



Marlene Smith, 'Ah, Sugar', installation view

Marlene Smith: Ah, Sugar

Cubitt, London, 22 August to 18 October

There is an end-of-summer glow under the gallery's skylight. It gently illuminates Marlene Smith's stripped-back installation of steel frame plinths that hold a series of works made from white icing sugar, and a set of framed black-and-white photographs over two adjoining walls. This is an understated yet captivating show by Smith, an artist who was one of the founding members of the influential BLK Art Group in the early to mid 1980s, before becoming the director of The Public in West Bromwich and more recently taking on research posts at Middlesex University and UAL, London. 'Ah, Sugar', however, is a celebration of an artist who is usually historicised by her formative work; the exhibition gives viewers the chance to engage with her current thinking - this, remarkably, is her first solo show.

In 'Ah, Sugar', Smith focuses in on items present in her childhood home. This is evident in the rolled-out sugar works that are imprinted with the patterns of textiles she inherited from her family. The steel surfaces that Smith has presented these works on lends a seemingly neutral, even austere, ground, certainly taking us beyond associations with a kitchen table. Yet they remain domestically sized. For example, one is the size of a chest of draws, another the dimensions of a fridge; its height means that I can only see the edges of the sugary surface and so find myself, as if returning to my own childhood height, stretching my arm above the work in order to photograph it with my camera.

Rather than placing these works in vitrines, Smith heightens the sense of fragility by exposing them to the temperature and dust of the gallery environment. The fondant icing is a neatly receptive surface for preserving and holding the impressions of these printed textiles and lace patterns: in places the edges are extruded and folded in, other times flattened and thinned into transparency. The edges of the sculptures are delicate, they shrivel and crack as they dry - I further notice an occasional impression of fingerprints from visitors who are drawn in by the tactile nature of the work. Each patterned imprint seems to entangle the complexities of the diaspora of the black Atlantic with Smith's home as a site of nurture and relative calm. This is further evoked through the works' titles: *Auntie Josette*, *Cousin Pee*, *Miss Ruby* and *Aunt Enid*. The naming, grouping and proximity of the sculptures create a connected familial network in which personalities, place and period emerge. The titling seems to extend defined notions of typical familial bonds to that of a community - as if a neighbour or friend has been poignantly made a blood relative - one that is framed by Smith within black British culture. Latently, these

relations hold together histories of the transatlantic slave trade, which are irrevocably bound by the history of plantations and the production of sugar with the UK and the West Indies.

Across two walls are a series of photographs made collaboratively with the artist Ajamu. The images record Smith's performance to camera and pull the viewer to her body; with only her back visible, we focus on Smith's folds of flesh or the nape of her neck. A dressing gown dappled with flowers and leaves is held tight or falls and drapes around her body, shapes that echo and counter the whited sugary forms that surround her. The edges of the photographs are also distinctive for their loose application of black ink, which gives a painterly quality to the overall image. The works extend her earlier performances from 2014, *Ad(dress) Rehearsal - Wesley* and *Ad(dress) Rehearsal - Golda*, in which Marlene dressed in the clothing of her mother and father; Ajamu's documentation highlights the tiny details that were present in Smith's gestures, clothing and jewellery. A further material connection to the sculptural sugar works is found in the fact that the photographs are printed on bagasse paper - a material made with the fibrous waste from sugar cane production: Smith's image is materially made of the sugar she observes and critiques.

By tending to the often-overlooked details of a black British home, the works in the exhibition make apparent what is passed between often-unrecorded lives: a creative inheritance that is layered in the materials Smith assembles.

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Simnikiwe Buhlungu: hygrosommons (iter.01)

Chisenhale, London, 6 September to 3 November

The 'hygro' in the title of the South African artist Simnikiwe Buhlungu's solo show at Chisenhale is a reference to the hygrometer: a scientific instrument invented in 1783 that measures humidity. Early into her research for this exhibition Buhlungu was in touch with scientists to try to understand the Earth's hydrological cycle. She became fascinated by the tools used to measure humidity and wanted to make her own. They told her to just use hair. Human hair is hygroscopic - it retains moisture, kinking when it senses humidity. Of course, what type of hair was not specified outright, but inevitably it would be different from Buhlungu's curly and absorbent hair. The exhibition 'Hygrosommons (inter.01)' shrugs off any attempt to construct a measuring device within legacies of western science and its colonial tendrils. Instead, Buhlungu sets up situations that query how we measure environmental phenomena against these established epistemological frameworks, such as the metrics that differentiate puddles from ponds or pools. The artist leads us through the different ways of 'knowing' by asking questions such as, 'when does a puddle stop being a puddle?' or, more abstractly: 'what is the sound of a puddle?'

Before installing the show Buhlungu spent several weeks soaking wooden boards in the Hertford Union Canal which runs just behind the gallery. These now form the two open doors at the entrance of the gallery,