Protection and Other Time Considerations
MIMI SMITH
Center for Women in the Arts and Humanities
2017-18 Estelle Lebowitz Endowed Visiting Artist

Exhibition
Protection and Other Time Considerations
September 5 - December 15, 2017
Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series Galleries, Douglass Library
8 Chapel Drive, New Brunswick, NJ 08901 • Gallery Hours: M-F 9am-10pm

Public Event
Reception and Lecture
Tuesday, October 24, 2017 • 5 - 6:30pm
Mabel Smith Douglass Room, Douglass Library

#MimiSmith  #Douglass100

Cover: Mimi Smith, Black Tamoxifen Bra from “Protectors Against Illness”, 1993-97 / Image courtesy of the artist.
The Center for Women in the Arts and Humanities’ Estelle Lebowitz Endowed Visiting Artist program annually brings to the University community and general public the work and ideas of exceptional women artists through solo exhibitions, lectures, and campus residencies. The program was endowed in 1999 by Professor Joel Lebowitz in honor of his late wife, artist Estelle Lebowitz.

The exhibition and event are funded in part by the Estelle Lebowitz Memorial Fund, Douglass Residential College (DRC), and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

Co-sponsors include:
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Director, Center for Women in the Arts and Humanities

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INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Douglass Residential College, formerly Douglass College, was founded in 1918 as the New Jersey College for Women. Now it is part of Rutgers University, the only flagship public research university in the nation to offer students the opportunity to join a women’s residential college and intellectual community for undergraduate women. This year, Douglass celebrates 100 years of educating and inspiring college women to think critically and creatively, to work hard and aim high. In recognition of this milestone, Rutgers graduate and renowned artist Mimi Smith is the Center for Women in Arts and Humanities’ 2017-18 Estelle Lebowitz Endowed Visiting Artist.

Mimi Smith graduated with her MFA from the Visual Arts Department at Rutgers University in 1966 when Mason Gross School of the Arts did not yet exist and the MFA program was located on the Douglass Campus. As a student in the 60’s, Smith studied with Fluxus and Conceptual artists such as Robert Watts and sculptor Robert Morris. In an atmosphere of sanctioning experimentation, Smith began making sculpture in the form of clothing, not as garments to be worn but as objects. Although the Feminist Art Movement had only just begun to take form, this work, launched Smith’s journey as an important artist creating work from a feminist viewpoint.

As a pioneering feminist artist, Smith was among the first to reject the detached approach of the Minimalist artists who dominated the art scene, and make artwork that incorporated her personal life, commenting on the realities of domestic and marital life, pregnancy and motherhood. These were subjects not talked about in the late 60’s by “serious” artists let alone the focus of serious work. Using non-traditional art materials, Smith’s work explores the often dichotomous relationships between her everyday life, the trappings of femininity, illness and aging, intimacy, safety and anxiety, current events, and the passage of time. During her 50 year career as an artist, Smith’s work has been both misinterpreted as fashion and highly respected as critical observations of women’s roles. Her work is conceptually clever and materially deeply satisfying to engage.

Mimi Smith has been the recipient of numerous grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts, Joan Mitchell Foundation, New York State Council on the Arts, and National Endowment for the Arts. She has been written about in over 75 publications including Art in America, Art News, Artforum, Frieze, the New York Times, and several books.
Smith has shown her work extensively throughout the United States, and internationally in locations such as the Bronx Museum, MOCA- Los Angeles, Walker Art Center, Franklin Furnace, Newark Museum, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Haywood Gallery – London, and many more. Her work is included in public collections such as The Getty Center, the Fogg Art Museum, Institute of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, and Museum of Modern Art, New York.

It was my pleasure to work with Mimi Smith to curate this show, and our honor to exhibit her beautiful, intelligent, original work in the Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series Galleries.

My heartfelt thanks go to our funders and those who generously support this and other CWAH programs. The Estelle Lebowitz Memorial Fund; New Jersey State Council on the Arts; Dean Jacqueline Litt, Douglass Residential College; Barbara Lee, Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs; and Isabel Nazario, Associate Vice President for Strategic Initiatives in the Office of the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs. Special recognition goes to Rutgers University Libraries, our partner in presenting the Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series. Additional thanks to the CWAH staff without whom our programs would not take place.

*The Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series (DWAS) is the oldest continuous running exhibition space in the United States dedicated to making visible the work of emerging and established contemporary women artists. It was founded by alumna artist Joan Snyder (Douglass College ’62) and established at the Mabel Smith Douglass Library in 1971 under the leadership of Library Director, Daisy Brightenback Shenholm (DC ’44). Formerly known as the Women Artists Series, in 1987 the Series was endowed by Professor Emerita Nelle Smither and renamed in memory of her friend Mary H. Dana (DC ’42).*

**Connie Tell**

Director

Center for Women in the Arts and Humanities
Like a fierce but soft-spoken warrior who reveals our foibles rather than causing us harm, artist Mimi Smith (b. 1942) has spent more than four decades creating objects that interrogate the pressing social and political concerns of our time, from women’s work and social conformity to nuclear holocaust, without flinching, and with a focused gaze. From her pioneering signature clothing sculptures to installations, artist books, and readings from the evening news, Mimi Smith uses what is around her in both intimate and prescient ways, connecting our daily lives to the important, difficult and sometimes life-threatening issues of our era. But despite the exquisite clarity of her work’s incisive merging of form and concept, her art has not always been adequately understood.

Smith came of age as an artist in the mid-1960s, amidst a tumult of social upheaval and an outpouring of art in new formats. Smith was a feminist artist avant la lettre, ahead of her time. She did not shy away from the topical or thematic, but rather, pushed the envelope to include the domestic sphere and the personal. A pioneer among the women (and later some men) who incorporated everyday life and sometimes autobiography into their work, Smith dealt with the stuff of life, like weddings and pregnancy, at a time when these topics were all but taboo in the art world. Autobiography was off limits for serious artists, especially women artists, before the upheaval and re-thinking brought on by the feminist art movement in the 1970s.

