

ARTFORUM

Barbara T. Smith

THE BOX



View of "Barbara T. Smith," 2016. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen.

Expanding on her previous three shows at the Box, each of which offered a tight grouping of related work (early paintings, performance documentation, and experiments with incipient Xerox technology, respectively), Barbara T. Smith sought in her most recent exhibition to expose underlying connections between disparate projects. This broad and generous installation made clear the extent to which the exhibition's titular "Words, Sentences & Signs" provide not only a through line between discrete series spanning from the 1960s to the present, but also a metering of communicative acts relative to the full length of a life. Smith admits as much in the show's press release, stating: "This collection is a portrayal of the life of a human/woman over a span of time." The ongoing "collection"—would-be sentences of stones and shells tidily lined up on boards or arranged into an exclamation point, large-scale paintings of logos and comparatively diminutive artist books collaged with found images and personal snapshots, photographs pasted into shadow boxes, and notes hung from the rafters like drying peppers—fashions an unrelentingly intimate self-portrait of Smith.



The first work one encountered upon entering the show was the undated *Petroglyph: Solitude, Perception, Communication, Incorporation*, a thickly built-up oil on canvas with four quadrants, each isolating a cell: The schematic narrative progresses from a stick figure, to a fish, to the figure with a pole catching the fish, to the figure consuming it. The work established from the first a drive for contact that is not necessarily mutually beneficial. Incorporation, after all, is not exchange. Next to this work, three oil pastels jointly constituting *Pronunciation: That, Mirror Voice, Words on Glass*, 1986, pictured the orifice from which speech emanates, while withholding the contents of any supposed utterances. Elsewhere, the wry *He Says, She Says*, 1985, framed the problem of communication as gender-based. Conversation seemed the goal, ever attempted if forever obviated from the first.

Smith's 2011 exhibition at the University of California, Irvine, "The Radicalization of a '50s Housewife," established the generational aspects of many of her recurring themes, which are extrapolated from but not beholden to her early experience as a twenty-year-old bride and Pasadena housewife. The termination of her role as the latter was the precondition for Smith's return to the studio (she would graduate from UCI's MFA program in 1971) and the fodder for her important 1981 performance *Birthdaze*, which presented a barely fictionalized account of Smith's relation to several male artists—playing themselves—in various scenarios that explored, via actions by turns aggressive, submissive, and sexually symbiotic, the power dynamics between women and men. Dealing with artmaking and normative social roles, specifically motherhood, Smith's recent show similarly suggested a kind of warped, nonfunctional Venn diagram that repels its constituents rather than finding within them a point of overlap.

While many of the artist's tropes are archetypal, there was no question as to the centrality of autobiography within her practice, as in the aggregation of performance photos and found objects arrayed as memoir in *The Cloistered Study*, 1976, or mordant allusions to her son's death from AIDS complications in *Blue Shards*, 1997–99. In a corner of the back gallery, surrounded by a photo series that offered glimpses of Smith's recent locales on the Pacific coast ("The Westside: A Blessed Time," 2011–15), one encountered *Hot Peppers*, 1982–83, a chain of index cards dangling from the ceiling, each card bearing a scrawled script. In a walk-through of the show, Smith admitted that the clustered poems are vestiges from her studio, observations and notes unread by their author after they were composed. They were intended for her but are now addressed to us. The poems lingered in the air. They served as a powerful reminder of what it means to keep working, to hold forth the possibility of recognition, still.

—Suzanne Hudson

