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# DAZED

## MEETING THE FIRST BLACK WOMAN TO HAVE WORK IN MoMA's PERMANENT COLLECTION

By Miss Rosen, March 6, 2018



Pioneers are often so far ahead of the curve that few know who they are and what they accomplished though we may all benefit from their work. Many simply live their destiny, leading quiet, humble lives, bearing the stripes and scars of the struggle while their legacy allows generations to succeed because they refused to fail.

In 1973, Ming Smith moved to New York. A recent graduate of Howard University, Smith took up modelling to support herself, working alongside Grace Jones, Bethann Hardison, Toukie Smith, Sherry Bronfman, and Barbara Smith – the first

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generation of African-American women to break through the colour barrier which had kept them out of the fashion and beauty industries.

Living in a studio apartment on Carmine Street in the West Village long before gentrification had set in, Smith invested all of her earnings into her true passion: photography. She carried her camera wherever she went, taking photographs while working in Paris and on assignment in Africa. Photography was a means to survive the challenges of daily life, providing a space where she could integrate with her authentic self, combining the profound power of the black experience with the universal beauty of humanity.

A woman of principle, poetry, and poise, Smith is a true pioneer in every sense of the word. The first woman member of Kamoinge, the African-American photography collective established in 1963, Smith is the first black woman to have work included in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art – the very establishment that championed the transformation of photography from a vernacular activity into a fine art.

Despite her historic achievements, Smith never pushed herself into the public eye. It is only in 2017 that the world is catching up with her. Smith kicked things off with a solo exhibition at Steven Kasher Gallery, New York; is featured in the landmark exhibitions *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85*; *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*; and Arthur Jafa's recent show at Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London; and is wrapping things up with a big bow, as Karl Lagerfeld personally selected her photograph of Sun Ra for Paris Photo (Steidl).

Below, Smith shares her journey as an artist and model, reflecting on the challenges of breaking boundaries in fashion and art, and the importance of staying true to yourself while navigating this thing called life.

“Certain people treated me like a second-class citizen. Other people didn't look at my work. Instead, they said, ‘You should be an actress – or a model!’ Just like that. But I knew I had a great portfolio” – Ming Smith

## THE SOUL OF AN ARTIST

Growing up in Columbus, Ohio, Smith was the quintessential American girl: beautiful, smart, and modest – with a desire to discover her calling and see the world. “My father always used to say, ‘To thine own self, be true,’” she remembers. These words became the principle by which she lived, as she set out to chart a course that had never been travelled before, guided by a fundamental desire to create art.

“I knew I had a gift for photography from the beginning,” she reveals. “I studied a lot of other photographers, but I realised that is a big mistake to try to look like other artists. It's good to know and be inspired. It's okay to imitate to a certain degree but you eventually have to come into your own. You are an original and you have to follow your own sensibility, instincts, and your soul. You have to do the work and keep to your own truth.”

## THE POWER OF SELF-DETERMINATION

Smith was raised in an old-fashioned home and wasn't allowed to date. But she had a passion for learning that shaped her fate. “I was real skinny and into sports. At a young age, I thought, ‘Well since I'm not pretty, I'll work on my mind,’” she recalls.

After graduating from Howard in 1973, Smith decided to move to New York, working as a model in order to support herself. She decided to not to tell her family at the time, explaining, “There was a lot of stigma attached to being a model and show business. All the (sexual assault and harassment) stuff that's going on now, people knew about it then but it was

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considered part of the territory. My mother would say, 'Girls don't become models, they become prostitutes.' It was really negative but I wanted to move forward in my life. I wanted to be someone because I read books about people who had achieved against the odds like Jackie Robinson and Phyllis Wheatley."

## THE HUNGRY YEARS

Smith chose to model because it allowed her to support herself. It wasn't a dream career so much as a practical solution that gave her the freedom and flexibility to be an artist. "Back then, I could make \$100 an hour modelling – my father was making maybe \$100 a week as a college-graduate pharmacist working a full-time job," Smith says.

Smith hit the ground running and never looked back. She remembers, "I was desperate so I went to the different agencies. Now I realise I was hungry. I went to Wilhelmina and they said, 'Go get pictures and come back.' So I went to Black Beauty. The owner, Betty Foray, came out. Someone said, 'She's kind of short, isn't she?' and Betty said, 'Yes, but look at her face.' I wasn't egotistical as far as any of that because I grew up in a family of beautiful women and had kind of given up on myself."

Yet her feelings about her appearance never held her back. "I joined Black Beauty and as soon as I had a full portfolio of tearsheets, I went back to Wilhelmina," Smith recalls. "She liked me and told me, 'Don't be like Naomi Sims.' Naomi was the first black model on the cover of LIFE magazine. At the height of her career, she made \$18,000 – which is nothing. She was a superstar but the average white girl made maybe \$100,000. They were nobodies but they could do catalogue and were always working."