This article will consider various aspects of Mimi Smith’s creative output. Then as now, her own life and world events...
inform her production, often furnishing the subject matter as well as the materials of the work that she makes. The feminist basis of her thinking makes her work important, engaged, and multi-faceted; and rather than marginalizing her output, it has broadened its scope. She has also sustained investigative commentary on media and technology, addressing our cultural forms and technological shifts in ways that utilize those very formats while also questioning them and their effects on society. By including not only clothing but also televisions and computers, she has integrated topic with medium, often employing the medium itself as the topic. 

Growing up in Milton, Massachusetts, Smith learned to sew from her grandmother. She loved the period costumes rooms at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, which she visited while taking Saturday art classes at the Boston Museum School. At Massachusetts College of Art, she majored in painting and earned her BFA in 1963, making abstract still-life and figure paintings. She viewed this early training as “a very conventional art education that was craft centered in all of the different art medias.” Smith eventually would put this training to use in her clothing works. After graduation, she moved to New York City (where she still lives), and entered the MFA program at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Landing at Rutgers was fortunate for Smith, as the program, which had recently been home to Allan Kaprow and his Happenings, encouraged big ideas and the use of non-art materials. Smith studied with the Fluxus and Conceptual artist Robert Watts and Minimalist sculptor Robert Morris, and at one point tried to learn welding. Among her friends there were students Joan Snyder, Jackie Winsor, and Keith Sonnier. In this creative, avant-garde environment, Smith began adding fabric to her abstract paintings. She found the “anything is possible” ethos at Rutgers very stimulating, and she was particularly inspired by the many lectures they all attended given by thinkers such as Buckminster Fuller, James Lee Byers, and Marshall McLuhan. By the end of her degree program, clothing had become both the subject and form of Smith’s art—before either Watts or Morris started to work with fabric. The conceptual framework that Smith developed was aided by her experience in the program.

In 1964, the language of feminist art had not yet been articulated and the concepts hardly formed. Her art, therefore, was born not out of feminist ideology but from her personal journey as a serious art student. As she began working with clothing, she was also constructing a theoretical framework for presenting clothing as sculpture. The works she would create, “based on a sculptural idea and an actual object,” were well ahead of their time. Those who saw her 1966 work Steel Wool Peignoir (Fig. 1 and Pl. 4) were hardly prepared to absorb it. In the 1970s, the sculpture was adopted by savvy feminist critics, artists, and art historians. Feminists, including critic Lucy R. Lippard and artist Miriam Schapiro, included slides of the work in lectures they presented at various colleges and museums across the country, helping to spawn a following for the work and a dialogue surrounding it. Peignoir was not exhibited
Steel Wool Peignoir had a brilliant concept and flawless execution. Made of sheer pink nylon and eggshell lace edged with thick bands of steel wool, Peignoir is political, poignant, and humorous. Smith used mass-produced materials that were also personal. Its boudoir elegance is undone by the clear association of the steel wool not with a fantasy wife but with the drudgery of house work. From a flimsy nightgown, the peignoir has been transformed into a protective garment, a kind of armor for the bedroom, cleverly employing an industrial material that was designed for domestic use. To Smith herself, the piece signified the realities of marriage in contrast to its illusions. Steel Wool Peignoir became her signature work.

Although Peignoir’s humor is darker and more visceral, the sculpture employs some of the levity of Pop art, which was still going strong in 1966. Like other Pop artists such as Andy Warhol, Smith both utilized and critiqued images at once, imparting a poker-face quality to their work as a result. But Smith went beyond Warhol; not just appropriating media images or advertising icons, Smith instead re-made the image into an object whose surprising materials and odd pairings still jolt. Transcending the cool flatness of Pop Art, she asks viewers to imagine their own bodies inhabiting her clothing pieces and the ideas that they convey. Stretching beyond Pop, Peignoir reverberates into other realms that are both familiar and strange. As Smith herself later stated, “The peignoir ... resembles some sort of robot-like monster.”

The robot-like quality of Steel Wool Peignoir functions on a number of levels, including metaphoric consideration of violence toward women. The ability of the work to address this topic so powerfully was underscored by the inclusion more than a decade later of Peignoir and Smith’s Girdle (1966; Fig. 2) in the 1978 Heresies special issue on women and violence. In her accompanying text, Smith wrote: “There is cruelty in the peignoir in the fact that the steel wool is very deceptive. It was sewed to look like fur. One doesn’t notice the danger until one gets close.”

Through its blatant yet subtle juxtaposition of sheer pink nylon chiffon and lace with abrasive steel wool, Steel Wool Peignoir explores the strange reality of women’s lives. It symbolically confronts some of the contradictions that women face in their roles as wives and mothers.
constantly face, along with problems raised by what Nancy Spector has called the “psychosexual dimensions of fashion”—something many critics have failed to perceive in Smith’s work. It is at once the dressing to attract and the armor that may be needed to fend off a suitor in the bedroom. Its merging of object and idea is part of its success and what makes it an enduring work of art. Prescient when it was made in 1966, *Peignoir* anticipated important social and artistic developments.

Lucy Lippard described *Steel Wool Peignoir* in her book *The Pink Glass Swan*: “This proto-feminist sculpture is a witty commentary on women’s work on a double level—sexual and domestic. Smith predicted the feminist artist’s fascination with clothing as an extension of the body and the life—a device that flourished throughout the seventies, was revived in the late eighties, and is still going strong.”

In 2000, *Steel Wool Peignoir* found a home at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, where visitors are consistently drawn to it. Its place in history often confounds viewers, who are surprised to learn it was made in the 1960s, as it still looks so fresh (although a recent group of students thought the sculpture dated to “the Middle Ages”). Also interesting is that many visitors do not know what a peignoir is. This item of women’s clothing, popular from the 1930s through 1960s, is not in their vocabulary. (If slinky peignoirs are no longer broadly recognized, it suggests that some progress has been achieved in the realm of gender parity.)

