

Mitter, Siddhartha. "A New York Art Debut, a Los Angeles Love Song." *The New York Times* (January 19, 2024) [ill.] [online]

The New York Times

A New York Art Debut, a Los Angeles Love Song

Film, music and scent combine in Cauleen Smith's immersive ode to her city. Her touchstone is Wanda Coleman, a great poet of L.A.



The artist Cauleen Smith, whose latest project, an immersive video installation combining sight, sound and scent to explore Los Angeles, honors the poet Wanda Coleman as its guide. Phylcia J.L. Munn for The New York Times

By Siddhartha Mitter

Jan. 19, 2024 Updated 9:08 a.m. ET

A couple of months ago, the artist and filmmaker [Cauleen Smith](#) gathered a bare-bones crew for a guerrilla-style shoot — no permits; the locations half-scouted, half-figured-out on the fly — around the land that she calls her home and her obsession: Los Angeles.

They were filming the city — four days and nights in a van, shooting from the ocean to East L.A., from humble Watts blocks to the San Gabriel foothills. But more than this, they were tuning into the city’s signals, as you might on an old radio — with the words of a Los Angeles poet, Wanda Coleman, as their tonal and emotional compass.

They made long tracking shots of the beach or roads lined with fast-food outlets and auto shops. They took slow panoramas from hilltops, and held still for minutes, sometimes hours, on downtown garment-shop blocks or railroad crossings. If people entered the frame they kept filming, letting the city come to them.

This week, Smith premieres the film, “[The Wanda Coleman Songbook](#),” at 52 Walker, a gallery in TriBeCa, through March 16. It’s a New York debut but a deeply Los Angeles project — an ode by a resident seeking language to make sense of L.A.’s seductions and precarity, while honoring a creative precursor — [Coleman died in 2013 at age 67](#) — in whom she finds insight and strength.



Installation view of "Caulieen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook" at 52 Walker gallery in TriBeCa. Accompanying the film is an album of seven specially commissioned songs from musicians who each freely interpret a Coleman poem. Kerry McPate/52 Walker

Video — four channels projected floor-to-ceiling — is just one part of this multi-sensory experience. In lieu of a soundtrack there’s an album of seven specially commissioned songs from musicians like Meshell Ndegeocello and Kelsey Lu — each one a free interpretation of a Coleman poem. Visitors may lounge on sofas and drop the stylus on the EP, which runs the same length as the video but can be started at any point.

Completing the immersive effect, shadows projected on the rear wall evoke Los Angeles street art and sights — an Olmec head; a raven on a power line. A bespoke scent — inspired by the earth and flora of Griffith Park — wafts through the gallery.

With its layers and synesthetic appeal, the project, which was curated by Ebony L. Haynes, the director of 52 Walker, explores Smith’s conflicted love for a city that is hard and getting harder — notably for the poor and for the city’s declining Black community, now [8.2 percent of its population](#) — yet infused with disconcerting beauty.

“I find L.A. beautiful and horrific, and I love trying to see it that way,” Smith said. “You can have such profound rage at the city and then be gobstopped at a giant feral bush of bougainvillea. And there’s someone sleeping underneath that bush. It’s all of it at once.”



Stills from “The Wanda Coleman Songbook.” Video is just one part of the multi-sensory experience. via Cauleen Smith and 52 Walker, New York

Smith, 56, who grew up in Sacramento, has had an [unusual creative journey](#) back to Los Angeles, where she lived in the 1990s. She emerged as a filmmaker with experimental works and a feature, “Drylongso,” which earned praise at Sundance in 1999 but failed to secure distribution — consistent with Hollywood’s low interest at that time in Black female directors and topics.

Decamping from the industry, she moved to Texas and then Chicago. There, she reinvented herself as an interdisciplinary artist, expanding into drawings, textile banners, installations, performances and processions — even wallpaper. After years under the radar in both film and art worlds, she appeared in the [2017 Whitney Biennial](#), with multiple [museum shows since](#).

