

FILM AT REDCAT PRESENTS

Mon April 15 | 8:30 pm |

Jack H. Skirball Screening Series

\$10[students \$8, CalArts \$5]

Cauleen Smith: *Black Utopia LP (for Sun Ra)*

Los Angeles Premiere

Premiered at Chicago's threewalls artspace, ***Black Utopia LP*** is a deeply original off-shoot of the years of research artist and filmmaker Cauleen Smith devoted to Afrofuturism, a cultural movement that mixes science fiction, fantasy, non-Western religion and Afrocentrism. Chicago legend Sun Ra (1914-1993) and his Arkestra were a key figure in this movement. Smith produced over 800 35mm slides: images of objects found in archives, recorded in contemporary Chicago or appropriated from occult, astronomical, and historical sources. The slides are projected in a 90 min performance over two sides of an LP she recorded – a collage of lectures, rehearsals and live performances by Sun Ra, mundane ephemera, as well as commissioned contributions from Chicago artists Krista Franklin and Avery R. Young.

In person: Cauleen Smith

“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.” —*Art in America*

Experimental filmmaker Smith was a long-term resident of threewalls, first joining the space in 2010 as part of the Studio Chicago program in conjunction with the Sullivan Galleries at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Initially Smith intended to extend her on-going film work on jazz, radical black creativity, and the American urban matrix to a work on Chicago and the legend and impact of Sun Ra. Her research led her down a winding path to residencies at the University of Chicago, Center for Race and Culture, and Experimental Sound Studio’s Sun Ra archives.

Smith produced The Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band, a series of marching band flash mob street performances inspired by Sun Ra’s Arkestra where Chicago Southside high-school marching bands would play a single Sun Ra song arranged for them by local musicians and composers. This series was recorded as part of a number of short films that Smith made while

in the city, culminating in two exhibitions: "A Seed is a Star," on exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and "The Journeyman" at threewalls. Both exhibitions cultivate a specific, immersive experience or manipulation of space; Smith's experience studying Sun Ra's extensive archives pay homage to his own intensive autodidact methods. In addition Smith produced a limited edition vinyl record, *Black Utopia LP* that includes recordings she made over the course of her project in Chicago and materials found in the Sun Ra archive at Experimental Sound Studio.

<Information gathered from threewalls web site>

Cauleen Smith began her artistic journey into the life and legacy of experimental jazz musician Sun Ra during a 2010 residency at Chicago's threewalls. 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. 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. <Adapted from an article published in *Art in America*>

"In African and African-Diasporic cultural production, improvisation signifies mastery. The substitution of one thing for another can sometimes represent a concept more effectively than the thing itself. My recent work has been guided by research into Sun Ra's creative production process and the very nature of his melodies. The time that Sun Ra spent in Chicago was formative. He rehearsed his Arkestra, he wrote some of his most delicate and gorgeous big-band compositions here, and he engaged in intensive historical and linguistic research, in cooperation with other autodidact scholars with the aim of revising history. Sun Ra and his cohorts found ample evidence in primary sources that African thought and spirituality was central to all modern thought and science; and they aimed to prove it through research, through writings, and through art. My recent work is a celebration of Sun Ra's success in this endeavor as well as a way of expanding his legacy to include his deep and abiding love and commitment to African-American youth, to the underdog, and to the outsider."

– Cauleen Smith

Cauleen Smith is a filmmaker and artist whose work reflects upon the everyday possibilities of the black imagination. She grew up in Sacramento, California, received her B.A. from the School of Creative

Arts at San Francisco State University and her M.F.A. from UCLA School of Theater-Television-Film. For the past several years Smith has produced multi-channel film and video installations that incorporate sculptural objects and text. Her interests roam from her roots in structuralist filmmaking to Afrofuturist narrative strategies. Materials and form are modified from project to project, thereby making the body of Smith's work unpredictably varied and diverse. She is currently teaching as a Visiting Artist at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago while exploring the intersection between art, protest, commerce and community on Chicago's southside.

Smith's narrative low-budget feature length film, *Drylongso*, earned her a 2001 Movado Someone To Watch Award from the Independent Spirit Awards, as well as awards from many festivals including SXSW, and Urbanworld. In 2012 Smith was named Outstanding Artist by the National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture. She has received grants from the Film Arts Foundation, American Film Institute, Rockefeller Foundation, and Creative Capital. Her experimental, installation and narrative work has shown at The Kitchen, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Nelson Atkins Museum of Art as well as in film festivals and markets in Milan, London, Paris, and Berlin.

A groundbreaking and powerfully original pioneer of space music, the first musician/composer to mix improvisation with an extensive use of electronic keyboards, **Sun Ra** (1914-1993), lived in Chicago – then a hub of African American cultural innovation and political activism – from 1945 to 1961. This is where he shed his birth name, Herman Blount, to adopt the name “Sun Ra” (inspired by Ra, the Egyptian Sun God) and funded the legendary Arkestra – there also that he developed the distinctive style of his Afrofuturist approach to music. With his friend Alton Abraham, he created an independent record label, usually known as El Saturn Records (the name was based on a vision of being transported to Saturn that Sun Ra kept describing throughout his life.) By the late 1950s, Sun Ra and the Arkestra were wearing costume and headdresses inspired by ancient Egypt and science fiction imagery that became their signature.

Curated by Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud

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