Magazine* titled, "How Susie Bayer's T-Shirt Ended Up on Yusuf Mama's Back." The article noted how Americans' discarded clothing, often donated at thrift stores,

ends up on the backs of people in poorer nations across the globe. Items deemed unfit for sale to Americans are baled together and shipped abroad. In the article, a worker spied a pink stain on a University of Pennsylvania T-shirt, and tossed the shirt aside, into a huge pile of clothes going to Africa.

"Everybody's history is chunked into this clean little cube, this nice little package," Smith says with equal resignation and curiosity.

At that point, she began reflecting on her own history and bundling it into the work. She'd already traded spray paint for Japanese calligraphy. "All of Shinique's work carries a certain memory and information in it," says Naomi Beckwith, assistant curator for The Studio Museum in Harlem. "Whether the artworks are made of old clothes, refuse from homes, even the text—whether legible or not—conveys some form of information. It is very meditative."

"When you look at her [artwork], it's clear that even if we get rid of something, nothing is truly discarded," says author

and culture writer Brian Keith Jackson. "It is indelible. It seeps into souls becoming memories that can trigger many emotions,

"When you look at her [artwork], it's clear that even if we get rid of something, nothing is truly discarded."

things that make up a life, if fully lived. That sort of work transcends age, gender, or race."

For the past three years, Smith has worked exclusively as an artist. She's exhibited at Chicago's Skestos Gabriele Gallery, Franklin Art Works in Minneapolis, and the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art; been featured in *The Washington Post*, *Art in America*, and *Art Forum*; and sold

pieces to several prestigious private and public collections.

Each time, pieces of Smith's past and, often, pieces of Baltimore, get shared with the world. "Shinique has such an imagination to see that these simple things could be made into art—something beautiful," says her grandmother. "It's just so fascinating the way she draws, and paints, and writes, and ties things up. It's amazing how she puts all of it together."

"I feel like I invoke this energy when I am working," says Smith. "Speaking things, writing things, creating things is a form of prayer. You're invoking something."

She turns to her laptop and finds some video footage. It's a video letter she once made for her teenage crush, Johnny Depp. In it, she gushes to Depp and shows him her artwork from Baltimore School for the Arts.

The video is now part of an exhibition at the Guggenheim in Berlin. **E**

ERICKA BLOUNT DANOIS is a frequent contributor to Baltimore.



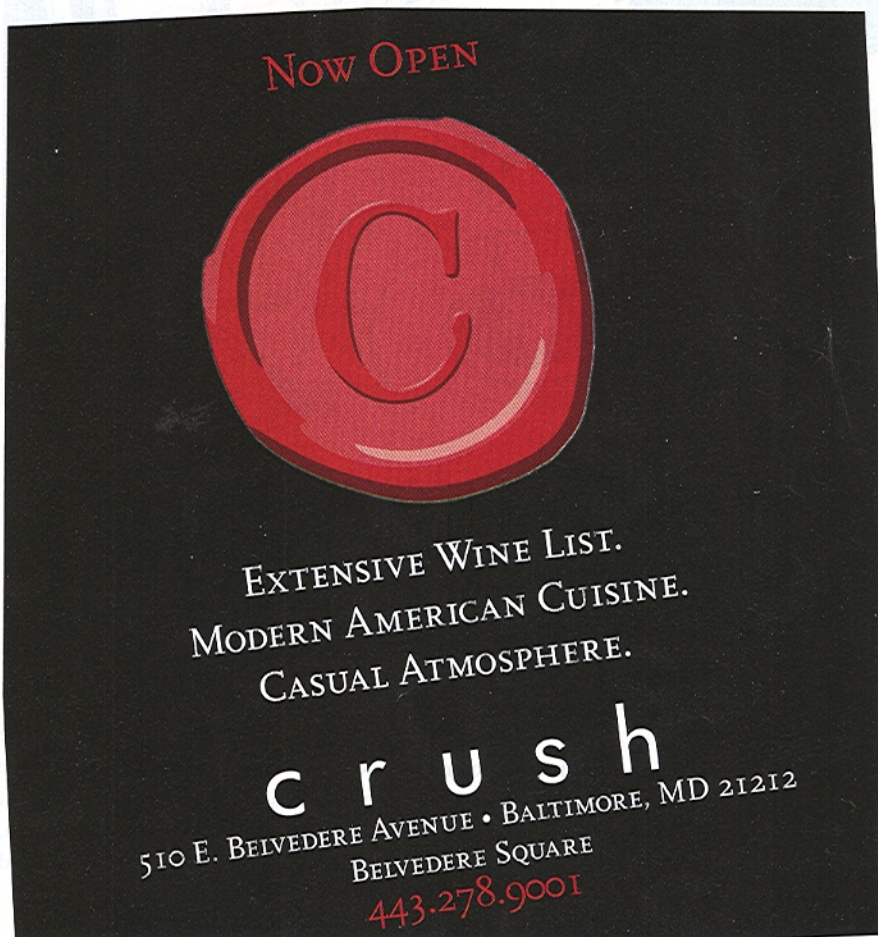
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