Honors too have followed, including the Studio Museum in Harlem’s [Wein Prize in 2020](#) and the [Heinz Award for the Arts in 2022](#). And last year the long unfindable “[Drylongso](#)” came out of obscurity with a restoration, theatrical release and induction in the [Criterion Collection](#).

In both film and other projects, Smith makes a practice of honoring her important influences, folding into her work their words or music, or filming at sites important in their lives. Sun Ra and Alice Coltrane recur frequently in these ways.

Her brilliant 2018 film, “[Sojourner](#),” invokes an expanded pantheon, including the assemblage artist Noah Purifoy, the feminist Combahee River Collective, and Rebecca Cox Jackson, who founded a 19th-century Black Shaker community. An ongoing drawing series, meanwhile, depicts covers of [Black feminist and other books](#) that have shaped Smith intellectually.



In the 2017 Biennial, Cauleen Smith presented elaborately hand-stitched banners that hung from the museum ceiling. Matthew Carasella/Whitney Museum of American Art



Still from Smith's 2018 video, "Sojourner," a homage to visionaries including Alice Coltrane and the Combahee River Collective, shot in locations around Southern California and elsewhere in the country. Cauleen Smith

But when she turned to Coleman, who was informally called the “poet laureate of Los Angeles” but less-known elsewhere, it was to address, Smith said, a downright existential concern.

Smith had moved back to Los Angeles in 2017 to teach at the California Institute of the Arts. (She now teaches at the University of California, Los Angeles.) On returning, she said, she found her love for the city undimmed, yet the circumstances of ordinary people, especially Black people, increasingly dire.

Reading [Coleman](#) — another Black female artist with love and anger for the city — helped Smith find her bearings. “Black people have been displaced and erased from L.A. in a way that continues to shock and infuriate me,” she added. “This idea of a Black L.A., which honestly was like the 20th-century fuel of this city, is struggling for life now. I was trying to find something to latch onto to think about this or put language to it. And that was Wanda.”

Coleman was intense, charismatic, an [L.A. original](#). “A force of nature ... the conscience of the L.A. literary scene,” the [Los Angeles Times critic David Ulin](#) wrote in an appreciation after her death. “A real in-the-flesh, flesh-eating poet who also happened to be a real black woman,” said the poet Terrance Hayes, introducing a [volume of her selected works](#) in 2019.

Raised in Watts, she dropped out of college for 1960s militant politics, but soon made writing her radical practice — sustained (barely) by various service, clerical and “pink-collar” jobs. She briefly edited *Players*, a soft-core magazine for Black men, in the early 1970s. She later won an Emmy as a writer for the soap “Days of Our Lives.”

Her poetry, published since the late 1970s by Black Sparrow Press, was raw, often rude, sexually explicit, biting funny, full of cleareyed fury at the systems and biases she faced as a working-class Black woman — and acerbically insightful on intimacy across class and race. It was also virtuosic, playing with forms from sonnets to the blues and a plethora of literary references. [She read it like jazz.](#)



Stills from "The Wanda Coleman Songbook." Cauleen Smith's film crew made long tracking shots of beaches or roads lined with fast-food outlets and auto shops, and took slow panoramas from hilltops or railroad crossings. via Cauleen Smith and 52 Walker, New York

In the 1990s, Smith was vaguely aware of Coleman. "I had read a poem or two," she said. Now, diving into the complete oeuvre, she was struck by how its perspective brought back her own precarious early days in the city, carless and riding the bus — and by the fierce dignity the author claimed for herself and the people she depicted.

Coleman wrote "without self-pity, but with total clarity," Smith said. When she writes about violence and abuse, "what you are experiencing is the processing of this terror and violence and a desire to survive it — a belief that your life has value and you're going to make your way."

Before long, Smith said, she was thinking of Coleman as she moved through the city, attentive to those on its margins. “When you’re sitting in your car in L.A., Wanda is the best guide,” she said. But once her project hatched, it was not with a film in mind.

Instead, she wanted to make a record album: To share poems with musicians she admired, “to know if they connect with Wanda, how they connect, what it sounds like.” Shot after the music was recorded, the video “is a wrapper or blanket that’s trying to envelop you while you listen to what these artists do with Wanda’s work.”

