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*Out of Easy Reach*

Rebuild Foundation, Stony Island Arts Bank

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The Stony Island Arts Bank portion of *Out of Easy Reach* presents three American artists working with abstraction and assemblage practices to address personal and universal histories, identity, socio-political and cultural issues. Each artist has an outstanding track record. These three remarkable artists are: Shinique Smith (born 1971, Baltimore, MD.), Sheree Hovsepian (American, born 1972, Isfahan, Iran) and Barbara Chase-Riboud, (born 1939, Philadelphia, PA.).

An uncluttered and sophisticated presentation at SIAB allows each work to command space and gravitas. The entire former bank lobby, now a white, box-shaped cube, is given to Shinique Smith's "*Forgiving Strands*," which consists mostly of bundled and stranded fabrics strung from wall to wall, high up near the ornate vintage ceiling. In this case, Smith's work is more installation art than assemblage.



Shinique Smith  
Forgiving Strands, 2014-present,  
Fabric, clothing, ribbon, rope, plush décor and accessories, dimensions variable

In one corner, a group of hanging bundles of black fabric looks eerily figurative, suggesting a squirming, tarred body; while in an opposite corner, a defeated looking teddy bear hangs like a suspension of childhood belief. Nearby, a worn out dream catcher is a stand in for a fading star. I imagined the strands from wall to wall to be lifelines, timelines, pathways and voyages, the bridging of continents and interpersonal constellation, the ties that bind us.

It's important to view *Forgiving Strands* from various viewpoints and distances, as the bundles take on different personas while new forms appear and disappear. The bright lighting on *Forgiving Strands* is a shadow slayer; one can imagine what the effect of shadow play might have been like in this presentation.

Also by Shinique Smith, there's a baled and bundled, upright and ironically rigid monolith of clothing and textiles called *Bale Variant No. 0022*. Both of Smith's pieces sent my imagination to wondering just who the people were that once wore these articles and scraps of clothing, and what their lives might have been like. One can almost feel their presence and hear their whispers. They've all been compressed and imprisoned into to one homogenous block in *Bale Variant No. 0022*.



Shinique Smith  
Bale Variant No. 0022, clothing, fabric, accessories, ribbon and wood  
90 x 30 x 30"

There are five pieces by Sheree Hovsepian included. Four of them are based upon old school, analog photographic processes such as photograms and die transfers, which are used as elements in mixed media constructions. Three of these pieces (*Sway*, *Lotus Position and Form Body*) make much use of layered shapes of stretched nylon to suggest minimalist, stage-like environments behind architectural veils.

*Reveries of a Solitary Walker* is the largest and most complex of Hovsepian's photographic constructions presented here. An attached and weathered wood stick divides the picture plain vertically and diagonally. References are made to star maps, planets and to the four directions. A cross over a rain bowed heart hovers above a small silhouette of a walking figure.

Hovsepian's large ink and walnut oil stained painting on paper, titled *Peaking*, is similar to classic and gestural abstract expressionists like Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Motherwell and Jackson Pollock. It's got calligraphic motion and form like a Whirling Dervish twirling above the blank white space of the paper. Hovsepian's very modest use of color is thoughtful, elegant and mysterious.



Sheree Hovsepian  
Reveries of a Solitary Walker, 2015, archival dye transfer, graphite, acrylic, silver gelatin prints, wood, ink drawing on paper, brass nails, string, 50x40"

The star and matriarch of the Stony Island Arts Bank portion of *Out of Close Reach* is Barbara Chase-Riboud, a 78 year old with a record of accomplishments longer than Mount Everest is tall. She also happens to be quite a successful novelist and poet.

Chase-Riboud's larger than human scale stele *Little Gold Flag* consists of a bulky, crumpled and reflective, lost wax bronze form above a skirt made of strands of knotted silk. It's like bumping into a dazzling one-eyed warrior that's wearing a tribal rope kilt.

*Little Gold Flag* is part of Chase-Riboud's Malcom X series of monumental stela sculptures, which she began creating in memory of the slain civil rights activist in 1969 and has continued for 48 years. The contrast of bronze and stranded silk threads is striking, and while it would be easy to dig for meaning here, the artist has stated that the work is meant to be purely abstract and beautiful. Here's the quote from an interview with the artist in Artforum, Oct 24, 2017: "The work is pure abstraction, pure beauty—that's the only thing I'm really interested in. Most activism sacrifices the aesthetic part of making art for the message. I never do that. For me, the message is the message."



Barbara Chase-Ribaud  
*Little Gold Flag*, 1985, polished bronze and silk, 78 x 26 x 15"

All photos courtesy of David Sampson