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The Photographs of Ming Smith are Magic & Mystery Made Manifest

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Ming Smith is the quiet storm, her photographs evoking the soul of Billie Holiday’s music in photographic form. She has lived as an artist all her life, creating a body of work that captures the mysterious beauty of eternal truth. “Images outlive us,” Smith observes, and at the same time, without them, things disappear and the moment is gone. In this way, photographs become not only a work of art or an artifact—they become part of the collective consciousness that defines human experience.

“Something flows through you,” Smith explains. The photographer becomes a channel open to the world, transforming three dimensions into two then delivering them so that we may feel and understand their point of view. Smith’s perspective is as singular as she is. The first African-American woman to have her work collected by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Smith is a pioneer, an innovator, and a rebel imbued with ineffable elegance.

Born in Detroit, MI, and raised in Columbus, OH, Smith first picked up a camera at the age of five. Her mother kept a Brownie in the coat closet and Smith asked to use to photograph her kindergarten class on the first day of school. Art was a formative part of her early years, as both her parents had their own practices. “My father was an artist. He never talked

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about art being art, but he carved, photographed, painted, etchings. He loved Chinese artwork. My mother embroidered and knitted. It was a way of life, I guess,” she remembers.

Smith never stopped taking photographs but it wasn’t until she arrived in New York in 1973 after graduating from Howard University that she discovered it could be more than a hobby or a craft. When I came to New York there was a big debate about whether photography was an art form. My teacher at Howard told me I could photograph medical equipment and that was the last thing I was interested in. He never mentioned photography as an art form, but I was kind of doing that without knowing it at the time,” she reveals.

Smith struck up a friendship with photographer Anthony Barboza, a member of the Harlem-based photography collective Kamoinge, and became the first woman to join the group. Founded in 1963, Kamoinge was dedicated to creating photographs that spoke to and of the African-American experience. Smith explains, “Kamoinge was committed to the image. They were unhappy about the images that they saw of blacks and of themselves, so they took it upon themselves to say, ‘We want to do our images about ourselves, about us, because who understands us more than we do?’”

Smith had found a home away from home, and it gave her a path to begin to develop her practice as an artist. “Just being a photographer and running away from the Midwest to big, bad New York, and even modeling was like being a pioneer or a rebel. It wasn’t the norm. No one in my graduating class—they’re still there. They didn’t even go to college. Being in a group, being a woman, I didn’t even think about it. Being a woman wasn’t the main thing, it was being black and trying to get in and survive in New York. That was more of the conflict,” she reveals.

Smith supported herself working as a model while living in the Village. It was a modest living that afforded her the flexibility to create art without any demand to compromise her vision to satisfy a commercial market. She remembers, “My small apartment off of Carmine, all I had was a little futon on the floor. I would talk to Lisette Model about things like love because I was so interested—not just about photography. One time I went to her house, she didn’t live too far from me, and I went into her place and was like, ‘Photographers aren’t rich at all.’ I thought of her as this huge, famous, big photographer and her apartment was minimal. It wasn’t a lot better than mine and I realized, ‘There’s no money in photography!’ Maybe fashion photography but not as an artist.”

But, as the maxim goes, “Everything cuts to ways,” and the freedom to create art on her own terms allowed Smith to create a style all her own, maintain her voice and vision, and preserve her artistic integrity. Her worldview can be seen in *Ming Smith*, an exhibition of 75 vintage photographs that span her entire career, now on view at Steven Kasher Gallery, New York, through February 18, 2017.