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## Photographer Ming Smith Shows Just How Much Black Life Matters

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The photographer Ming Smith, whose body of work since the early 1970s touches on Black music and bohemia, urban life, and a more mystical, oneiric realm that's harder to specify, tells a story from her Midwestern childhood, when a pair of songs played on the car radio and her aunt, who was driving, asked her which one she preferred.

One was a jazz tune, the other blues. "I said, 'The blues!' and she just laughed!" Smith says, lengthening the last word as far as it will stretch. It's an important memory. Her aunt was one of several women in Smith's family, in late Jim Crow-era Columbus, Ohio, who broke the bounds of conventional, churchgoing Black society to enjoy "fast" living and music, and paid the price in stress and disapproval. The blues, however, stuck with Smith, who made her own more successful escape, first to Howard University in the late 1960s, and then to New York City. There, she became a quiet, observing presence in the midst of the downtown scene, channeling into photography the spirit of her idol, Billie Holiday.

Though she supported herself at first by modeling, Smith soon became, in 1972, the first woman admitted to the collective Kamoinge, which had been founded in 1963 in response to the dearth of outlets for Black photographers, and which remains active today. On a whim, she submitted work to an open portfolio call at MoMA, which resulted in an early acquisition. Her work, all black-and-white, technically inventive, and aesthetically poised between documentation and dream — often playing with blur, double exposure, low light — earned acclaim from photography scholars and no less than Gordon Parks, who wrote, in the introduction to a 1990 book of her photos: "Wondrous imagery keeps cropping up, stuffing themselves into her sight. She grasps them and gives eternal life to things that might well have been forgotten."

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And yet Smith has remained largely in the shadows, as if a character in one of her many nocturnal studies of darkened rooms and streetscapes, a practice inspired by one of her photography heroes, Brassai. Though she has had occasional solo shows, and her name appears in histories of African-American photography, her new exhibition at Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea, with more than 75 works from the span of her career, including some never-shown early pieces, is the first large-scale retrospective she has enjoyed. Asked if it's been a long time coming, Smith says plainly: "Yes, of course."

The show is necessarily a condensed and directed introduction to a prolific, nearly five-decade career. One long-running body of work, in which Smith augments her prints with touches of paint, appears only once, in a glamorous early self-portrait set apart from the rest of the show. Other series are well-represented, particularly one Smith made in the early 1990s in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, when she retraced the steps of playwright August Wilson, photographing people and places that could have featured in his plays and that ennobled ordinary Black life. We see portraits — a man playing pool, a woman named Auntie Esther, a woman in a leopard-print hat in a cafeteria. Two dapper gentlemen in hats eat lunch at a senior center; the focus is slightly off, and the light lands on the side of one man's face, on the other's plastic fork as he tucks into his meal, on the rim of their cans of beer; other diners in the background are a blurry murmur. "Wilson made marginal people monumental," Smith says. "Just from going to his plays, I felt so strongly about those characters. When I grew up in Ohio, these were characters I knew."

Another image, Pittsburgh Was My Finest Dream, consists of a view, partly obscured by branches, from a hilltop out across the Monongahela River, under heavy skies. Smith had asked Wilson's sister what location marked the playwright as a child. "It was up on the mountain. You could see the river and the bridge; he used to sit there and daydream," Smith says. The picture echoes another, from 1979 — not shown in the current exhibit — in which the view from a window and the thin drapes wafting across it, all reflected in a wall mirror in a rough wood frame, identify her own childhood "dreaming place," in her Columbus family home.

Several images in the show come from an ongoing series called "Transcendence"; these ones were taken at the Ohio State Fair in 1992, Smith revisiting a place where she worked summer jobs as a teenager, and have the melancholy carnival feel that recalls another favorite, Fellini. Leaving Ohio meant transcending the rigidity and racism of her upbringing, Smith says. For instance, the high school counselor who told her college would be unnecessary given her likely future work as a domestic. "It's to forget all that, forgive and forget," she says.

"Transcendence" is also an Alice Coltrane song. Smith's blues love notwithstanding, jazz has been a steady presence in her life, and her work is replete with portraits of musicians — though this is evidenced by only a few items here, like a regal Sun Ra, his glittery cape in motion like a constellation. Smith was married for a number of years to saxophonist David Murray and, with him, frequented the loft scene of the late 1970s and 1980s, which included key figures like Butch Morris, Henry Threadgill, and Billy Bang. Images shot abroad, for instance in France, attest to the tour schedule of that time. Two images made in Senegal in 1972, meanwhile, were done while Smith was traveling there as a fashion model.

In a few pieces Smith goes surreal, for instance layering images of James Baldwin or the Harlem Renaissance photographer James Van Der Zee into the clouds above a Harlem sky. Elsewhere, she shoots street scenes, some recognizably in New York and others harder to place, rich with eerie lighting and kinetic energy. The gallery's careful curation offers just a peek into her archive — which she is currently working to organize and put in conversation-style collaborations with artists in other media — but still affirms her visual signature. "In the art of photography, I'm dealing with light, I'm dealing with all these elements, getting that precise moment," Smith says. "Getting the feeling, getting the way the light hits the person — to put it simply, these pieces are like the blues."