

Institute of  
Contemporary  
University Art  
of Pennsylvania

118 S. 36th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104  
(215) 898-7108, [icaphila.org](http://icaphila.org)

**Solo Exhibition of Filmmaker and Interdisciplinary Artist Cauleen Smith Opens  
Fall 2018 at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania**

Featuring new works, a site-specific light installation, and revised versions of two previous  
sculptural works

**Philadelphia, PA, May 24, 2018** – Opening on September 14, 2018, the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania (ICA) will present a solo exhibition of film, video, and sculpture by filmmaker and artist Cauleen Smith, before it begins traveling across the United States. *Give It or Leave It* navigates separate and unrelated universes into an emotional cosmos: Alice Coltrane (1937–2007) and her ashram; a 1966 photo shoot by Bill Ray at the Watts Towers; Noah Purifoy (1917–2004) and his desert assemblages; and black spiritualist Rebecca Cox Jackson (1795–1871). *Cauleen Smith: Give It or Leave It* is organized by Anthony Elms, Daniel and Brett Sundheim Chief Curator, and will be on view through December 23, 2018.

“Embracing black avant-garde experimental music, culturally hybrid forms of spirituality, film, as well as literature, Cauleen Smith’s work encourages us to reconsider histories of misogyny and white supremacy and demonstrates how creative responses to our past are necessary, transformative, and intergenerational,” said Amy Sadao, Director of ICA. “This exhibition is further significant for ICA as it is only the third solo exhibition by a black woman artist in our 56-year history. This is the reality of many institutions, not just ICA, and so we should address it head-on. We are honored to have the opportunity to present Smith’s work and to provide a critical platform for her experiments linking us with our past and serving as an instruction manual for the future.”

The exhibition title, *Give It or Leave It*, is a revision of the threat “take it or leave it.” The artist proposes a new rule for a better world: creating something, offering it, and gifting it—regardless if the gesture is accepted or rejected. “Give it or leave it” is a rule for the self, not an ultimatum for the other, born of this spirit of generosity, hospitality, and selflessness. Smith finds the roots of this spirit in Alice Coltrane, Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers, Noah Purifoy, and Rebecca Cox Jackson, and the fact they did not turn their backs on the here and now, nor on the cities around them. They each in their own way wanted prospective utopian gestures to be imbedded in current events and social communities. It is this energy that drives Smith’s work.

“Whether based in African American histories, neighborhoods and landscapes, improvised music, or speculative afrofutures, Cauleen’s films, videos, and artworks are a series of blossoming gestures that cultivate a shared space of humanity in the face of the dehumanizing forces of our everyday present” says curator Anthony Elms. “She engages because she knows that a better world is available once we strengthen our wills against the brutal behaviors thriving within social structures.”

Highlights of the exhibition include two new films, three new banners, a site-specific light installation, and revised versions of two previous sculptural works.

To date, much of the research conducted by Smith for her film projects is in progress and onsite in California, on location at Coltrane's ashram, The Vedantic Center, in Agoura, and in history through a restaging at Noah Purifoy's desert museum of a photograph of nine dapper black men taken in 1966 at the Watts Towers by Bill Ray. Additional research centers on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century black spiritualist Rebecca Cox Jackson (1795–1871). Jackson is known for having been the Eldress of one of the few urban Shaker communities, which was also the first black Shaker community in Philadelphia. This community was known for its hospitality and fervent spiritual practice. An autobiography written by Jackson between 1830–64 provides inspiration for Smith in her current research and filming. *Give It or Leave It* builds on *The Warplands*, a 2017 exhibition of Smith's at the University Art Gallery (UAG) in UC Irvine's Claire Trevor School of the Arts, organized by Rhea Anastas.

Following its premiere at ICA in Philadelphia, the exhibition will travel across the United States and will next be on view at the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU from February 13, 2019 through May 5, 2019. It will next open at the Frye Museum of Art and run from June 1, 2019 through September 1, 2019.