The seven tracks were made separately, with different artists, yet the result — somewhere in the realm of jazz and avant-garde soul — is lyrical and cohesive. The roster is impressive: [Alice Smith](#); [Jamila Woods](#) and Standing on the Corner; [moor mother](#) and [Aquilés Navarro](#); [Jeff Parker](#) and Ruby Parker; [Shala Miller](#); [Ndegeocello](#) and [Lu](#).



Cauleen Smith with George Evans, an artist and brother of Wanda Coleman, at Beyond Baroque, a literary center in Venice, Los Angeles, where Coleman often taught workshops. Phyticia J.L. Munn for The New York Times

Woods, who is based in Chicago, said she felt resonance between Gwendolyn Brooks's street-level feel for that city and Coleman's Los Angeles. She picked the poem "Wanda in Worryland" for its "gritty vulnerability," she said — "the intrusive thoughts and external pressures and assumptions that haunt your interior space."

Alice Smith found Coleman "very intense — I had to really figure it out," she said by phone. Her lush, echoing track builds off a few lines of "In That Other Fantasy Where We Live Together." She found herself wishing tenderness on Coleman, who she felt "could use a little bit of somebody to handle her with some kind of care."

By the time of the shoot, Cauleen Smith said, Coleman's work felt like a trusted guide in looking closely at her city.

It pulled her toward long slow takes, allowing life to happen: "Can we just stare at this strip mall for 10 minutes? Can we just watch people go in and out of the liquor store?" And when things got uncomfortable — how long is it appropriate or productive to show a person disoriented at a bus stop, or laboriously pushing a cart across the street? — thinking about Coleman helped her sense where to draw the line.

Coursing through Coleman's work, Smith said, is deep love for the total Los Angeles with all its contradictions. "She drank up this whole city," Smith said. "She understood it so well."

Now Smith, too, has found that the more she loves on Los Angeles, the more it loves her back — like the strangers she encountered while shooting, who were kind and funny. "It's really disarming," she said. "The distance between the political rhetoric of the city, which is cruel, and the tenderness and joy of the people is wild."

Hopkins, Zoe. "Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook." *The Brooklyn Rail* (January 26, 2024) [ill.] [online]