Smith used industrially produced materials aimed at the domestic domain in other works of the period. *Girdle*, made of rubber bath mats, is another non-functional piece of clothing that serves as sculptural object as well as visual metaphor. Along with her wildly distorted, super-skinny *Model Dress* (1965), this work suggests that women should not be forced to reshape their bodies to be attractive to others (men), and that they will not achieve happiness through clothes. Smith described the girdle-like the peignoir, no longer in fashion as “[o]ne of the most frightening items of clothing that I can imagine … an uncomfortable torture. It doesn’t let a woman breathe. It sticks to her like an octopus. It doesn’t let air in or out.” Like *Peignoir*, Smith’s *Girdle* poked fun at some of the extreme fashions that women were subjected to in their everyday lives in our culture.”

*Peignoir* and *Girdle* were created in 1966, the same year as Smith’s MFA thesis.
exhibition at Rutgers, an exhibition that, especially for a graduate student, made a significant statement. Comprising a single work, *The Wedding* (Fig. 3), the show was an installation consisting of a 12-foot square plastic cube that could not be entered. Hung with sheets of vinyl plastic floor to ceiling, the box had satin fabric on the floor and contained items including a see-through dress on a white dress form and a 30-foot-long wedding train created from plastic carpet runners, doilies, and plastic lace tablecloths (the train still exists). Smith used plastic in several works around that time, including her 1965 *Recycle Coat* (Pl. 5), wearable art made of plastic product wrappers with bottle cap fasteners. Also in *The Wedding* box was a hanging bouquet with plastic flowers and a veil, all with notably long trains. When Smith herself was married a few years earlier at City Hall, she did not wear a wedding gown, and she says that perhaps this installation represented her own wedding, symbolizing the role that weddings play in American girlhood. (Her thesis project anticipates *Womanhouse* of 1972, which included a wedding dress.) She wanted to signify that a wedding is just one day in a woman's life, in contrast with the realities of marriage that will follow. The wedding itself becomes frozen in time: a memory in a plastic box.16

Smith, then, was quietly creating her own revolution with understatement and subtlety—with these and other critical works, like *Maternity Dress* of 1966 (Fig. 4), described by Ingrid Schaffner as “a sci-fi vision of woman as test tube or ‘gro box’” with “a plastic observation window.”17 Her clothing art put Smith squarely in the avant-garde. Although Smith believed that these works were based on a simple idea that everyone would understand, she often found herself having to explain them. In the heyday of Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptual art, in the 1960s and early 1970s, Smith’s work did not fit neatly into any category.

The feminist art movement, beginning in the 1970s, would promote some of the ideas Smith had been articulating, such as breaking down male-dominated hierarchies and allowing other voices including one’s own. In a broader way, the feminist art movement sought to question the whole formation of canons and to shift the discipline of art history to a different level, whereby we would rethink and renegotiate the terms by which the hierarchy of art had been defined. Smith continued to address issues of protection, social conformity, and symbolic identifications with power, addressing new subjects as her life evolved in new directions.  

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**Fig. 4.** Mimi Smith, *Maternity Dress* (1966), plastic, vinyl, zipper, screws, wood hanger, 45” x 20” x 9”. Collection RISD Museum, Providence, RI. Photo: Oren Slor.
Moving out from the realm of clothing but still using non-art materials associated with the personal and domestic realms, Smith created a series of wall drawings made with knotted thread and measuring tape in the early 1970s. When her family moved from New York to Cleveland (for her husband to take a new job) in 1973, Smith found herself at home with two young children. She made the most of this isolated time by adapting industrially produced materials associated with the domestic sphere to “draw” every room and object in her house. Made to scale, these knotted thread drawings systematically outlined the furniture and rooms in her house. In *Bedroom* (1973; Fig. 5), the bed is portrayed like a perspective drawing, receding back in space, as is the bureau adjacent to it. Using wooden rulers or soft measuring tapes and sewing thread—the materials at hand around the house—she made “process drawings using the process of my life,” says Smith. The process of making the pieces was repetitive and obsessive because she felt like she had become a machine in her house, at home with the children and a house full of furniture. These room-sized installations, with their ghost-like outlines, low-art materials, and grand sense of scale, are still fresh. When she exhibited *Bedroom* in 1973 at the New Gallery in Cleveland, she was the only woman in their group exhibition granted space for “an installation.”

The knotted thread works are compelling, not only for their whimsical beauty but also because they relate in fascinating ways to the avant-garde trends of their time. The form of the thread drawings exactly mimics the process by which they were made, connecting them to other works...
such as the process-driven line paintings of Agnes Martin and the quirkier, post-Minimal sculptures of Eva Hesse. The art critic Roberta Smith described the way Smith’s knotted thread pieces “combine elements of high Conceptualism with instant accessibility and a feminist viewpoint” as they “sparkle with light and wit and all the charm of children’s drawings...”¹⁸ The measuring tape and knots of thread, with squiggles of densely knotted thread dangling at the base of the bed to mimic the blanket fringe (Fig. 6), make art out of sewing stuff and women’s work. At the same time they convey her sense of confinement, they offer a new perspective on household spaces, as in *Stairs* (1973; Fig. 7).¹⁹ The domestic simplicity of the thread offers a critique of macho bravado, but the aesthetic of Minimalism engaged Smith’s imagination, as it did for other women who followed in her footsteps.²⁰

Smith expanded these ideas by making drawings with words: turning the knotted thread into flowing letters that form lines, and the lines made of words into objects such as television sets and windows. Based on works such as *The Wedding* and *Bedroom*, Smith developed a reputation as an installation artist to some degree.²¹ In 1975, for an installation titled *Five Windows* (Fig. 8), she outlined the windows in the distinctive gallery space at 112 Greene Street in New York over paper and plastic coverings. The window drawings were made entirely out of handwritten phrases, like “Please open the window, I’m going to faint” and “Don’t go outside, it’s dirty outside.” The drawings...
were accompanied by audio tapes of her reading the words in the drawings.

