

Shinique Smith: Bound Together



SHINIQUE SMITH, based in Brooklyn, New York, is a practicing artist best known for her paintings that incorporate elements of graffiti and collage. Her recent body of work also includes large sculptural “bales” made from repurposed clothing. Combining her training in painting and Japanese calligraphy from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), Baltimore, with her teenage exploits in graffiti art, Smith now translates her skills with color and line in two-dimensional art to the three-dimensional realm.

While living in Baltimore, Smith’s mother—once a fashion designer who trained in New York and Paris—instilled in her daughter at a young age a love of fabric, design, and culture by exposing her to new people and places, fabric stores, trade shows, and catwalk presentations. Smith’s love of fashion continues to play a large role in her work. She is “always looking and being inspired” by designers such as Rei Kawakubo (founder of Commes des Garçons), Alexander McQueen, and Peter Som. Currently she

is interested in the sketches of Christian Lacroix, who—like Smith—combines dynamic line work with collaged pattern, texture, and color. Period costume is also an influence, a result of Smith’s time as a costume designer for film and theater.

Once she began living in New York City, Smith was overwhelmed with the volume of recycling and frequently observed the New York custom of leaving piles of “trash” (gently used pieces of clothing or furniture) on the curb for people to take. After reading an article in *The New Yorker* magazine about a donated T-shirt from New York that ended up in Africa, Smith became intrigued by the business that sells unsold or donated clothing to developing countries in extremely compact half-ton bales. She felt that the clothing created physical connections between strangers. Combining this idea with the ability of the bales to “represent different ideas at once” and her fondness for the cube’s relationship to minimalism, Smith began constructing her own “bales.”

Her first experiments left Smith with irregularly shaped bales of clothes tied together with black-and-white striped ribbon. They were also extremely heavy! Working by herself in her studio requires that Smith be able to move her work easily, so she began creating a wooden-framed infrastructure for each sculpture. She then conceals the frame with layers of clothing tied to each other and then bound with industrial twine. For larger pieces, Smith divides the work into smaller structures allowing for quick disassembly and reassembly. *Bale Variant No. 0017* (2009) is actually four small sculptures, one for each shade of indigo.

The clothing used in the sculptures is a combination of her own, donations from friends, and thrift-store finds—giving her work a hybridized history. Regularly buying garments and fabric that catch her eye, Smith looks for unique colors, patterns, and personalization. Taking away the clothing’s purpose but keeping its identity allows her to approach her sculptures like her paintings. She carefully positions and ties down each piece, looking to create microcosms of color, pattern, texture, and line within the overall design of her bales.

When asked if she plans to continue making many bales in the future, Smith says she wants “to keep things fresh.” “There’s so much relationship to the body within my work that it’d be great to see it walking around on people,” she says, whether as a print or actual clothing. Regardless of what Smith does in the future, she’s set on always engaging her passion for art and her passion for textiles. 🌱

Smith’s work is included in Next Wave Art at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, through December 20, 2009, www.bam.org; and Embrace! at the Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado, through April 4, www.denverartmuseum.org. Smith’s work will also be on display in the Yvon Lambert, New York, booth at Art Basel Miami Beach December 3–6, 2009, www.yvon-lambert.com; www.artbaselmiamibeach.com.

Bale Variant No. 0017, 2009; clothing, fabric, ink, twine, ribbon, wood; 72" x 52" x 52". © Shinique Smith, courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert, Paris, New York. Photo: Mark Woods.