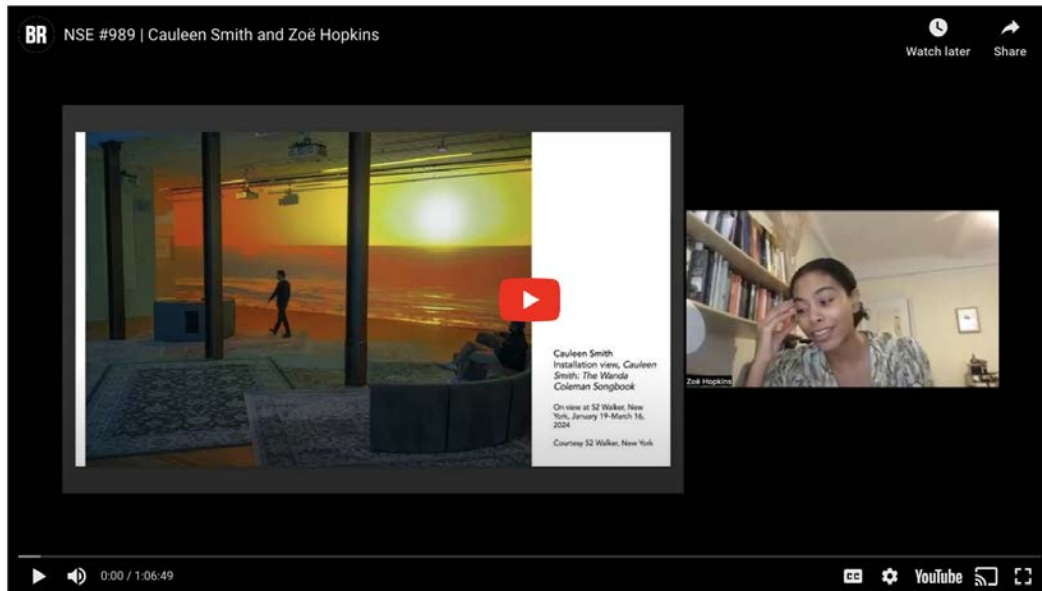


THE NEW SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT | #989

Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook

Featuring Smith and Zoë Hopkins

📅 Friday, January 26, 2024 1 p.m. Eastern / 10 a.m. Pacific



Artist Cauleen Smith joins Rail contributor Zoë Hopkins for a conversation.

In this talk

[Visit *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, on view at 52 Walker, New York through March 16, 2024 →](#)

Cauleen Smith

Cauleen Smith is a filmmaker and artist. With a BA in cinema from San Francisco State University (1991) and an MFA in filmmaking from the University of California-Los Angeles (1998), her interdisciplinary work expands from histories and practices of experimental film, including structuralism, Third World cinema, and science fiction. Through immersive installations, moving-image works, sculpted objects, and textiles, she engages with non-Western cosmologies, Afro-diasporic histories, Black cultural icons, real and speculative utopias, and, in her words, “the everyday possibilities of the imagination.” In addition to many group exhibitions, she has had solo exhibitions at MASS MoCA and LA’s Museum of Contemporary Art, among others.



More on Cauleen Smith

- cauleensmith.com
- [@cauleen_smith](https://www.instagram.com/cauleen_smith)

Zoë Hopkins

Zoë Hopkins is a writer and critic based in New York. She received her BA in Art History and African American Studies at Harvard University, and is currently working on her MA in Modern and Contemporary Art at Columbia University. Her writing has been published in the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Artforum*, *Cultured* and *Hyperallergic*.

In the Rail: [Zoë Hopkins](#)



Miranda, Carolina A.. “Two Chilean films depict Tierra del Fuego’s brutal colonization — and with it, art’s role.” *LA Times* (January 27, 2024) [ill.] [online]

Los Angeles Times

Two Chilean films depict Tierra del Fuego’s brutal colonization — and with it, art’s role



Felipe Gálvez's "The Settlers" tells the story of the genocidal massacre of the Selk'nam people of Tierra del Fuego. (Mubi)

BY CAROLINA A. MIRANDA | COLUMNIST

JAN. 27, 2024 8 AM PT

It’s been a devastating week at the Los Angeles Times, with the [layoffs of countless colleagues](#) 🎧. That is going to mean some changes around here. I’m **Carolina A. Miranda**, art and design columnist, and I’ll continue to keep you posted on all that — as well as the latest essential arts news:

In and out of the galleries

Cauleen Smith's "The Wanda Coleman Songbook," [an immersive, four-channel video piece](#) inspired by the words of L.A.'s unofficial poet laureate, has landed at New York gallery **52 Walker**. "I find L.A. beautiful and horrific, and I love trying to see it that way," Smith tells the New York Times' **Siddhartha Mitter**. "You can have such profound rage at the city and then be gobstopped at a giant feral bush of bougainvillea."



A still from Cauleen Smith's "The Wanda Coleman Songbook," 2024. (Cauleen Smith / 52 Walker)

“Hyperallergic Spring 2024 New York Art Guide.” *Hyperallergic* (February 2, 2024) [ill.] [online]

HYPERALLERGIC

Art Previews

Hyperallergic Spring 2024 New York Art Guide

A guide to this season’s museum exhibitions and art events in and around New York City, including the Whitney Biennial.

 Hyperallergic February 2, 2024

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Isaac Julien, "Iolaus/In the Life (Once Again... Statues Never Die)" (2022), inkjet print, 59 x 78 3/4 inches (© Isaac Julien; courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London) / From the Whitney Biennial

There’s nothing like springtime in New York City, blooming with color, people, and things to do. Museums, galleries, and public art come alive as locals and tourists mingle in plazas, on subways, and in the halls of the venerable institutions that make this place truly great.

