

MING SMITH

FROM THE BLACK PHOTOGRAPHER'S ANNUAL TO AUGUST WILSON



Lady and Child (from the *August Wilson* series), Pittsburgh, PA, ca. 1993

There is a great need to correct deeply entrenched racial and gender imbalances within the photographic canon. Ming Smith is key among the photographers who are due belated recognition.

From early interiors and streetscapes of the 1970s in Harlem to images from Europe and Africa dating from the 1980's to the August Wilson series shot in Pittsburgh in the early 1990s and the ongoing large-scale *Transcendence* series of a carnival in Columbus, Ohio, her hometown, Ming Smith's unique vision and surreal touch push back against reductive expectations of "black photography."

As Holland Cotter wrote in 2010, "It's hard to think of another photographer who could set a misty head shot of the writer James Baldwin in a bank of dark clouds over the Harlem skyline and get away with it, but she [Ming Smith] does, and more than that she creates something heartfelt and gorgeous in its deep feeling and high sophistication."

Smith's work is less focused on documenting black life than creating a personal response to that life. Her shooting style often results in out-of-focus images in which the finer details of figure and background are obscured. This deliberate blurriness creates a half-abstract effect, which lends her work an instantly recognizable and utterly unique dream-like feeling. This magical quality is amplified in some cases by Smith's experimental post-production techniques including double exposed prints, collage, and painting on prints.

Ming Smith was the only original female member of the renowned African-American photography collective Kamoinge which was committed to challenging negative representations of African-Americans in photography. Smith's work was first published in the Black Photographer's Annual in 1973. After submitting her work to an open call for portfolios in 1975, Smith became the first African-American female photographer to be acquired by the Museum of Modern Art.