

Cauleen Smith

By [Susan Snodgrass](#) [📅](#) December 1, 2012 9:37am



San Diego filmmaker [Cauleen Smith](#) began her artistic journey into the life and legacy of experimental jazz musician Sun Ra during a 2010 residency at Threewalls, and the odyssey recently culminated in two powerful exhibitions (all work 2012) that pay homage to both her subject and Chicago, where Sun Ra lived from 1945 to 1961. Combining archival research, interviews and a bit of myth, Smith, working primarily in video and installation, offers a fascinating portrait of this important, eccentric composer and mystic, sometimes conflating history with her own interpretations.

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Sun Ra (1914-1993) was a key figure in Afrofuturism, a cultural movement that mixes science fiction, fantasy, non-Western religions and Afrocentrism. His cosmic jazz celebrated improvisation and space-age themes and was performed with what he called an "Arkestra," whose members wore Egyptian-style robes and sci-fi-inspired headgear. A number of books that influenced Sun Ra and the philosophies he embodied were on view at Threewalls, borrowed from the collection of the late Alton Abraham, Sun Ra's close friend and business manager. These volumes, ranging in theme from religion to poetry to magic, were displayed on shelves that lined three walls of the back gallery, at the center of which were a rug, a chair and a turntable. Smith's album *Black Utopia: LP*, which gathers rare audio excerpts from Sun Ra's rehearsal recordings, live performances and recorded interviews, spun on the turntable.

On view in the main gallery was Smith's *Black Utopia: The Movie*, a series of slides featuring cosmological symbols, drawings and fragments of historical text projected onto a make-shift screen cobbled together from cardboard, plywood and duct tape. Pinned to a nearby wall were 23 watercolor-and-pencil drawings of members of Smith's Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band, comprised of contemporary black youths she organized to play Sun Ra's music in a series of flash mobs that took place throughout the city.

A flash mob that assembled on a rainy day in Chicago's Chinatown forms the central narrative of *Space Is the Place*, one of 14 HD videos exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art, along with two installations. Throughout her short video pieces, Smith employs cinema verité camerawork, particularly in those sequences that lovingly capture Chicago's lakefront and skyline or solo performances by black musicians. At the same time, she uses an improvisational style that interweaves various leitmotifs, including cosmological references, such as pyramids and patterns of shimmering light; Sun Ra's music; and two orange-haired aliens dressed in black unitards. The alien characters often appear outside of windows or walking down the street, where they offer handouts bearing quotes by black icons. In two related works, *Visual Fixation* and *Play Your Part*, a woman tries to convince her therapist that her visions of these figures are not hallucinations but quite real. Deeply empathetic yet often lyrical, Smith's constellational approach to filmmaking parallels Sun Ra's freestyle compositions and spiritual belief in the astral world, while reawakening the political possibilities of black experimental culture.

Photo: View of Cauleen Smith's 2012 re-creation of the library at El Saturn Research Institute, 1945-1993, co- founded by Sun Ra; at Threewalls.