As the city's leading publication for visual art, we're proud to compile this guide for those looking to explore and see things in new and different ways. Contemporary art is not for the timid; it jostles you into action, provokes you into reconsidering long-held beliefs, and pushes you to look outside your bubble toward other worlds — good art does, anyway.

Please read through these previews and challenge yourself. Explore a new venue you've never visited before, or enjoy the work of an artist whose name is unfamiliar to you. The beauty of New York that is there are too many museums, galleries, and nonprofit art spaces for any one person to see — but you can certainly try.

—Hrag Vartanian, *Editor-in-Chief, Co-founder*



Cauleen Smith, *work in progress* (2023) (© Cauleen Smith; courtesy the artist and 52 Walker, New York)

Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook

This show follows Cauleen Smith's previous homages to Black artists such as Noah Purifoy and Alice Coltrane, this time focusing on Wanda Coleman, often called Los Angeles's unofficial poet laureate. An immersive video installation, it merges Coleman's written poetry with Smith's visual poetry.

52 Walker (52walker.com)

52 Walker Street, Tribeca, Manhattan

Through March 16

Harris, Jane Ursula. "Cauleen Smith Presents an Ode to Wanda Coleman." *Frieze* (February 6, 2024) [ill.] [online]

FRIEZE

Cauleen Smith Presents an Ode to Wanda Coleman

At 52 Walker, New York, the artist honours the poet by bridging her writing and her beloved Los Angeles

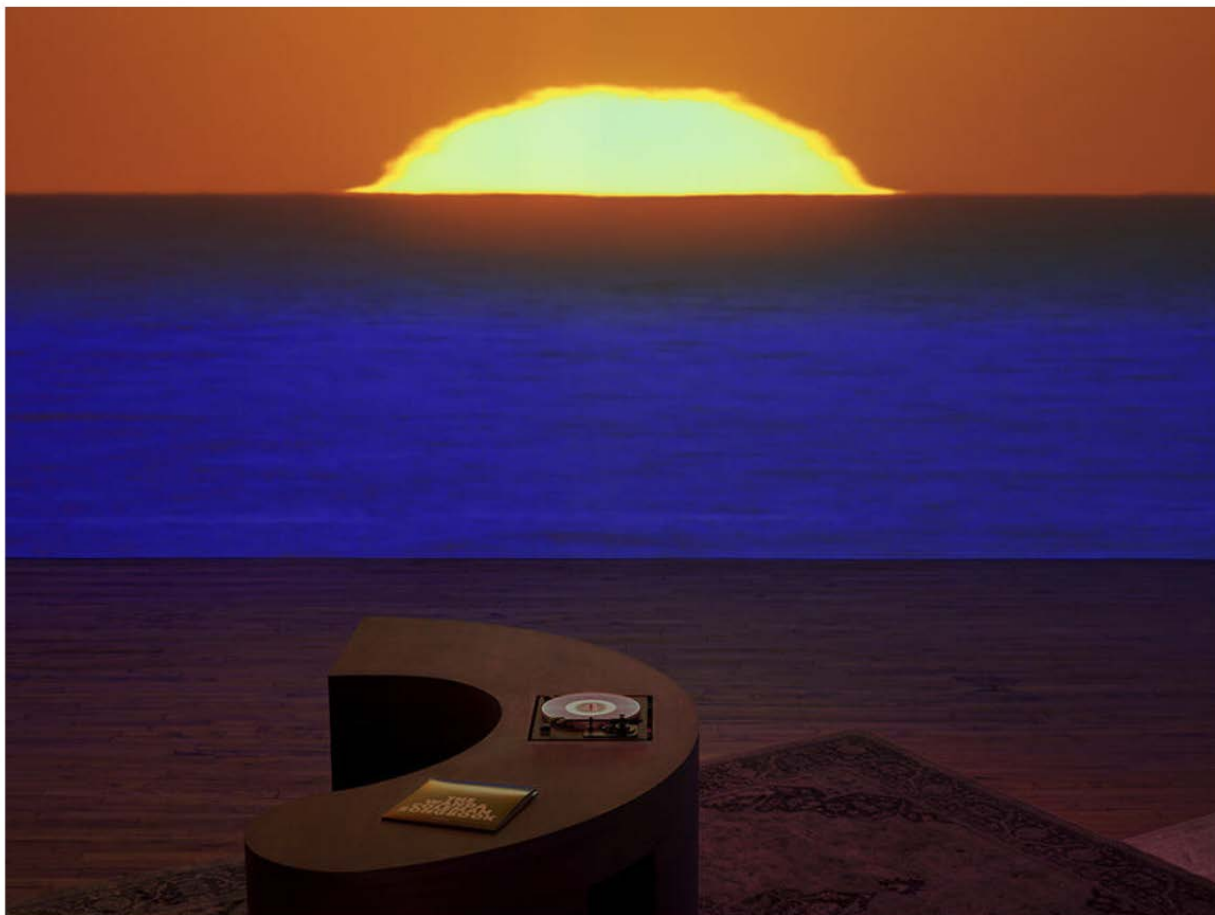
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BY JANE URSULA HARRIS IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 06 FEB 24



