

December 15, 2023–April 7, 2024

Cauleen Smith: Mines to Caves

Aspen Art Museum

Cauleen Smith (b. 1967) is a multidisciplinary artist and filmmaker whose work engages cinematic landscape, science fiction, and mythology in the Black diaspora. Her immersive installation *Mines to Caves* evolves out of the artist's film program *GIMME SHELTER CINEGLYPHS* that premiered in September 2022 inside Aspen's Smuggler Mine, the oldest operating silver mine in the region. Smith presents a reimagined edit of her animated cinematic hieroglyphs first projected on the mine walls. Here, the Museum gallery points towards Smuggler Mine's darkened, cave-like interior. These moving images of animals and topographies reference cave paintings, the earliest known art. The experimental film reflects on Smith's desire to return the mine to the mountain and to reorient towards an alternative relationship with the planet.

In *Mines to Caves*, Smith foregrounds how traditional capitalist structures like overconsumption and land development affect our relationships to each other and the environment, and draws from work Smith developed during her residency with the Aspen Art Museum and Anderson Ranch in Spring 2022. The film, shot partially on location inside the mine, puts forth the artist's research around geologic extraction in the United States. *Mines to Caves* incorporates a candle sculpture composed of different colored wax layers with wicks that will be lit at set times, activating and destroying the work in one turn. Smith's striated waxworks trace an abstract topography of the earth, emphasizing the politics of creating art that will, like humans, disappear over time.

Humanity's ephemeral presence on earth and our imaginings of a better present and future are central themes in Smith's practice. A handsewn textile proclaiming "Mines" hangs in the center of the gallery, at once a flag, a mantra, a heraldic tradition, and a poetic protest. Smith sees mines as a colloquial expression of romantic possession. The artist's banner draws on the long history of banners raised for celebration as well as social and political change, from those erected by labor unions, carried by community organizers and activists, or flown by marching bands or churches.

The gallery's colorful wallpaper incorporates images of the *Pandanus candelabrum* plant, a palm tree that grows in soil above diamond bearing kimberlite rock in Liberia and other tropical sites in Africa. The plant marks sites for potential extraction, like an x on nature's own treasure map. Since humans pillage the land that produces this shrub, the tree is now endangered. In the gallery, Smith envisions a world where this plant grows wild and undisturbed.

Cauleen Smith (b. Riverside, California, 1967) lives and works in Los Angeles, CA. She received her BFA from San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, and her MFA from University of California, Los Angeles, CA. Smith is the recipient of several grants and awards, including the 2022 Heinz Award; Guggenheim Fellowship; Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize; Ellsworth Kelly Award; The Herb Alpert Award in the Arts; and a Rauschenberg Residency. Smith's works

have been featured in solo exhibitions at institutions such as Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago, IL; Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL; Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, MA; Contemporary Arts Museum Houston,

Houston, TX; and Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA, among others. Her work is included in numerous public collections, such as the Art Institute of Chicago; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Studio Museum Harlem; Smithsonian Museum of American Art; and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

List of works

Pyroclastic Unconformity (mauve club), 2023

Coconut/soy wax, paraffin, gel wax, stearic acid,
microcrystalline wax, pigment, UV inhibitor, cotton
wick, aluminum wick tab, 3/4 in plywood board,
acrylic lacquer
48 × 24 × 9 in

Noted for Echoes, 2023

Photo prints on cotton rag with pigments from ground
gemstones and synthetic dyes
40 × 30 3/4 in

Mines To Caves, 2023

Single channel video
Loop length 9:47 min

*Panadus Candelabrum hearts Kimberlite
(taupe color way), 2023/24*

Wallpaper, dimensions variable

Mines, 2022

Cloth, acrylic, satin, paper, sequins, velvet, velour,
synthetic suede, fringe, and gold anodized aluminum rod
60 1/2 × 54 in

Courtesy Sasha and Edward P. Bass

Unless otherwise noted, all works courtesy the artist, Morán Morán, Los Angeles,
and Corbett vs Dempsey, Chicago

Cauleen Smith: Mines to Caves
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*To See the Earth Before The End of
the World*

being property once myself
i have a feeling for it,
that's why i can talk
about environment.
what wants to be a tree,
ought to be he can be it.
same thing for other things.
same thing for men.