This use of written messages led to Smith’s taking on such other real-life topics as the pervasiveness of television and the language of computers. Smith made drawings based on television news, some of which lined part of a room installation, *Good Morning Class*, at P.S.1 in New York in 1979. Smith was also adding audio around the drawings, and sometimes performing the works in spaces around the city. At Franklin Furnace and other performance spaces, for example, she did readings from the evening news. For these multi-media events, the artist read her text-drawings aloud, with tape recorders playing Smith’s comments, and sometimes one of her television drawings hanging on the wall behind her. Audience members watched the evening news on a TV with no sound while listening to Smith read old news scripts. These performances provided a subtle critique of both the events reported and the fact that TV news, even then, was invading private spaces and furnishing an unwitting soundtrack to television news, some of which lined part of a people’s lives. Rather than devising her own script, Smith read aloud one made from the actual evening news, while also interjecting some of her own news along with exhortations such as “Pay Attention” or “Get Up.” One interviewer, Joan Arbeiter, said to Smith, “your real medium is the media itself.”

Other works conveyed her concerns about safety for our families and in our home environments. In two large drawing-based installations, *House with Clouds* (1980; Fig. 9) and *Home Sweet Home* (1982), words again help form the image and the object. *House with Clouds* was inspired by the Three Mile Island nuclear reactor mishap that caused widespread anxiety about nuclear pollution and people becoming sick in their homes. The drawings form a squarish paper house; a television news drawing is in the window; multiple audio tapes play different voices exhorting listeners to keep dangerous substances from their homes, mimicking the barrage of noise and information of television news; and cloud-shaped drawings on the walls

![Image of *House with Clouds*](image-url)
behind the house spell out “dirty air.” In *Home Sweet Home*, the window is blocked off with an X, suggesting that our homes may no longer be our havens in the case of large-scale disaster or a nuclear nightmare. Smith’s artist book *This is a Test* (1983) also addresses fears and concerns about nuclear holocaust.24

In 1982, Smith was invited to create an installation for the highly visible, street-level lobby of Chase Manhattan Bank’s headquarters in New York City, titled *October 1, 1981* (Fig. 10). (Jenny Holzer and several other artists also participated in this project to exhibit work in several Manhattan office buildings.) Smith’s four large paintings of hand-written transcriptions of television news were arrayed across a large glass entrance nearly 100 feet long. After drawing criticism, she was asked to re-arrange the drawings to produce a less coherent narrative and critique. According to critic Kate Linker, bank officials from the public relations department asked that the works be moved to a less prominent location, as they thought that people passing by were “reading them too much.”25

Smith describes the Chase project:

My installation *October 1, 1981* was part of a group show called *Art Lobby*, 4 installations by 4 artists all in bank lobbies during February 1982. Chase complained about my piece and Marine Midland [Bank] complained about Jenny Holzer’s piece; I think she was out of town and they may have taken her piece down. The show was sponsored by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and curated by Jacki Apple. My installation consisted of 4 large acrylic paintings on silk that were hung in the windows of the lobby of Chase Manhattan Plaza and an audiotape that was placed in the corners along the wall of the paintings. The subject of the paintings and the audiotape was the October 1, 1981 news broadcast combined with a second track of phrases about money that I overheard in the surrounding neighborhood including the lobby and the NY Stock Exchange. October 1st is the start of the federal
fiscal year and the news was full of budget cutbacks, etc. The phrases which were also on the painting panels said things like: Money Money Money, The Dow is down, My husband said to me you work for the landlord, I need more money, and info from the Stock Exchange tour.

The bank initially complained about the audiotape because although the volume was set like 2 people talking, the acoustics of the building made the sound seem much louder. It was the stock exchange tour phrases that they objected to. I had to exchange the places of the red and silver paintings and put the audio on headphones during the show. The day before the last day of the show the FALN bombed Chase and a number of other places, the Stock Exchange, Merrill Lynch, and my work was damaged.26

Investigating another aspect of how we measure our lives and the objects that populate our offices and homes, Smith created a series of clocks. Minus the audio of the performance works, the clock pieces, like Women's work is never done (1985) and Don't Turn Back (1985; Pl. 6) employ words and phrases to address timely issues like AIDS, women's work, and poverty. They convey the idea of time being considered, but they are also functional objects. With its mantra, “Don’t Turn Back the Hands of Time. Protect Women’s Right to Choose;” Don’t Turn Back remains relevant as politicians continue to erode this right granted to women in 1973 by Roe v. Wade. The round-face clocks project a strong presence with the text encircling and within the numbers that mark the hours in each day.

Responding to the burgeoning number of striving women in the workplace, Smith’s wall installation Slave Ready: Corporate (1991-93; Fig. 11) incorporates a clock and a recasting of the peignoir into daytime wear. A framed early computer error message intones “Slave Ready” beside a steel-wool-edged women’s pinstripe business suit, resonant of the “dress for success” style de rigueur for women seeking professional recognition in the workplace. Here the clock resonates with the message, “Just a minute, please” (a typical receptionist’s response

Fig. 11. Mimi Smith, Slave Ready: Corporate (1991-93), suit: pinstripe fabric, steel wool, aluminum hanger; painting: acrylic, pencil, on canvas; clock: acrylic, computer prints on clock; 50” x 60” x 6”. Courtesy the artist and Anna Kustera Gallery. Photo: Mimi Smith.
as she relays a phone call to her boss). The odd, computer-language use of the word “slave” was not understood by many of the women who saw this piece, and some who did not perceive Smith’s ironic meaning were bothered by it. This work relies heavily on the computer user-message, which was highly coded, apparently for inaccessibility. Smith was pointing out how strange and violent was the language that early computers employed. In this piercing work, which Ingrid Shaffner has called “the ‘corporate’ peignoir,” one could surmise “that hewing to the career path is as misguided as following the mommy track.”

In a 2004 catalogue essay, the art critic Joseph Jacobs called Smith’s work representational. However, her work goes far beyond being representational, as what she is creating is not objects in the traditional sense. Rather, she combines conceptual work with “images” or forms that we recognize to create something powerful and unusual. Her series of clothing pieces called Protector Against Illness uses these objects to address concerns about various health risks. Protector Against Illness: Red Tamoxifen Bra (1997; Pl. 7.) consists of a red bra that hangs elegantly on a padded, luxury hanger, as if displayed in a high-end intimate apparel shop. Viewers soon realize that delicately placed within the black embroidered patterns are pills taken by breast cancer victims, as if wearing such a bra could protect a wearer from getting cancer in the first place.