## THE NECESSITY OF BOUNDARIES

New York City in the 1970s was a radical era on many fronts – including the fashion world where black models were transforming the industry for a new generation of women.

"In that period, there was Grace Jones, Tookie Smith, Barbara Smith, Sherry Bronfman, and Bethann Hardison," Smith remembers. "We were real pioneers. We reinvented ourselves. We were struggling. As a model, we didn't get a lot of go-sees. It's not like it is now – there are so many more ads. When I first started working, I was either too light or too dark but today they have people with vitiligo and trans models – there was nothing close to that then."

For years, Smith's face could be seen everywhere. "I did almost every cosmetic company that existed, black or white. With me, they said I looked 'exotic.' That's what they called women of colour at the time."

Heeding the warnings that had been drilled into her head, Smith refused to allow the photographers to dictate the parameters of the shoots and allow her integrity to be compromised. "You used to have to go around and do tests, and they would always want to do a nude. I was like, 'No.' I was still a Columbus, Ohio, girl and there was no way I could," she reveals.

"We were real pioneers. We reinvented ourselves" – Ming Smith

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-REPRESENTATION

Coming of age during the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements, Smith fully embraced the power of self-determination. "I never saw being a woman or being a black woman, as an obstacle. I wanted to take pictures. It wasn't like you were going to make money – you just did it," she says.

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In 1974, just a year after she arrived in New York, Smith was able to turn a fashion go-see into an opportunity to join the photography world as the first female member of Kamoinge, the celebrated African-American photography collective.

“I went to a photographer’s loft on 20th and Fifth Avenue. While I was waiting in the outside room, I overheard (Kamoinge member) Anthony Barboza and another photographer having a debate about photography. They were talking about if it was all nostalgia or if it was an art form – at that time, photography was not considered an art form,’ she explains.

A few months later, Smith met Kamoinge member Louis Draper. He asked to see her photographs and then formally invited her to join Kamoinge. Smith accepted the offer, understanding the mission of the group aligned perfectly with her own. “They wanted to make images of the black experience themselves, rather than having the establishment photograph them. That was like being a pioneer and a revolutionary in their own right.”

## FINDING YOUR PATH

Although Smith has always stood on the side of truth, her independence has created challenges that she wanted to examine and explore through photography.

“I never photographed with any type of agenda,” she reveals, “I’ve always been rebellious and pro-Civil Rights but there were always conflicts going on with me. When I was in Washington, DC, in college my first job away from home was working for (New York Congressman) Jacob Javits. While I was there, some college students stormed the House of Representatives. So here I was – part of the system – and I was more like the students, so there was a conflict for me. Black people go through a lot of conflicts living in America.”

Photography became a tool of survival and a way to connect with her spirit and nurture her soul. “I always photograph for myself. When you have that lonely, self-defeating, isolating, depressed feeling, not knowing what to do or where to go, you can always pick up the camera and go outside and get involved in the world,” she explains.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

While Smith created photographs that were poems, epics, and odes to the struggle to survive and the beauty that life bestowed, she was met with pushback along the way. “A few males were really angry at me because I had talent and they saw it. They did everything possible to try to destroy me so I had gone through all of that. Really heavy-duty stuff”, she reveals.

“I don’t like to dwell on that, but I am telling you this because people are talking about those issues right now. Certain people treated me like a second-class citizen. Other people didn’t look at my work. Instead, they said, ‘You should be an actress – or a model!’ Just like that. But I knew I had a great portfolio.”

Despite the negativity, Smith was undeterred and remained true to herself, willing to overcome the obstacles along her path. “I was going through all of this stuff, being misunderstood in my intent. I was like, ‘I’m not even trying to make money. This is something I am doing out of my heart,’” she remembers.

## TAKING A RISK

Intent on being seen and recognised, Smith decided to take a risk. One day, while passing by the Museum of Modern Art in 1978, an idea hit. Smith thought to herself, “Maybe I should go to some place that really can see who I am.”

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She rang the museum and they told her they had a portfolio drop off period. "I was like, 'Really? I would have been up there if I had known,'" she says. "I got my portfolio together. I went up there in a t-shirt and jeans with a brown bomber jacket. When I walked in there was a little lady that was very old Bazaar, Madison Avenue to the height. Very elitist and very refined. The receptionist thought I was a messenger."

Smith laughs at the memory of what came next. "When I went to pick up my portfolio, the same receptionist asked me my name and I told her, and she said, 'Ohhh!' I knew something was good then because she completely changed her demeanour."

Then, photography curator Susan Kismaric came out and invited Smith inside. Kismaric spread out eight photographs on the desk, invited her to select two that would be part of the Museum's permanent collection, and then said, "You're a genius."

Smith's eyes light up as she remembers that moment in time. "I said to myself, 'I knew it!' It wasn't ego. It was 'To thine own self, be true.' I just knew my work was good. If no one else knew, I knew, and God knew."