Lucille Clifton

While Anthropocene literature is often concerned with identifying a specific moment in which humans crossed a critical threshold in their relationship to the planet, an alternative perspective emerges from Clifton's revolutionary poem. The origins of the Anthropocene are entangled with histories of empire and modernity. Clifton underscores how the vulnerability of Black existence is intricately entangled and inseparable from nature. Slavery and colonialism ruptured and continue to rupture ongoing human relationships to place and our environments. This crisis in our connection to the earth, which in the words of Jamaican novelist, dramatist, and philosopher Sylvia Wynter reduced "Man to Labour" and "Nature to Land," and prioritized the logic of empire and external markets over planetary survival. Given the intertwined vulnerabilities of Blackness and the environment, how might we use Black studies to interpret the Anthropocene and search for alternative forms of relating to the earth, to (in the words of poet Ed Roberson), *see the earth before the end of the world?*

In *Mines to Caves*, artist Cauleen Smith delves into the artistic imagination and ethical concerns of this entanglement amidst the intertwining apocalypses of slavery, colonialism, and environmental catastrophe. Despite enduring unimaginable violence and loss, Indigenous and Black peoples have continually constructed and reconstructed worlds amidst the world-ending processes of imperialism, slavery, and ongoing colonialism. Resistance to the dehumanization of Man and Nature may be found in practices that

make the earth habitable once more, practices that concern sustenance over profit. Smith pushes us to reinterpret the Mine as a Cave, once a shelter to humans and nonhumans alike, with an emphasis on spatial practices concerned with the collective survival. Through cultural resistance against the market economy, we might rehumanize nature, and at the same time, save our own humanity.

Smith entangles the geologic, geographic, and botanical with Black thought to search for a reorientation to the planet. In her essay *Volcano Manifesto* (2022) she meditates on a discussion between Fred Moten, Robin D.G. Kelly, and Rinaldo Walcott where Moten provokes us to consider *Black studies as earth studies*.

Insofar as Black studies has earned the right to look out for itself, what that really means is that Black studies has earned the right to try again to take its fundamental responsibility, which is to be a place where we can look out for the Earth. I think that Black studies has on a fundamental level a specific, though not necessarily exclusive, mission to try to save the Earth, and on a secondary level, to try to save the possibility of human existence on Earth.

(Moten)

Black people have a particular relationship to land and property, being property once ourselves. Smith and Moten's instructive *Black studies as earth studies* is revealing in the search of guidance for alternative means of interplanetary solidarity and survival:

Black/earth studies to understand struggles of ongoing settler colonialism globally

Black/earth studies to understand the conditions in which abolition and resistance are envisioned

Black/earth studies to rehumanize Man and Nature

Black/earth studies to save the possibility of human existence on earth.

—Anisa Jackson

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ABOUT THE ASPEN ART MUSEUM

Accredited by the American Alliance of Museums in 1979, the Aspen Art Museum is a thriving and globally engaged non-collecting contemporary art museum. Following the 2014 opening of the museum's facility designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Shigeru Ban, the AAM enjoys increased attendance, renewed civic interaction, and international media attention. In July 2017, the AAM was one of ten institutions to receive the United States' National Medal for Museum and Library Services for its educational outreach to rural communities in Colorado's Roaring Fork Valley and its fostering of learning partnerships with civic and cultural partners within a 100-mile radius of the museum's Aspen location.

Aspen Art Museum
637 East Hyman Avenue
Aspen, Colorado 81611

aspenartmuseum.org
(970) 925-8050

Hours
Tuesday–Sunday, 10 AM–6 PM
Closed Mondays

Admission to the AAM is free courtesy of Amy and John Phelan.

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Cauleen Smith: *Mines to Caves* is curated by Anisa Jackson, Curator at Large, and Simone Krug, Curator.

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