Smith’s Timelines installations (1999-2005; Fig. 12) combine her primary media: drawing and clothing. Very personal works, they track an unseen aspect of the aging process in a dramatic form that is systematic and clear-eyed. The Underpants and Undershirts series of drawings depict the most personal items of clothing, those that are not normally seen by anyone but the wearer. Each series narrates a life through what is worn over time. Such imaging of personal textile items and pieces of clothing systematizes something that most of us take for granted, and objectifies it by using pencil on paper, eschewing the intimacy of cloth. The drawings reveal the stages in a person’s life in an objectified way, allowing us to examine how these most intimate forms of clothing intersect with phases of our lives, from childhood through old age, healthy and not, from jogging and nursing bras to mastectomy bras. This is systematic “imaging” that is timely in a broad cultural context that relates to our
increasingly close connections to the internet and various electronic social media platforms. These electronic venues lend new focus to the imaging of people’s lives in ways that were unimaginable even twenty years ago. The internet has leveled images so that they become available to all, equivalent, fungible, there for the taking and for universal consumption. It is as if nothing is original but instead exists only in digital, infinitely replicable form. A work of art is no longer a painting or a sculpture but an “image” like all other images—a snapshot to be posted on one’s “Facebook” page.

What concerned Smith as a young artist now has ramifications for her children’s and future generations. Like her mod Maternity Dress of 1966, Smith’s Camouflage Maternity Dress (2004; Fig. 13) still features a see-through pod for a growing baby. Once again, it is a time of war, but unlike in the Vietnam war which was underway in 1966, women now fight side by side with the men. Here is a wry comment on gender and war, and the ways that clothing constructs both. The militaristic look of this sculpture suggests a war machine in which babies cannot be made without significant logistical and social problems. The idea of a pregnant soldier once bordered on the farcical, but this camouflage dress conveys the wearer’s position as someone in the military. Clothing can be understood as an extension of the body, sitting on our skin and flesh; but it is also coded, related to real life.

When Smith made the Steel Wool Peignoir, clothing as sculpture was a new idea, taking the ready-made concept from Marcel Duchamp and others, but shifting it into a much more personal realm. The clothing sculpture that Smith developed was deadpan but also white hot in its refusal to ignore tough personal and political issues. Her work has always faced those issues head-on, using the language of post-minimal and conceptual art. She makes images of sorts—an object, an altered ready-made, a sculpture. According to the artist, the clothing pieces were based on the theory that people had more experience looking at clothes than at sculpture. More important, these feminist works addressed the shared experience of being female in society.

In a new take on her earlier theme of protecting children and families, Smith’s Flower (2010; Fig. 14) comprises a pink camouflage child’s dress floating inside a kind of garden cage. Smith said: “After we bought our place upstate I noticed that people would plant and grow and tend to the most beautiful flowers and then build a cage around them to protect them from the animals. I thought
that is what we do to our children, maybe daughters specifically and on some level to everything.”31 In works like this Mimi Smith continues to challenge the ways that we think about art, clothing, craft, modernist hierarchies, and conveying political messages through visual art.

Judith Tannenbaum argued that Smith’s motivation derives not from a cultural critique but instead from “her need to transform her personal experience ... into unique objects with which others can identify.”32 Clearly, Smith anticipated the clothing art by artists such as Jana Sterbak, Beverly Semmes, Maureen Connor, and more recently that of Nick Cave and Mark Newport. Moreover, Mimi Smith merges feminism with an approach to the whole person, which is also part of the broad scope of what has become the feminist project since she began making art in the 1960s. Working with clothing as sculpture and proposing this new medium as a radical idea for art in many ways, she has been addressing feminist issues as they have evolved over four decades. Within this framework, she addresses politics, the media, and health and human safety concerns. As an early computer artist, she interrogated the role of television and computers in our lives, including the strange language of computer error messages. She exemplifies the creator of feminist methodologies helping to transform the art world and the world we inhabit by articulating powerful critiques of a male world in which male power still predominates.

Susan Earle is curator of European and American art at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, where she also serves as affiliate faculty member in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and as Courtesy Assistant Professor in the Kress Foundation Department of Art History.
Notes:

The author wishes to thank Mimi Smith for her exceptional generosity and assistance with this article.


2. Mimi Smith’s grandmother taught her to sew on an old treadle sewing machine. Her grandmother, Sarah Lyman Bayard, did “piecework” and worked in a sweatshop making men’s suits, once calling a suit she had just made a work of art. Mimi Smith, “Dialogue with Mimi Smith,” interview with Saralyn Reece Hardy, Spencer Museum of Art Newsletter (Fall 2010): 4. See also Smith’s reminiscences of her grandmother’s “exhibitions” of family photographs in Heresies, A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics, 6:4, (Winter 1978): 87. (Hereafter, Heresies)

3. Smith first enrolled at Rutgers in the fall of 1963, but became ill and postponed starting the program. She returned in the fall of 1964, at which time she began to work with Robert Watts. Mimi Smith, email conversation with the author, February 2011. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent quotes from the artist were told to the author over the course of many conversations between 2000 and 2011 or contained in emails during January and February 2011.

4. Smith says she kept fainting in the welding classes, so she never really learned welding as she had hoped; conversation with the author, Lawrence, Kansas, April 2010. Among the other artists who taught at or attended Rutgers/Douglass around this time or earlier were Geoffrey Hendricks, George Segal, Robert Whitman, Lucas Samaras, and Roy Lichtenstein.

5. The MFA program at Rutgers has been featured in exhibitions and publications in recent years, including Joan M. Marter, ed., Off Limits: Rutgers University and the Avant-Garde, 1957-1963 (Newark, N. J.: Newark Museum; New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999), and Ferris Olin, ed., Artists on the Edge: Douglas College and the Rutgers MFA (New Brunswick, NJ, 2005). The Douglass Library at Rutgers also developed a series of exhibitions and catalogues to showcase the work of women, including many who were graduates of the program. Founded by artist Joan Snyder in 1971 and still ongoing, it is now called the Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series. Mimi Smith was included in “Women Artists, year 8: 1978-79.”

7. Her early paintings include an abstract still-life from 1962 with a lively sense of color and brushwork, and a large reclining female nude.