#### **EXHIBITION CATALOGUE, CREDITS, AND SUPPORT**

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue designed by Los Angeles-based designer Kimberly Varella of Content Object, featuring essays by the curator; Rhea Anastas, Associate Professor of Art, Claire Trevor School of the Arts, University of California, Irvine; and an interview between the Smith and artist Rodney McMillian.

The exhibition is curated at the ICA by Anthony Elms, Daniel and Brett Sundheim Chief Curator.

Support for *Cauleen Smith: Give It or Leave It* has been provided by The Ellsworth Kelly Award.

#### **ABOUT CAULEEN SMITH**

Cauleen Smith (born Riverside, California, 1967) is an interdisciplinary artist whose work reflects upon the everyday possibilities of the imagination. Smith roots her work firmly within the discourse of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century experimental film. Drawing from structuralism, third-world cinema, and science fiction, she makes things that deploy the tactics of these disciplines while offering a phenomenological experience for spectators and participants. Her films, objects, and installations have been featured in numerous group exhibitions at the Studio Museum of Harlem; Houston Contemporary Arts Museum; Yerba Buena Center for Art, San Francisco; the Whitney Biennial 2017; Prospect.4, New Orleans; the New Museum; D21, Leipzig; and Decad, Berlin. She has had solo shows of films and installations at The Kitchen, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; The Art Institute of Chicago; and Threewalls, Chicago. Smith is the recipient of several grants and awards including the Rockefeller Media Arts Award, Creative Capital Film/Video, Chicago 3Arts Grant, and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, Chicago Expo Artadia Award, and Rauschenberg Residency. Smith was born in Riverside, California and grew up in Sacramento. She earned a BA in Creative Arts from San Francisco State University and an MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles School of Theater Film and Television. She teaches in the School of Art at CalArts.

#### **ABOUT ANTHONY ELMS**

Elms joined ICA in 2011. He has organized the exhibitions *Endless Shout* (2016–17), *Rodney McMillian: The Black Show* (2016), *Christopher Knowles: In a Word* with writer Hilton Als (2015), *White Petals Surround*

*Your Yellow Heart* (2013), and coordinated several other exhibitions and projects. He has written essays for catalogues and edited collections such as *Cosey Complex* (Koenig Books), *Geof Oppenheimer: Big Boss and the Ecstasy of Pleasures* (Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art), and *Terry Adkins: Recital* (Prestel). He has independently curated many exhibitions, including: *Interstellar Low Ways* (with Huey Copeland); *A Unicorn Basking in the Light of Three Glowing Suns* (with Philip von Zweck); and *Sun Ra, El Saturn & Chicago's Afro-Futurist Underground, 1954–68* (with John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis). He was one of three curators of the 2014 Whitney Biennial.

#### **ABOUT THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA**

The Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania is a non-collecting institution presenting exhibitions at the forefront of contemporary practice and culture that challenge audiences to think in new ways. The ICA is free for all to engage and connect with the art of our time. Since its founding in 1963, ICA has served as a laboratory for the new, introducing and supporting the production of urgent and important contemporary art, beginning with ICA's inaugural show of paintings by Abstract Expressionist Clyfford Still, followed by the first museum show of works by Andy Warhol in 1965. Throughout its history, ICA has been instrumental in identifying and developing many promising artists before they attained prominence within the international art world, some of whom include—in addition to Warhol—Laurie Anderson, Richard Artschwager, Vija Celmins, Karen Kilimnik, Barry Le Va, Glenn Ligon, Robert Mapplethorpe, Agnes Martin, Pepón Osorio, Tavares Strachan, and Paul Thek.

#### **MEDIA CONTACTS**

Adriana Elgarresta, Resnicow and Associates, 212-671-5155, [aelgarresta@resnicow.com](mailto:aelgarresta@resnicow.com)

Racheal Campbell, Resnicow and Associates, 212-671-5157, [rcampbell@resnicow.com](mailto:rcampbell@resnicow.com)

Jill Katz, Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia, 215-573-9975, [katzj@ica.upenn.edu](mailto:katzj@ica.upenn.edu)