Black people have a particularly intimate relationship with various forms of violent death. In the United States there is a historical continuum between the practices of lynching, rape, and police brutality. Sometimes it is relatively quick, and sometimes this death comes in slow motion. Crows may well represent the ancestors who escaped, dead or alive, from the conditions of black fugitivity and creative mobility. The murder of Smith's work is an elegiac embrace of movement as a trope in the restless cycle of life that continues.

At about one minute into the film, our view is through the sights of a gun. Yet the crosshairs never quite sit on the bodies of the crows, and the point of the film is that the crosshairs never settle on the bodies of the crows. In the United States there is a historical continuum between the practices of lynching, rape, and police brutality. Sometimes it is relatively quick, and sometimes this death comes in slow motion. Crows may well represent the ancestors who escaped, dead or alive, from the conditions of black fugitivity and creative mobility. The murder of Smith's work is an elegiac embrace of movement as a trope in the restless cycle of life that continues.

As much as in mobility, Smith’s video is settled in geography. The artist drew initial inspiration from her location, as the film was made at the end of the film it appears again to ascend upward, home to the night sky.

Notes

2. “Jane Crow” is a term coined by civil rights lawyer, activist, and author Paul Murray in the early 1960s to call attention to the experience of women under the law.


Caulene Smith
March 12–July 2, 2016
Flash: Cauleen Smith

Yayna Brown is Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies and English at UCR. Brown’s research interests center on black performance and culture in the US and elsewhere, with current research examining pop and postpunk music as well as speculative fiction. She earned her PhD at Yale University within the African American Studies Department, and is the recipient of fellowships from the Ford Foundation for dissertation and postdoctoral work and a Rockefeller Award for the Study of Black Culture at Stanford Humanities Center. Her book Babydoll Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern (Duke University Press, 2008) won the American Society for Theater Research’s Errol Hill award as well as the Theater Library Association’s George Fredley Award. Brown has published articles in Early Films and Filmmakers (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2001), and Big Ear: Listening to Gender in Jazz Studies (Duke University Press, 2008), among elsewhere.

Flash! contemporary art series features single works made within the last year. The series is organized by Joana Stefanopoulou, CMP Curator of Exhibitions, at the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock. Flash! Caulene Smith is the twelfth exhibition in the series.

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