8. Steel Wool Peignoir was first shown in 1979 in a solo show titled “Sculpture/Drawings 1966/1978” at Rutgers in the Douglass Library Women Artists Series. Later it was shown in two group shows, “Regalia” (1980-81) at the Henry Street Settlement, and “The Rag Trade” (1983), curated by Saul Ostrow at InterArt Center; and two solo shows, “Steel Wool Politics” (1994), curated by Judith Tannenbaum at ICA, and “A 30 Year Survey” (1997) at Anna Kustera Gallery. Later she was careful about lending the work after experiences in which her art was damaged during travel. Email from Smith to the author, January 2011.

9. There is an extensive bibliography on Steel Wool Peignoir, including a master’s thesis, and many discussions in books and articles over the past thirty years. See for example, Rachel Eileen Wright, “Inside-Out: Mimi Smith’s Steel Wool Peignoir” (MA thesis, Univ. of Texas at Austin, 1998).


11. Ibid. Smith’s text was placed on a page in the journal opposite a story on female circumcision and genital mutilation.

12. The quoted phrase is from Nancy Spector, “Freudian ‘Slips’: Dressing the Ambiguous Body,” in the exhibition catalogue for Art/Fashion (New York: Guggenheim Museum Soho, 1997), in which Spector incorrectly states that “women artists working with clothes during the early and mid-seventies did not rigorously explore the psychological and psychosexual dimensions of fashion ...” because “the discursive vocabulary for such a feminist inquiry had yet to be formulated.” Quoted in Jane Harris, “Clothing Art: Mimi Smith and the Fabric of Time,” PAJ [Performing Arts Journal]. 20.3 (1998): 36. Such a statement ignores Smith’s accomplishments in the mid 1960s.


15. As with many of Smith’s clothing pieces, Girdle anticipates later works by younger artists. There have been a number of recent exhibitions that focus on clothing. See, for example, Nina Felshin’s “Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art” (1993) (New York, Independent Curators International). Smith’s work has not always been included in these.

16. Mimi Smith graciously provided details about the Wedding installation (and about many other works discussed in this article). Emails and phone calls with the author, January-February 2011.


19. Smith’s Stairs was included in the recent touring exhibition “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution” (2007).


23. I would argue that we still live with so many threats in our homes and in the world, in part because objection to those threats has been marginalized as a feminine concern.

24. See Mimi Smith, This is a Test (New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1983). This artist’s book, for which Smith received a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, culminates the antinuclear theme that she had pursued in several artist books. Using the phrase and concept “this is a test,” this book tells the story of five fictitious nuclear bomb blasts and what happens to five cities around the world; Smith, Arbeiter interview in Lives and Works, 173. Smith’s related nuclear holocaust work, Bless This House, was included in Nina Felshin’s 1984 exhibition “Disarming Images: Art for Nuclear Disarmament” and the catalogue.


29. Smith also created a black bra in this series which has been exhibited and reproduced more than the red one shown here. This one was exhibited in the 30-Year Survey of Smith’s work at Anna Kustera Gallery in 1997.


In 1965 I started to make sculpture in the form of clothing, not as garments to be worn but as objects. I felt women intuitively knew how to look at clothing as a visual object much as I had been taught to look at a work of art, and wanted to use this idea in my art to say something about the experiences I shared with other young women. With my previous knowledge in sewing, and my history of adding sewing materials to paintings and drawings, I started to produce sculptural clothing pieces out of plastics, fabrics, and household materials that dealt with my life and concerns. I wore the earliest ones, thinking of myself as the armature.

In 1965 I made two pieces that were objects on their own, *Model Dress* and *Bikini*. I was a graduate student at Rutgers at the time, and in 1966 for my MFA thesis show I constructed *Wedding*, a 12 x 12 x 12 foot room installation of a wedding gown. I have continued to use clothing as both form and subject in my work to this day.

As my life progressed I added other mediums and subject matters. In 1968, pregnant for the 2nd time, I made *Knit Baby*, a conceptual art kit with instructions showing an easier way for a woman, or even a man, to have a baby. A miscarriage prompted embroidering “the baby is dead” on the undershirt. In the 70’s, at home with small children, I made a process art piece of life size wall drawings from repetitively knotted thread and tape measures of the things in my house. The repetitive knotting represented time and the process of my life. Later, in the 70’s and into the 80's I was making drawings and sound installations that dealt with the intrusion of television and computer media into our homes and pollution into our environment. Other works, clocks and artists’ books, dealt with additional issues. One series of clocks deals with the many women’s issues still undone in our
collective lives.

No longer a young woman, new clothing pieces also included more recent topics. A series of clothes as protection, *Coverings for an Environmental Catastrophe*, deal with the ever encroaching issue of the environment on our bodies. The birth of grandchildren started me re-knitting babies, this time concerned with the broader subjects of fear, rights, and fertility. The last decades found my life and my work increasingly involved with issues of aging and illness. Recent sculptures, *Protectors Against Illness*, deal with these issues, as does a series of drawings titled Timelines, that comment on the different ages of a woman and her changing body depicted through her clothes during her lifetime.

*Mimi Smith, 2017*
Model Dress
1965, recreated 1993
Plastic, buttons and metal hanger
72 x 18 inches

Recycle Coat
1965, recreated 1993
Photographic reproduction-2017
49 x 35 inches
Wedding
1966
Photographic reproduction-2017
30 x 20 inches
Steel Wool Peignoir
1966
Photographic reproduction-2017
61.5 x 35 inches
Knit Baby
1968
Yarn, undershirt, thread, and handwritten instructions
21 x 10 x 4 inches
The 7a.m. and 11p.m. News
1978
Performance at Franklin Furnace, Excerpt-5:04 minutes
This is a Test

Mimi Smith

This is a Test

© 1983 Mimi Smith, Publication
Installation view

*Women’s Work is Never Done 3*

*You Only Live Once*

*Her Money, Their Time*

*8:15, 11:02*

*Women’s Work is Never Done, Clean*

1983 - 1995

Acrylic, computer prints, colored pencil, dollar bills, and xerox on clocks

Dimensions variable
Installation View

*System Error 3, System Error 5, System Error 11, System Error 15, System Error 16,*
*System Error 22, System Error 23, System Error 25, System Error 28*

