

ARTS & CULTURE

Artist Cauleen Smith on Black Feminist Utopia in California



LISTEN

By [Asal Ehsanipour](#) Feb 5

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life utopian universes, and show how these radically generous communities can offer a model for the rest of society.

One of Smith's films, the 2018 short *Sojourner*, explores communal settings across California, including Alice Coltrane's ashram in the Santa Monica hills and Noah Purifoy's Outdoor Desert Art Museum in Joshua Tree.

Sojourner is currently on display in immersive installations—complete with a shag rug, disco ball, and custom wallpaper—at the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) and the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#). (Due to the spread of COVID-19, both museums have been closed for much of the past year.)

Smith joined [California Report Magazine](#) host Sasha Khokha from her home in Boyle Heights to discuss her inspiration for *Sojourner* and how her work responds to this current moment in history. Her answers have been edited for length and clarity.



'Sojourner' examines the concept of utopia by featuring Black activists from Chicago to Los Angeles. (Courtesy of Cauleen Smith)

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On the Watts Towers, an Unexpected Manifestation of Utopia

Simon Rodia built the Watts Towers over the span of 25 years in the community of Watts. When he started building, Watts was a predominantly African-American neighborhood. He built the towers after work in a strangely collective manner. There are anecdotes about his neighbors saying, 'It's fine if you build these towers, but can you just stop working on them past 10 o'clock? Because we all have to get up to work in the morning.'

Now, the Watts Towers function as a kind of artery and cultural currency and leverage. And the fact that Simon Rodia built these towers and then literally gave them away to the community is an act of radical generosity.



Bill Ray's photo of a group of young men holding a transistor radio at the Watts Tower inspired Cauleen Smith to recreate the photo in her film, 'Sojourner.' (Bill Ray/LIFE/Time Inc/Getty Images)



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fashion shoot. But as I dug deeper into the context for these photos, I learned that the angle of his story was supposed to be the angry, seething aftermath of the Watts Rebellion in 1965.

One of the things that Bill Ray's photograph provoked in me was that when we talk about activism, change, politics, and power, the thing that is always pictured is a male image. But in fact, the actual manifestation of change has always been the work of women. I wanted to make it really visible that Black women have been imagining a better world—and not only imagining it, but making it so.

This photo became a talisman in terms of my research. So I decided that I wanted to reenact that photo somehow, but with women instead of the gorgeous young men in the photo he took.



Smith weaves the motif of the transistor radio throughout 'Sojourner,' using it to tune in and out of different historical reflections on Black women's lives. (Courtesy of Cauleen Smith)

'We would like to affirm that we find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women's continuous life, and the struggle for survival and liberation. As Angela Davis points out in 'Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves,' Black women have always

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Throughout *Sojourner* you hear voices being transmitted to me, like, right when I needed them somehow. Some are words from the **Combahee River Collective**, which wrote this astounding **statement** published in 1977. It discusses the conditions of being a Black woman and it's still a document of great use and value. It's very contemporary in terms of the stakes it's describing.

The part [of the statement] that is so crucial to remember is that if we start building a world based on the position of the least powerful and least empowered in society, we will be building a better world for everyone. The statement is from the perspective of Black women, and their political position actually enables a kind of liberatory ethic for the entire society. I think that is a really important principle and why the document is so vital right now.



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Artist and filmmaker Cauleen Smith, whose work is currently on view at SFMOMA and LACMA. (Courtesy of Harry Gamboa)

On Alice Coltrane, Whose Music Became the Soundtrack for 'Sojourner'

Sojourner opens with "**Om Supreme**," a song where **Alice Coltrane** repeats the word "California" over and over again in this ecstatic fashion. The song basically says that God told her to move to California.

I have never heard anything like the music she made. She really is bringing in bebop, gospel, and the raga form all into one sound. It just blows my mind. I find it totally intoxicating.

After John Coltrane [Alice Coltrane's husband] died, she and her four children moved to Calabasas County. She bought this gorgeous piece of land and started an ashram that attracted all kinds of people from all over the country—especially Black people interested in vedic spirituality—to practice religion and music with her.

Alice Coltrane had already passed away when I finally had the opportunity to visit. I was stricken with this world that she'd built and how her students were still there practicing with the same kind of ethic and generosity that she generated there.

On California's Landscape: Alice Coltrane's ashram, Antelope Valley Poppy Reserve, Vasquez Rocks, Watts Towers

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The phrases on these banners are a quote, the last four lines of Alice Coltrane's book *A Monument Eternal*: “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.” I just thought that was the most beautiful thing anyone could say to anyone else. It's like a prayer or a wish, a blessing. A gift.



In *Sojourner*, a group of women walk out in the desert at sunrise, showcasing Noah Purifoy's Outdoor Desert Art Museum in Joshua Tree. (Courtesy of Cauleen Smith)

On the Film's Closing Scene, at Sunrise in Joshua Tree

I knew sunrises are always gorgeous. That's a given. But the way that light, once it raked across the desert, the second it crossed over the mountains...wow. It was truly profound. I didn't have to give a lot of directions. I didn't have to set a tone. The landscape and that sunrise did everything.