Wanda Coleman is a poet's poet, known for her biting lyricism and deeply felt explorations of the quotidian and personal. Alternately dubbed 'the LA Blueswoman' (by poet Tim Joyce) and 'LA's unofficial poet laureate' (by the *Los Angeles Times* in her 2013 obituary), her raw vulnerability and unwavering resilience recently inspired artist Cauleen Smith to turn Coleman's work into a collaborative songbook. Featuring ten musical artists and bands – Kelsey Lu, Shala Miller, moor mother and Aquiles Navarro, Meshell Ndegeocello, Jeff Parker and Ruby Parker, Alice Smith, and Jamila Woods and Standing on the Corner – the resulting EP, *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, like the eponymous exhibition it spawned (both 2024), is a remarkably tender ode to both the late poet and her native city.

Smith, who grew up in Sacramento, began digging into Coleman's prodigious output in 2017, when she moved to LA and found herself trying to navigate its startling mix of natural beauty and sprawling poverty. That dissonance, along with the alienation limned by Coleman in her evocations of the racism she endured as a working-class Black woman in her hometown, imbue both the EP and the multi-sensory installation with a particularly elegiac or 'bluesy' register.



'Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook', 2024, installation view. Courtesy: 52 Walker, New York

Walking into 52 Walker, the audience is plunged into a languid environment replete with plush couches and rugs, where a bespoke scent embodying the earthy splendours of LA's Griffith Park wafts around you, and a large ottoman covered with Coleman's published books encourages you to read. Wall-to-ceiling projections of an LA both majestic and mundane – shot mostly by the artist from the remove of a car – surround a turntable station in the centre of the gallery on which visitors can play tracks from the EP at will. Running the same length as the video loop, the album consists of A and B sides respectively titled 'MILES IN THE NIGHT' and 'THE WEATHER', with several songs, including 'Wanda in Worryland' and 'Black Handed Curse', taking their names directly from Coleman's poems.



'Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook', 2024, installation view. Courtesy: 52 Walker, New York

Occasionally, the noise of traffic and helicopters punctuates the exhibition's cocoon-like vibe, obscuring the lilting, jazzy, discordant sounds emanating from the EP. Similarly, close-up images of Coleman's poems cut into the hypnotic revelry of Smith's panoramic LA – its famed sunsets and palm trees, for example, or iconic landmarks like the Sixth Street Bridge and the Getty Museum. The poems, impossible to read in their brief appearances, find their corollaries in less cliché scenes: the mesmerizing, slowed-down document of a South-Central classic-car parade; prosaic depictions of downtown LA's Fashion District, where the unhoused roam; and the poet's beloved Griffith Park.