1986 - 1989

Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 9 x 12 inches each
Installation View

“Coverings for an Environmental Catastrophe”

1, 2, 3, 4

Apron

Chest Plate

1991 - 1996

Steel wool, thread, screening, fabric, ribbons, elastic, and lace, Dimensions variable
“Protectors Against Illness”
Bra, Black Tamoxifen Bra, Maximum Strength
1993 - 1997
Fabric, pills, vitamins, ribbon, and lace hangers
Dimensions variable
Biography

1996

Steel wool, nylon, lace, and satin hangers

56 x 72 x 7 inches
Installation View

*Timelines: Underpants*

2002

Acrylic and graphite on board

20 x 109 inches
Camouflage Maternity Dress
2004
Fabric, plastic dome, screws, and hanger
47 x 22 x 9 inches
Installation View

*Timelines: Undershirts*

2005

Acrylic and graphite on board

18 x 142 inches
Terror
2009
Yarn, dust mask, thread, stuffing, and undershirt
21 x 12 x 7 inches
Nonuplets
2010
Fabric, plastic dome, and dolls
43 x 20 x 5 inches
CALL / VOCA - Creating a Living Legacy/Voices in Contemporary Art
2015
Joan Mitchell Foundation interview, 1:15 minutes
EXHIBITION CHECKLIST
Images courtesy of the artist.

Model Dress
1965, recreated 1993
Plastic, buttons, and metal hanger, 72 x 18 inches

Recycle Coat
1965, recreated 1993
Photographic reproduction-2017, 49 x 35 inches

Wedding
1966
Photographic reproduction-2017, 30 x 20 inches

Steel Wool Peignoir
1966
Photographic reproduction-2017, 61.5 x 35 inches

Knit Baby
1968
Yarn, undershirt, thread, and handwritten instructions
21 x 10 x 4 inches

The 7a.m. and 11p.m. News
1978
Performance at Franklin Furnace, Excerpt-5:04 minutes

This is a Test
© 1983 Mimi Smith, Publication

Clocks
Women’s Work is Never Done 3
You Only Live Once
Her Money, Their Time
8:15, 11:02

Women’s Work is Never Done, Clean
1983 - 1995
Acrylic, computer prints, colored pencil, dollar bills, and xerox on clocks, Dimensions variable

Error Messages
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System Error 16
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Acrylic and graphite on board, 20 x 109 inches

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2004
Fabric, plastic dome, screws, and hanger, 47 x 22 x 9 inches

Timelines: Undershirts
2005
Acrylic and graphite on board, 18 x 142 inches

Terror
2009
Yarn, dust mask, thread, stuffing, and undershirt, 21 x 12 x 7 inches

Nonuplets
2010
Fabric, plastic dome, and dolls, 43 x 20 x 5 inches

CALL / VOCA - Creating a Living Legacy/Voices in Contemporary Art
2015
Joan Mitchell Foundation interview, 1:15 minutes
MIMI SMITH  ● CV
mimismith.com

Born 1942 Brookline, Massachusetts. Lives and works in NYC.

EDUCATION
1966  MFA - Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ  
1963  BFA - Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, MA

GRANTS and AWARDS
2017-18  Estelle Lebowitz Endowed Visiting Artist, Center for Women in the Arts and Humanities, Rutgers, NJ  
2016  Massachusetts College of Art and Design Distinguished Alumni Award  
1998  Joan Mitchell Grant  
1986  NY Foundation of the Arts Fellowship Recipient  
1982  NYSCA Visual Artist Project Grant with Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY  
1978  NEA Artist’s Fellowship Grant

SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2017  Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series Galleries, Douglass Library, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ  
2014  New Jersey City University, Lemmerman Gallery, “Mimi Smith: Constructing Art About Life”  
2010  Anna Kustera Gallery, “Mimi Smith: New Work”  
2006  Kustera Tilton Gallery, “Drawings from the 60s to the Present,” NYC  
1998-99  Anna Kustera Gallery, “Knotted Thread Work from the ’60’s and ’70’s”, NYC  
1997  Anna Kustera Gallery, “A 30 Year Survey”, NYC  
1993  Valencia Community College, “Mimi Smith: A Retrospective”, Orlando, FL (catalogue)  
1983  Printed Matter, NYC, window installation
1980  The Art Center, “Television Drawings”, Waco, Texas (catalogue)
1980  55 Mercer, NYC
1980  A.I.R. Gallery, NYC, “From the Newsroom”, performance/installation
1979  55 Mercer, “Color Television Drawings”, NYC
1978  Franklin Furnace, NYC, performance: “A Reading of Two Drawings”
1978  55 Mercer, “Television News Drawings” NYC
1978  Allegheny College, Meadville, PA
1977  Franklin Furnace, NYC
1976  The Institute of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan
1975  Hundred Acres, NYC
1975  112 Greene St. Gallery, NYC
1973  The New Gallery, Cleveland, OH

