

## FSA Open Studio: Nyugen E. Smith

Nyugen E. Smith (b. 1976), whom FSA invited to participate in its spring residency, is regarded as one of the most important artists working today in the representation of African diasporic histories, cultures, and identities. His practice is multidisciplinary in nature, encompassing painting, drawing, sculpture, installation, performance, poetry, and spoken word. Smith was born in the U.S. to immigrant parents of Trinidadian and Haitian origin, and spent his formative years in Trinidad. This experience shaped his visual aesthetic, one in which collage and assemblage reference the inventive reuse of found objects and scrap materials that he witnessed on the island. A profound sense of his own ancestry and deep knowledge of Caribbean histories and cultures are the nexus for Smith's wide-ranging investigations, especially into African spiritualities and the strategies by which oppressed or displaced communities sustain themselves.

Smith has described his working process as rhizomatic, akin to the subterranean spread of a plant stem that sends shoots and roots in different directions. His concern with African diasporic histories has led, in turn, to diverse explorations of colonialism, cartography, and global migration. A recurring image in his artworks is the 'bundlehouse,' which references the bundling of materials to build shelters as well as the precarious existence of refugees or migrants who carry their possessions in bundles. Smith began producing 'bundlehouses' in 2005, after seeing photos of a refugee camp in Uganda. While they evoke trauma or loss, their titles imply a potential for providing spiritual sustenance because these bundles contain a sense of home and thus, of inherited traditions.

Smith's work at FSA is informed by his recent travels in Barbados, from which the Charleston plantation system and earliest enslaved populations arrived. A regard for these ancestors, the traditions that they preserved, and the knowledge that they passed down is evident across a range of media that Smith employed during his residency. The culmination of these explorations is *Follow de Sounds They Say*, an installation currently on view in the *Indigo in Bloom* exhibition at Magnolia Plantation and Gardens. There, Smith's indigo-clad guardian figure leads the spirits of the Africans who worked and died on the plantation to a crossroads where they can transcend the earthly realm.

### About the artist:

Smith holds a BA in Fine Art from Seton Hall University and an MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His work has been presented at various museums: the National Museum of African American History and Culture (Smithsonian); the International African American Museum (Charleston), the Museum of Latin American Art (Long Beach), the Pérez Art Museum (Miami), Frist Art Museum (Nashville), the Blanton Museum of Art (Austin), the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and many others. Among other honors, Smith has received a Creative Capital Award (2021-22), a Franklin Furnace Award (2018), and a Leonore Annenberg Performing and Visual Arts Fellowship (2016). His works are in various private and public collections, including the Newark Museum of Art and Hudson Valley MOCA.

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### **LIST OF ARTWORKS:**

#### **In the Dining Room:**

*Untitled* (Improvisational movement with hand-dyed indigo fabric and crossroads map)  
Video work

Before a performance, Smith often engages in improvisational exercises intended to explore movement and gesture. He also ‘activates’ various artworks by physically moving them through space, gaining a sense of their shifting weights, moving parts, and sounds. Here he executes a series of movements holding the crossroads map that now forms part of his sculptural installation, *Follow de Sounds They Say*, at Magnolia Plantation. While the activity is standard practice for Smith, when considered alongside his other residency works it may also be read as an exploration of the potential of the object to transcend its own materiality.

#### **In the Garden:**

*Four indigo resist-dyed textiles*

Smith produced these textiles at the indigo workshop of Charleston artist Arianne King Comer. Once an important plantation crop in the area, indigo was grown by enslaved populations who became the primary stewards of its cultivation and use. Smith’s textiles include several hand-drawn and stamped images referring to African spiritual traditions and the journeys that brought them here. The two small textiles feature images of Oshun, a goddess of prosperity and abundance in West African Yoruba tradition. A third textile features several figures on a boat carrying a bushel of indigo leaves. They sail towards a sun-like emblem that, in West African Akan culture, represents wisdom and creativity. Also from Akan tradition are the Sankofu birds on the side of the boat. They point backwards as a reminder to learn from the past. The largest textile is a tablecloth, a celebration of gathering and community that contains an image of food abundance at its center. An Akan symbol representing strength, humility, wisdom, and learning appears in the border.

#### **In the Studio:**

*Untitled Work in Progress (Sound Ritual for Those who died during forced migration)*  
Acrylic and mixed media on canvas

In this work, which imagines the spiritual recovery of lost ancestors, Smith brings together his distinctive visual devices and interpretations of African religious beliefs with imagery drawn from his residency in

Charleston. A reclining figure at the center of the composition hovers in an indeterminate space that is enclosed by a structure inspired by the architecture of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. Stellar bodies and planar diagrams appear to provide points of guidance within the space. Above, watchful eyes stare from two mask-like faces inspired by nineteenth-century face jugs attributed to enslaved potters in South Carolina. The prone figure is borne by waves issuing from a 'bundlehouse' and from speakers recalling Caribbean sound systems. Smith envisions a soul guided by vibrations of sound which, across many African cultures, are associated with divine forces.

*Crossroads Guardian with sound stem and boombox*

*Fabric, canvas, paper, plastic, tomato stem, felt, paper, carved crape myrtle, found floorboards, bells, wire, beads sequins, and cork. Most materials found in Charleston.*

The concept of "crossroads" plays a significant role in the belief systems of African and African diasporic cultures, denoting a place where spiritual and earthly realms meet. This iteration of a "Crossroads Guardian", who facilitates communication with spirits, ancestors, and the divine, holds a boombox and stem with which to make noise. Sound has a divine force in many African religious traditions.

*Drawing of Follow de Signs They Say Crossroads Guardian*

*Mixed media on paper*

*Bundle House drawings*

*Mixed media and collage on paper*

On the Table:

Books, research material, and ephemera read and collected during FSA residency