

Flash: Cauleen Smith

March 12–July 2, 2016



Crow Requiem, 2015 (detail, video still). Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.

Black people have a particularly intimate relationship with various forms of violent death. In the United States there is a historical continuum between the practices of lynching, rape, and police brutality. Sometimes it is relatively quick, and sometimes this death comes in slow motion—from chattel slavery and the grinding pain of generational poverty to modern high-tech incarceration. These forms of death leave spirits without remembrance, recognition, or respect, and with no means of repose.

The murder of crows flocking and flying throughout Cauleen Smith's video work *Crow Requiem* (2015) embody these spirits. Harbingers of death and mourning, the crows may also remind us of the experience of Jim Crow, the brutal form of de jure segregation at the turn of the 20th century in the Southern US and de facto versions in the North. But in Smith's work the crows' flight is never fully arrested. At about one minute into the film, our view is through the sights of a gun. Yet the crosshairs never quite sit on the bodies of the crows, and despite the birds' dive to earth, we are never quite sure of their death. Carrying history with them, the crows continue to fly, to alight and fly again, perhaps signaling a porousness between death and life, and the restless cycle of life that continues.

Smith's work is an elegiac embrace of movement as a trope in black culture. The crows' collective flight, dives, and dips evoke the condition of black fugitivity and creative mobility. The murder of crows may well represent the ancestors who escaped, dead or alive, from slave ships or across the Mason Dixon line. Flying to the sound of blues music, they signal the movement of free black people,

individual and en masse and most often by train, out of the South. Or they may embody alien beings that fell to earth; through the fog at the beginning of the film a fiery red ball zooms downward, then at the end of the film it appears again to ascend upward, home to the stars and into the future.

As much as in mobility, Smith's video is settled in geography. The artist drew initial inspiration from her location, as the film was made while she was in residence at Light Work in Syracuse, New York. Invited to make a film about the region, Smith found the nearby town of Auburn. The town is the site of the great Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman's house, and the region an important area for the escape of fugitive slaves to the North. Auburn is also the site of the first modern prison. Built on the site of an indigenous Onondaga village, this prison is where the first ever execution by electrocution took place in 1890.

In the midst of Smith's research, in August 2014 police officer Darren Wilson shot an unarmed young black man named Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in a continuation of this history of state violence. A wave of protest began sweeping across the US. "Hands up! Don't Shoot!" protesters shouted, and were met with a military grade police response of tanks and tear gas.¹ Smith took in the news from her residency in Auburn surrounded by the flocks of crows for which the area is known, and which are often shot and killed. The artist combined these elements into this powerful artwork about oppression, resistance, and resilience. In the video, a young woman named Jane Crow offers us a nest of bird's eggs, suggesting

the irrepressibility of birth and life in the face of death.² Alongside death, one could just as easily say black people have a particularly intimate relationship with love—bold love, self-love, collective forms of love that defiantly sustain.

Auburn was also the site of early cinematic and 3D optical technologies. Smith recognizes this history as she plays with early stereoscopic images of crows' nests found in the Onondaga Historical Association's collections. The still poses of Jane Crow bring to mind the style of early daguerreotypes, in which smile-less slaves sit with their charges, or the lynching photographs made into postcards between the 1890s and 1930s. But as Jane Crow gives a slight, subtle smile, the work also brings to mind the history of portrait photography popular in the 1920s among newly migrated black people to the Northern cities. Smith's film is not made in the sepia tones of early photography. Instead, her use of color reminds us of the contrasts between ugly events and gorgeous landscapes, of great beauty in the midst of horror. The grays of dusk and concrete and the stark white of snow contrast with saturated colors—sometimes cold and bright, sometimes warm and lush.

