

STEVEN
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ARTFORUM

Ming Smith

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A black photographer who began her career in the 1970s, Ming Smith was always driven by strong social commitments. And as the titles in her present retrospective suggest—Rememberin’ Billie (for Billie Holiday), New York, NY, ca. 1977, and Farewell to Alvin Ailey, New York, NY, ca. 1989—she was an elegist, commemorating a community whose existence this country tries to deny. Indeed, her sense of social erasure is so strong that it accrues a metaphysical significance. Carefully blurred, often foggy or dim, sometimes so overexposed they resemble Rorschach blots, Smith’s black-and-white prints embody a deep awareness of transience, of mortality.

In Sun Ra Space II, New York City, New York, 1978, the jazz legend is shown in a swirl of motion, almost rushing past us, as if to suggest how quickly his song will end. Smith also freezes a timeless aspect of the present, the essence of music being made. She knows the performance will end, as well as what might remain once it has. She makes visible the “ghosts”—as photographer and activist Gordon Parks once put it—that transcend time.

Like her fellow Kamoinge members—she was the only female in Harlem’s legendary black photo collective—Smith set out to develop a novel visual idiom to document what Aimé Césaire would have called her “unique people.” This exhibition shows her experimenting with a variety of techniques, including surrealist montage, atmospheric blurring, and paint-based manipulation. The results are often an elegant convergence of form and content. No Money (from the Invisible Man Series), Harlem, NY, ca. 1991, for example, is an overexposed photograph of a young boy standing before the facades of closed shops. Light from the left of the frame threatens to erase our protagonist. But his defiant pose, almost a silhouette now, asserts that he isn’t going anywhere.