

HYPERALLERGIC

Cauleen Smith Projects a Futuristic Black Utopia

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Cauleen Smith, *Space Station: Rainbow Infinity* (2014), 35mm colour slide installation
(courtesy International Film Festival Rotterdam)

ROTTERDAM – At what speed do moving images become a movie? Most films move at 16, 24, or 60 frames per second. Yet, as a 90-minute “film without film” by filmmaker and interdisciplinary artist Cauleen Smith demonstrates, a series of images that move at a much slower pace works perfectly well. Involving a 35mm slide projector, a pair of vinyl records, and a sound system, Smith’s evolving, revolving multimedia project *Black Utopia LP* is expansive in both its setup and content. She performed the work at the Kunsthal Rotterdam as part of the 2019 edition of the International Film Festival Rotterdam.

The performance was primarily part of a program of Smith’s work that included a screening of her recent shorts, a new 16mm restoration of her much acclaimed, rarely seen 1988 feature film *Drylongso*, and a previously unscreened short film, *Sojourner*, in the festival’s Tiger Short Film Competition. It was also part of the festival’s Blackout exhibition, a stunning showcase of 35mm carousel slide projector artworks created since 2004, the date which Kodak ceased to manufacture that device.

Black Utopia LP is emblematic of the festival’s commitment to programming events that encourage visitors to experience art related to the moving image in an expanded format and outside of a traditional cinema setting. An all-analogue operation, it involves a 35mm slide carousel slide projector and a double LP played on a turntable. Cauleen Smith stands behind both, dropping the needle and swapping out slides, swaying gently behind the booth at the back of the room.

The title record and the performance are born from the same subject: experimental jazz musician, thinker, and bandleader Sun Ra. Smith’s professional engagement with Sun Ra began with a 2010 residency at Chicago non-profit Threewalls where Smith investigated the Sun Ra Alton Abraham archive; this produced several exhibitions and the 2012 album at the center of this performance.



Cauleen Smith, Black Utopia LP (2012), 35mm colour slides and vinyl LP (courtesy the artist)

The record, which Smith plays in its entirety, consists of Sun Ra Arkestra rehearsal recordings, snippets of live performances and lectures, interviews with various friends and Ra collaborators, and poetry by artists Krista Franklin and Avery R. Young. It also contains speeches spliced together and compiled from multiple voices that form a kind of Afro-futurist collage of sound and language, rhapsodizing on the utopian potentials and possibilities of Black space travel and astrology, among other cosmic concepts explored in Sun Ra's oeuvre.

The visual component includes an ever-growing collection of more than 800 35mm slides, the selection and order of which vary with each performance. Smith draws on research and archives in the locations of previous performances to add to her collection, creating a satisfying sense of infinite possibility. She selects images from a large library of slides related to Afro-futurism and experimental Black culture that create a dialogue with the audio collage, either obliquely or directly. In one cycle of slides, shots of audio equipment are placed next to astronomical charts, with Sun Ra chiming in on music's paranormal potential. "Music is alive, the vibrations change the air," he says. Another montage features images of black astronauts, space memorabilia, and Afro-futurist comics and posters, with the Sun Ra Arkestra's "The Second Stop Is Jupiter" jubilantly accompanying the imagery.

Each shutter sound of the slide projector becomes hypnotic, until the imagery ends, breaking the spell. Smith walks out through the crowd, waving a giant flag cut from a silver space blanket that casts a billowing shadow against the light of the projector. After all those images without her obvious presence, the gesture of seeing her stepping out is very moving. The show left me ruminating on all the sounds and images that wafted past my ears and eyes. What makes a film a film? Smith's "film without film" certainly seemed like one, and its slow pace should leave viewers with plenty of space to think.

The 2019 International Film Festival Rotterdam took place from January 23 to February 3.