Crow Requiem is as much an aural work as a visual one. Like her color palette, Smith's use of sounds and music offers contrasts, juxtaposing the scratchy sounds of radio broadcasts, the epic reach of an orchestra, and the intimate closeness of blues. The video opens with *A German Requiem* (1865-68) by Johannes Brahms,

Notes

1. For an overview of the events related to the shooting of Michael Brown, see "Tracking the Events in the Wake of Michael Brown's Shooting," a journalistic timeline, *The New York Times*, last updated November 24, 2014 (http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/11/09/us/10ferguson-michael-brown-shooting-grand-jury-darren-wilson.html#time354_10512, accessed February 16, 2016).
2. "Jane Crow" is a term coined by civil rights lawyer, activist, and author Pauli Murray in the early 1940s to call attention to the experience of women under the system of Jim Crow.
3. For information on the influence of Lightnin' Hopkins and John Lee Hooker on rock music, see Wolfgang Saxon, "Sam (Lightnin') Hopkins, 69; Blues Singer and Guitarist," *The New York Times*, February 1, 1982 (<http://www.nytimes.com/1982/02/01/obituaries/sam-lightnin-hopkins-69-blues-singer-and-guitarist.html>, accessed February 16, 2016), and "John Lee Hooker: Biography," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, originally published in *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll*, Simon and Schuster, 2001 (<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/john-lee-hooker/biography>, accessed February 16, 2016).
4. Conversation with the author, December 20, 2015.

Cauleen Smith (born in 1967 in Riverside, CA) is an interdisciplinary artist whose work reflects on the everyday possibilities of the imagination. Operating in multiple materials and arenas, Smith roots her work firmly within the discourse of mid-20th century experimental film. Drawing on structuralism, third world cinema, and science fiction, she makes artworks that deploy the tactics of these disciplines while offering a phenomenological experience for spectators and participants. Her work has been featured in solo presentations at The Kitchen, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and Threewalls, Chicago. Her films, objects, and installations have also been featured in group exhibitions at the Studio Museum in Harlem; Contemporary Art

written in the first three years of the American Reconstruction Era following the Civil War. Throughout the course of the film, Smith brings together the requiem with the blues tunes "Heavy Snow" from the album *Lightnin' Strikes* (1962) by Lightnin' Hopkins, and "Rainy Day" from *Don't Look Back* (1997) by John Lee Hooker. All of these pieces can be considered in the timeline of modern music: Brahms's *Requiem* was the first non-Catholic requiem, and was intended for a broader audience. Blues marks the beginning of modern popular music in the US, and both Hooker and Hopkins were influential for white rock and folk musicians.³ The film is punctuated by close shots of home and car radios; the radio was a crucial medium through which black people kept community together through their restless and necessary migrations. The association with black movement, solidarity, and resilience remains. "The Lightnin' Hopkins song just says everything that those young men in Ferguson were saying by holding up their hands and marching into tear gas with laser sites aimed on their chests," says Smith. "'You can't hurt me no more.' Perfect."⁴

The film takes us through five vignettes, ending with Smith's signature call on the astral. The weather, so pertinent throughout the film, changes. The film's final vignette, "We Are the Makers of the Future," brings us into the cosmos, as the crows fly through the night sky.

—Jayna Brown

Museum Houston; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; New Museum, New York; D21 Leipzig; Decad, Berlin, and elsewhere. She is the recipient of several grants and awards, including the Rockefeller Media Arts Award, Creative Capital Film/Video, Chicago 3Arts Grant, Foundation for Contemporary Arts grant, Chicago Expo Artadia Award, and Rauschenberg Residency. Smith was born in Riverside, grew up in Sacramento, and is currently based in Chicago. She earned her BA in Creative Arts at San Francisco State University, and her MFA at UCLA's School of Theater, Film, and Television. She teaches in the Vermont College of Fine Arts low-residency MFA program. *FLASH: Cauleen Smith* is her first solo museum presentation in California.

Jayna Brown is Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies and English at UCR. Brown's research interests center on black performance and culture in the US and elsewhere, with current research examining pop and postpunk music as well as speculative fiction. She earned her PhD at Yale University within the African American Studies Department, and is the recipient of fellowships from the Ford Foundation for dissertation and postdoctoral work and a Rockefeller Award for the Study of Black Culture at Stanford Humanities Center. Her book *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Duke University Press, 2008) won the American Society for Theater Research's Errol Hill award as well as the Theater Library Association's George Freedley award. Brown's published texts appear in *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: Early Race Films and Filmmakers* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2001), and *Big Ears: Listening to Gender in Jazz Studies* (Duke University Press, 2008), among elsewhere.

FLASH! contemporary art series features single works made within the last year. The series is organized by Joanna Szupinska-Myers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions, at the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock. *FLASH: Cauleen Smith* is the twelfth exhibition in the series.