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2016  “Distinguished Alumni Exhibit”, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston, MA
2016  “Back in Time With Time Based Works: Artists’ Books at Franklin Furnace”, MoMA Library exhibition space
2016  “X”, Lyles & King, New York, NY
2015  “Mirror Mirror”, Eric Firestone Gallery, East Hampton, NY
2015  “La Corteza del Alma”, Galeria Fernando Pradilla, Madrid, Spain
2011  “Building Blocks: Contemporary Works from the Collection”, RISD Museum, Providence, RI
2009  “Dress Codes Clothing as Metaphor”, curated by Barbara Bloemink, Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, NY, (catalogue)
2008  “Object of Desire”, Anna Kustera Gallery, New York, NY
2008  “(un)Common Threads”, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, NY
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Exhibition Title</th>
<th>Location Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>“101 Dresses”, curated by Linda Lindroth and Denise Markonish</td>
<td>Art Space, New Haven, CT</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>“Threads of Memory”, curated by Margaret Mathews Berenson</td>
<td>Dorsky Gallery, LIC, NY</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>“Pattern Language: Clothing as Communicator”, curated by Judith Hoos Fox</td>
<td>Tufts Univ Art Gallery, Medford, MA Traveled to: Krannert Art Museum, Univ of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, IL (Jan-April 2006)</td>
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<td>Art Museum, Univ of California, Santa Barbara, CA (July-Aug 2006) Frederick Weisman Museum, Univ of Minnesota, Minneapolis (Oct-Dec 2006)</td>
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<td>Paul and Lulu Hilliard Art Museum, University of Louisiana, Lafayette (Jan-April 2007)</td>
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<td>“Artists On the Edge: Douglass College and the Rutgers MFA”,</td>
<td>Mabel Smith Douglass Library, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ (catalogue)</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>“Critical Mass: Happenings, Fluxus, Performance, Intermedia and Rutgers</td>
<td>organized by Geoff Hendricks, Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, MA Traveled to: Mason Gross Art Galleries, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ</td>
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<td></td>
<td>University, 1958-1971”, organized by Geoff Hendricks, Mead Art Museum,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Amherst College, MA Traveled to: Mason Gross Art Galleries, Rutgers University,</td>
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<td>Morris and Ingrid Schaffner, White Columns, NY, Traveled to: The Galleries at</td>
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<td>Moore College of Art and Design, Philadelphia, PA (Jan-Feb 2003); The RISD</td>
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<td>Museum of Art, Providence, Rhode Island (Nov 2003-Feb 2004)</td>
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<td>“Obsession/Fixation”, curated by Grace Graupe Pillard</td>
<td>Ceres Gallery, NY, NY (catalogue)</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>“Drawing on Language”, curated by Carter Foster and Stephan Jost, Spaces,</td>
<td>Spaces, Cleveland, OH (catalogue)</td>
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<td>2000-01</td>
<td>“Uncomfortable Beauty”, Jack Tilton/ Anna Kustera Gallery, NY, NY</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>“Measurement”, curated by Helen Molesworth, Amelie Wallace Gallery, SUNY Old</td>
<td>Westonbury, NY (catalogue)</td>
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<td>Westbury, NY</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>“Shoes shoes shoes”, curated by Michéle Gerber Klein, Frederieke Taylor TZ Art,</td>
<td>NY, NY</td>
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<td>1998</td>
<td>“Material Perception”, curated by Joyce Pomeroy Schwartz, TrizecHahn at Bank</td>
<td>Traveled to: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany, 1999</td>
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<td>of America Plaza, Charlotte, NC</td>
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<td>Traveled to: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany, 1999</td>
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<td>“Drawing to an End,” Anna Kustera Gallery, NYC</td>
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<td>“Disappearing Act”, Bound &amp; Unbound and Leslie Tonkonow Projects, curated by</td>
<td>Kirby Gookin &amp; Robin Kahn, NYC</td>
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<td>Kirby Gookin &amp; Robin Kahn, NYC</td>
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1997
“Thread”, Cristinerose Gallery, NYC
“Hung Out To Dry”, Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, NYC

1996
“Kickstart”, Anna Kustera Gallery, NYC
“15 Degrees from Rutgers, Charting New Directions in Contemporary Art”, Rutgers University, NJ

1995-96
“Art With Conscience”, The Newark Museum, NJ
“Division of Labor: Women’s Work in Contemporary Art”, Bronx Museum, NYC; LA MOCA, Los Angeles (catalogue)

1994
“Prints from Solo Impression New York”, College of Wooster Art Museum, Wooster, OH (catalogue)
“About Time”, TZ’Art, curated by Barbara Sahlman, NYC
“Engaged Vision”, Terry Dintenfass Gallery, NYC

1993
“The Rag Trade”, The InterArt Center, NYC, curated by Saul Ostrow
“Women at War”, Ledisflam Gallery, NYC

1992
“10 Steps”, Muranushi Lederman, NYC
“By Any Means Necessary”, Printed Matter, NYC

1991
“Artists of Conscience”, The Alternative Museum, NYC
“Burning in Hell”, Franklin Furnace, NYC, curated by Nancy Spero

1990
“Television Apparatus”, The New Museum, NYC
“Words and Images With a Message”, Women’s Studio Workshop, NY, (cata.), curated by Nancy Spero

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_Huffpost Arts & Culture, huffingtonpost.com_, G Roger Denson, “Contra Acte: Mimi Smith and Susan Bee Unleash the Comic Repressed”, 5/30/14

_Hyperallergic, hyperallergic.com_, Tiernan Morgan, “Mimi Smith’s Battle With Chase Manhattan Bank”, 6/6/14

NJCU Brochure essay: Joan Marter, “Mimi Smith: Constructing Art About Life”, 2014


_Woman’s Art Journal_, Susan Earle, “Mimi Smith Fashioning Art and Life”, Spring/Summer 2011, p13-21, photos

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Cleveland Magazine, “Towering Proposals”, December 2007, p. 46
Bloomberg.com, Linda Yablonsky, “Virgins, Sluts, Feminists Triumph at LA’s Geffen Contemporary, March 6,’07
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A Basic History of Western Art, Janson & Janson, Prentice Hall, 2006, p.621
Artforum, Peggy Phelan, “Feminism & Art (9 Views),” October 2003, pp.148,149
Art in America, Carey Lovelace, “Feminism at 40,” May 2003, pp.67-73

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS
Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, Arkansas
Franklin Furnace, New York
The Getty Center, Santa Monica, California
The Institute of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan
Museum of Modern Art, New York
The Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey
The RISD Museum, Providence, Rhode Island
Spencer Art Museum, Lawrence, Kansas
The Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts
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CWAH engages in university and community partnerships to present exhibitions, educational and public programs, sponsored research, documentation, and interdisciplinary projects encompassing the creative and intellectual production of women of all gender expressions, in all arts and humanities fields across geographic, cultural, economic, and generational boundaries. The Center for Women in the Arts and Humanities serves university, state, national, and global audiences.

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Nicole Ianuzelli, Manager of Programs and Exhibitions  
Leigh-Ayna Passamano, Program Coordinator and Web Administrator  
Deborah Lee, Work-Study Assistant

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