



# QUEENS MUSEUM

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

### ***The Queens Museum Presents Sable Elyse Smith: Ordinary Violence***

*The first solo museum show by the Queens Museum Jerome Fellow that continues her ongoing exploration of violence and its effects, specifically on the bodies that are suspended in and connected to prison.*

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Public performance: September 17, 2017



Sable Elyse Smith, *Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors* (video still), 2017

**Queens, NY** – *Sable Elyse Smith: Ordinary Violence* is the first museum solo exhibition by Smith, a conceptual artist working across film, sculpture, and photography. Her practice explores the many ways that trauma and violence is graphed and marked across bodies. For this exhibition, Smith draws from her own experience of visiting her father in each of the six prisons he has inhabited over the past 20 years in order to question the fictions about the systems and structures that govern our lives, and our

illusions of order and justice. Smith examines this habitual violence, and terrors that can hardly be discerned, and asks how it can be visualized, imaged, and grasped.

In her photographic works, Smith explores the ways in which multiple modes of image making and production promote or refute common narratives of incarceration. In a series of works including *7665 Days* (2017), Smith manipulates Polaroid photos of family members taken in visitation rooms that are set against a painted mural; these Polaroids are among the most prominently visible and highly distributed types of images of the prison experience.

In these works, Smith further addresses the unspoken economy and negotiation embedded in the creation and circulation of these images. Typically depicting tropical landscapes, the murals are painted by the inmates themselves, most of whose labor is unpaid. These Polaroids cost USD 2-4, which must be purchased by federal inmates (visitors are not allowed to make the purchase) who typically earn between 12 - 40 cents per hour.

In this way, the paintings are repeatedly commodified and occupy a slippery space between public art and private art. Very tender, personal moments that take place in front of them feel choreographed by and sharply contrasted with the strict code of conduct that governs the visitation, which are enacted by a number of agents: muralist, guard, photographer, camera, visitor, inmate receiving a visit, inmates not receiving a visit, and the room of spectators.

"The mural is a ubiquitous art form within the walls of prison. Besides popular imaging of prison and jails in the dominant media landscape, the intimacy performed (between the incarcerated individual and their visitors) in front of a visiting room mural is the second most iconic representation of prison in the United States," says Smith, who is interested in the production of these images and the immaterial labor embedded in them, in relation to the many and varied ways prison is visualized.

Many of her works address how the system of incarceration impacts personal and collective psyches, registering its effects through bodily experience. A nine-channel video that resembles a surveillance tape, *Untitled: father Daughter Dance* (2013-2017), comprises a juxtaposition of found footage of an arrest, and video of Smith performing the choreography that occurs during the visitation such as emptying pockets, stepping through magnetometers, and being searched.

Smith maps the performances that occur within the bounds and mandates of the prison sphere, inflicting their silent brutality that begins well before one enters the visiting room, and extend well beyond it. In two other videos, *Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors* (2017) and *How We Tell Stories to Children* (2015), Smith employs fragmented cinematography and soundscapes, building up layers of imagery to achieve a silent poetic, and rendering a beauty in the brutal. She marries original and appreciated footage, ranging from familiar images of urban streets, to a clip from Charles and Ray Eames' documentary *Powers of 10* (1977), in a collage at once connecting us to her personal experience and the implicit, but radiating psychosocial milieu of the prison industrial complex. The artist's largest sculpture to date also features in the exhibition, a large white and green neon entitled *Landscape I* (2017), which spells out the sentence "*And there are plenty boys out there screaming.*" Rather than point to familiar narratives of violence of the US prison system, Smith's interest in portraying violence and trauma exists in the banal, everyday effects that are accumulated in bodies over time.

## About Sable Elyse Smith

Sable Elyse Smith (b.1986, Los Angeles, CA) is an interdisciplinary artist and writer. She holds a BA from Oglethorpe University and an MFA from Parsons, The New School For Design. Her work has been exhibited at Socrates Sculpture Park, Queens, NY, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York City, The Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts, Brooklyn, and El Museo del Barrio, New York City among other venues. She has performed at The Museum of Modern Art, New York City; New Museum, New York City; Eyebeam, New York City; and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. Her work has also been screened at Birkbeck Cinema in collaboration with the Serpentine Galleries, London, Artist Television Access, San Francisco, and MoMA PS1, New York City. Her writing has been published in *Radical Teacher*, *Selfish*, *Studio Magazine* and with Recess Art's Critical Writing Fellowship. Smith has received awards from Creative Capital, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, the Franklin Furnace Fund, NYSCA Individual Artist Program in Film and Media and Art Matters. Smith is is visiting Faculty at Virginia Commonwealth University in the Sculpture and Extended Media Department for fall 2017. Smith lives and works in New York City.

## Funding and Support

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## About the Queens Museum

*The Queens Museum in Flushing Meadows Corona Park features contemporary art, events of hyperlocal and international impact, and educational programs reflecting the diversity of Queens and New York City. Changing exhibitions present the work of emerging and established artists, both local and global, that often explore contemporary social issues, as well as the rich history of its site. In November 2013, the Museum reopened with an expanded footprint of 105,000 square feet, a soaring skylit atrium, a suite of daylight galleries, nine artist studios, and flexible event space. The Museum works outside its walls through engagement initiatives ranging from multilingual outreach and educational opportunities for adult immigrants, to a plethora of community led art and activism projects. The Museum's educational programming connects with schoolchildren, teens, families, seniors as well as those individuals with physical and mental disabilities. The Queens Museum is located on property owned in full by the City of New York,*

*and its operation is made possible in part by public funds provided through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.*

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