Cauleen Smith looks for repairs to the past. In this, she has not been alone, leading to searches for primary sources in libraries and places in landscapes that register the expansive efforts of those who have formed their own solutions. The results of this search manifest as directly as a reading list, as internalized as embracing a full spectrum of the world’s sounds, or as simple as attentiveness to the variation of light over a day. Here in *Give It or Leave It*, film, object, and installation offer an emotional axis for navigating four distinct historical universes.

Most present is composer and musician Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda’s Vedantic center, the Sai Anantam Ashram. In the early 1970s, Coltrane experienced both astral projection and spiritual visitations, which soothed the emotional turmoil she faced after the death of her husband and collaborator, John Coltrane. Her experiences were written down and later self-published in a series of books. These incidents lead her to adopt the Sanskrit name Turiyasangitananda, and in 1975, to found the ashram she would run until her death.

In 1966, photojournalist Billy Ray was documenting the environs of Watts for *LIFE* magazine. The photo shoot would be featured in the July 15, 1966, special issue “Watts: Still Seething,” which reckoned with the aftermath of the 1965 Watts Rebellion in Los Angeles. Ray followed a number of local residents, including a group of nine dapper, disaffected, defiant young men iconically

documented in a group portrait at the foot of the Watts Towers. The towers, built by Italian immigrant Simon Rodia between 1921 and 1954, have long registered as a symbol of self-dedication and renewal for the Watts neighborhood, and can be viewed fleetingly in Smith’s *Pilgrim* (2017).

Billy May’s Watts Tower photograph was selected by Smith to recreate as a film, *Sojourner* (2018). Recast with women, Smith relocated the encounter from the Watts Towers to the Outdoor Desert Art Museum of assemblage sculptor Noah Purifoy. Purifoy, who spent a life nurturing ties between artists and a range of communities and social institutions, was incidentally a cofounder of the Watts Towers Art Center in 1970.

The fourth nexus for Smith’s investigation is the Philadelphia Shaker community of black spiritualist Rebecca Cox Jackson, who wrote of her spiritual journey—including her fantastical visions—in an autobiography composed between 1830 and 1864. Jackson was a free woman who, among other callings, founded the first black Shaker community in the United States. Though nothing physical remains today, still, traces of Jackson’s energy—through her recorded images and the Shaker belief in communalism and equality—thread themselves into Smith’s films and installation.

These four locations, while not technically utopian societies, embody sites of historical speculation and radical generosity between artist and community that set divergent paths beyond categorizations, building antidotes to a pervasively perceived hopelessness in American society. Smith is drawn to energies that do not turn their backs on the here and now, and through such, she rebuilds using historical examples, gestures that site her concerns for us. Cinematic filters and mirror balls focus, transform, and refract the light with constant change. Overlapping pastoral soundscapes, and the collected small-scale sculptures populating her closed-circuit TV landscapes hark to music collective the Art Ensemble of Chicago’s decades-long dedication to “little instruments”—including gongs, cymbals, toys, bird calls, and noisemakers of all shapes—as a way to broaden the sonic, historical, and geographical spectrum for music traditionally associated with African Americans. Artist Paul Thek’s painting *Afflict the Comfortable, Comfort the Afflicted* (1985), which in turn borrowed this phrase—coined to describe the role of the press by writer Finley Peter Dunne—is adapted into a banner, calling here to more spiritual ends. Gathered together, these gestures of self-realization want for social publics.

The Combahee River Collective (1974–1980) is perhaps the least visible yet most embedded influence for *Give It or Leave It*. The Boston-based group of black lesbians fought to redress concerns overlooked by mainstream feminism. Widely credited with coining the term “identity politics,” their influential document, “The
Combahee River Collective Statement” (1977), is quoted in fragmentary form throughout Sojourner:

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.

In reimagining a future through this historical cosmos, Smith casts a world that is black, feminist, spiritual, and unabashedly alive.

This defiant energy drives Give It or Leave It. As idiom, “give it or leave it,” mutates the coercive attitude of “take it or leave it.” Smith’s recast proposes a liberating rule for a better world — creating, offering, and gifting, regardless your gesture’s recognition, acceptance, or rejection. She sees this continuing the important examples of selflessness and self-definition that allowed Rebecca Cox Jackson, Simon Rodia, Noah Purifoy, the

Combahee River Collective, and Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda to refuse the pull to merely mirror the world and instead generate something more than the world, in their surrender to possibilities of generosity, hospitality, and collective destiny larger than the self. How we attend today to their examples is on us. Turiyasangitananda in Monument Eternal (1977) recorded one opportunity we could choose:

At dawn, sit at the Feet of Action.
At noon, be at the Hand of Might.
At eventide, be so big, that sky will learn Sky.
Cauleen Smith (b. Riverside, California, 1967; lives Los Angeles) is an interdisciplinary artist, whose work reflects upon the everyday possibilities of the imagination. Operating in multiple materials and arenas, Smith roots her work firmly within the discourse of mid-twentieth-century experimental film. Drawing from structuralism, Third World Cinema, and science fiction, she makes things that deploy the tactics of these disciplines, while offering a phenomenological experience for spectators and participants. Her films, objects, and installations have been featured in numerous group exhibitions, including those at the Studio Museum in Harlem; the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston; the Yerba Buena Center for Art, San Francisco; the 2017 Whitney Biennial; Prospect.4, New Orleans; the New Museum, New York; D21, Leipzig; and Decad, Berlin. Smith has had solo shows of films and installations at the Kitchen, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; the Art Institute of Chicago; and Threewalls, Chicago. Smith is the recipient of several grants and awards, including the Rockefeller Media Arts Award, a Creative Capital Moving Image Grant, the Chicago 3Arts Grant, the Foundation for Contemporary Arts’ Ellsworth Kelly Award, Expo Chicago’s Artadia Award, and a Rauschenberg Residency. Smith was born in Riverside, California, and grew up in Sacramento. She earned her BA in creative arts from San Francisco State University and her MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles’s School of Theater, Film, and Television. Smith teaches in the School of Art at CalArts.

Organized by Anthony Elms, ICA Daniel and Brett Sundheim Chief Curator.

RELATED PROGRAMS

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 7

TBD  Alice Coltrane
Turiyasangitananda: The Ashram Experience

Presented by Ars Nova Workshop as part of The October Revolution of Jazz & Contemporary Music. For information and tickets: theoctoberrevolution.org
FringeArts, 140 N. Columbus Blvd (at Race St.)

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 10

TBD  An intimate performance with singer and actress Helga Davis

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 28

6 PM  Public tour with Anthony Elms, Daniel and Brett Sundheim Chief Curator

PUBLICATION

A fully illustrated publication is planned for 2019 release, featuring essays by the curator and art historian Rhea Anastas, organizer of Warplands, a related 2017 exhibition by Smith at the University of California, Irvine’s CAC Gallery, alongside a conversation between Smith and artist Rodney McMillian.
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