



CASE
STUDY

TIFFANY SMITH

Exploring Cultural Identity and Finding Home Through Photography

Home can be a complicated concept. So can family, community, identity and assimilation. All of these sometimes complex and challenging concerns pulse through the vibrant photography and installations of Tiffany Smith, who received her MFA in Photography, Video and Related Media in 2015. Her works both invite the viewer in and challenge their assumptions as she explores these issues.

As part of the first generation of her family to be raised outside of the Caribbean, Smith has ►







experienced the tension between preserving her cultural identity and assimilating. She was raised between Miami, the Bahamas and Jamaica, and has lived for the last 10 years in Brooklyn. Her work examines the sense of displacement that she has experienced throughout her life.

Smith has a background in photography, having earned a BFA in the subject in 2007. One day, as an undergrad, Smith was selecting images for an exhibition. A friend noticed and fell in love with a candid photo of Smith's sister and her children sitting on rocks beside a river in Jamaica. For her friend, the image portrayed a reality very distinct from her own, informed perhaps by a touch of exoticism. For Smith, "that moment made me view my family and our experience from a different perspective, and I began photographing them more, centering on

this experience of visiting home and trying to understand who I am there, who I am here, and how I embody the space in between."

"Undergrad was a time of a lot of technical experimentation for me—discovering ways that I could use and challenge the medium of photography," she explains. Smith worked in graphic design and photography before deciding to apply to the MFA program. She had started to explore installation art in the time leading up to her graduate studies. One of the reasons she was attracted to the program was that it would allow her to further develop her photography skills while also exploring other media through the ample resources that SVA makes available to students.

In her series called *For Tropical Girls Who Have Considered Ethnogenesis When the Native Sun is Remote*,

LEFT, *WOMAN WHO BECAME NIGERIAN THROUGH HER PARENTS EYES*, 2015, FROM THE SERIES *A WOMAN, PHENOMENALLY*. TOP, AN INSTALLATION VIEW OF THAT SERIES.

which she started during her time in the MFA program at SVA, Smith presents self-portraits where she is clad in costumes and placed amid sets that evoke cultural signifiers of the Caribbean. The works pose questions about cultural identity and the implications of iconographic representations. Smith decided to use self-portraits so she could experience what her subjects experienced when she photographed them. At about the same time, she started work on her series *A Woman, Phenomenally*, which explores the representation of women of color and how they are generically classified as one group, which skips over the details of their greatly varied identities. The project, which was her MFA thesis, mixes photography and installation, including props, sets, and digital manipulation of the imag-

es. "This constructed environment mirrors the ambiguous social space that the women navigate in reality," she explains. "Each woman presents a reflection of her constructed identity within the idealized environment of the photograph." Smith continues to work on these series even now.

Many of the themes that Smith addresses in her work are reflective of personal experiences of identity and home. And as her work evolves, so too does her personal understanding of these issues: "What I'm learning more as I go is that you carry 'home' with you. I do still view myself as sort of a gypsy and not really fixed to one place in particular, and through these investigations in my work, I am learning to feel more at home in the in-between space."



TIFFANY WITH HER *INDOOR OUTDOOR* INSTALLATION.