A lot of times people [believe the closing scene includes] 12 Black women in the desert, but it doesn't. It's a really diverse group of women. But they are, I believe, practicing Black culture. Those women are holding each other's hands, grieving together, and walking together. I

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On the Closure of California Museums

I'm hoping that we can get a handle on COVID soon so people can see my work. It really is about this moment. It's about what's possible now and in the future. It's been hard to have a show installed at my favorite art institution in the city, the L.A. County Museum of Art, and not be able to share it with people. But I think relative to the piles of bodies stacking up all around, that's nothing. It's just not even something to complain about. It's simply a signifier of the conditions. I would rather no one see the show and no one die. I just wish that could be the case.

Cauleen Smith imagines a Black, feminist utopia



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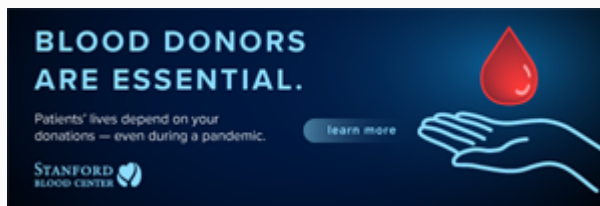
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Now, this is actually work for white people to do. We've seen the face of white supremacy in our neighbors, our coworkers, and strangers on the street. For people who are shocked by what they saw at the Capitol, it's time to think about the ways in which they themselves are connected to that kind of violence in their own lives, in their own families, in their own workplaces, and think about what they want to do about it.

On Finding Micro-Moments of Joy and Hope

I'm very fortunate to live in Boyle Heights in a little bungalow with a big backyard. I go back there and dig holes and plant plants and watch them grow. What I've learned is more than how plants grow, but what they bring: hummingbirds, butterflies, goldfinches, and crows. I just really love watching our backyard become a place for other creatures to live in. And having a closer attachment to the land has been really nice.

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THE DO LIST

Watch: Prince Harry Makes Non-Royal Debut on 'James Corden'

By [Rae Alexandra](#)  Feb 26

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James Corden and Prince Harry enjoy afternoon tea on an open-top bus in Los Angeles. (YouTube/ The Late Late Show With James Corden)

It's been a weird year for Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. First, they stunned Great Britain by "**stepping back**" as senior members of the Royal Family. Then Harry's grandma, Queen Elizabeth II, subsequently chucked a massive **proverbial middle finger** in their direction. Harry and Meghan have since moved from England to Canada, Canada to California, and announced both a **new baby** and a controversial **deal with Netflix**.



I Stayed Up All Night to Watch the Royal Wedding (So You Wouldn't Have To)

Last night—before Meghan and Harry's much-anticipated Oprah interview hits CBS in March —Harry went a'roamin' around Los Angeles with his pal James Corden on the *Late Late Show*.

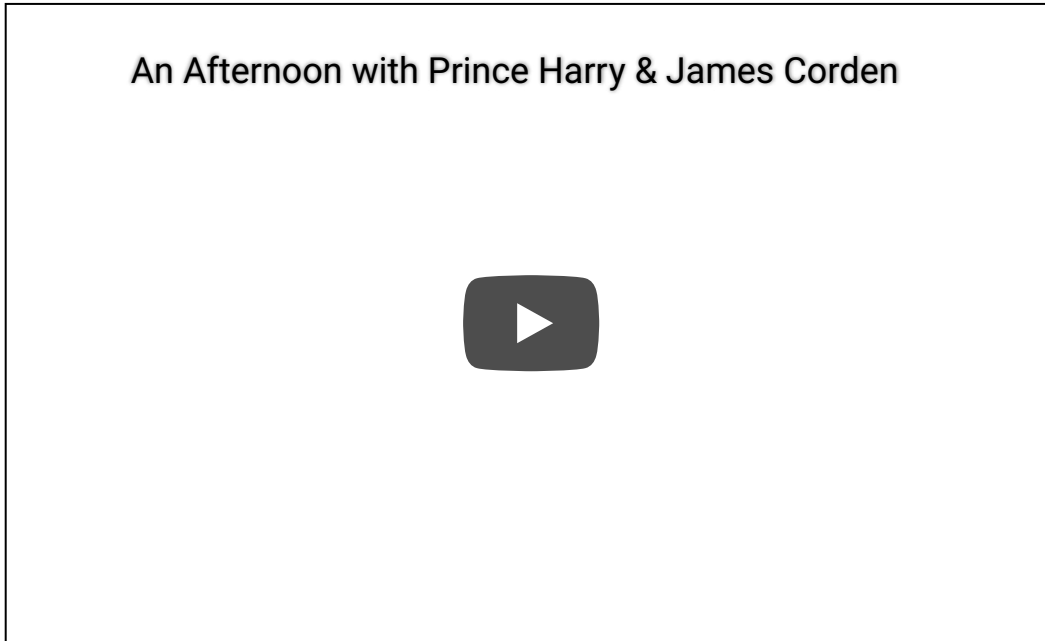
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to watching *The Crown*, Facetimes Meghan, and even completes a military assault course without getting his T-shirt muddy.

You can watch Harry (or "Haz," as his wife calls him) spill the tea both figuratively and literally in full below.



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