Cauleen Smith, *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, 2024, film still. Courtesy: the artist and 52 Walker, New York

Merging the poetic and the real, Smith's affective realm not only speaks to Coleman's writing but to its influence on the work of the artist and that of her collaborators. And this is the point. Smith is not interested in creating a traditional portrait here, hence the lack of footage – despite its availability – of Coleman reading her work, or even images of her face. Rather, *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, like Smith's other sojourns in the creative worlds of Black cultural visionaries such as Alice Coltrane, Rebecca Cox Jackson, Noah Purifoy and Sun Ra, aims to make work with and through its subject. Doing so, she enlivens the legacy of a poet many of us have never heard of through the voices – including her own – of those who will never forget her. At a time when the Black population of LA continues to dwindle in the face of rampant gentrification and ongoing racism, these voices form a necessary chorus whose collective song not only honours Coleman's work and her hustle but also offers a lament and an antidote to such loss.

'Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook' is on view at 52 Walker, New York, until 16 March.

Main Image: Cauleen Smith, The Wanda Coleman Songbook, 2024, film still. Courtesy: the artist and 52 Walker, New York

D'Souza, Aruna. "Cauleen Smith." *4Columns* (February 9, 2024) [ill.] [online]

||| 4Columns

Cauleen Smith

—
Aruna D'Souza

*Beauty, ugliness, an equalizing gaze: the artist channels the work of poet
Wanda Coleman to share her vision of Los Angeles.*



Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook, installation view.
Courtesy 52 Walker.

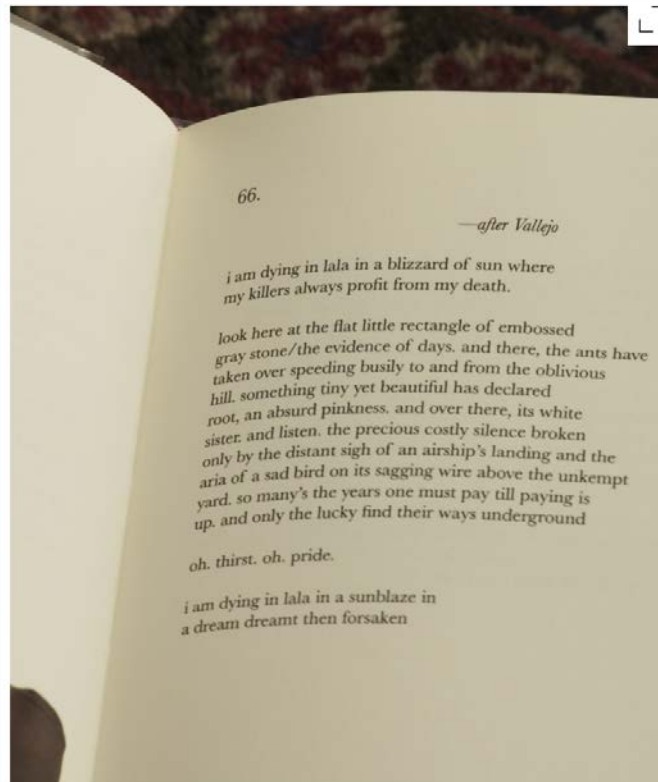
Cauleen Smith: *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, *curated by Ebony L. Haynes*, 52 Walker, 52 Walker Street, New York City,
through March 16, 2024

With *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, the installation at the center of Cauleen Smith's latest New York solo show, the artist has transformed 52 Walker into the ideal space for deep listening and slow looking. The floor is covered with worn carpets, the lighting is dim, warm, and inviting, and the couches are remarkably comfortable. It's a place where you feel like shedding your coat, plopping down your bags, and settling in. Drop the needle on a thirty-two-minute vinyl on the minimalist DJ table, watch the videos projected all around you, take in the scent wafting through the gallery (a mix of grass, eucalyptus, gasoline, ocean salt, flowers, and citrus, from what I could sniff), and find yourself immersed in Smith's vision of Los Angeles.



Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook, installation view.
Courtesy 52 Walker.

That portrait is a complicated one, rooted in a clear-eyed, contradictory, ambivalent love—neither wavering nor idealizing. Smith lived in LA in the 1990s, making experimental films as well as a feature, *Drylongso*, which has found a second life with a 2023 Criterion Collection edition and a theatrical release. When she moved back to the city in 2017 after stints in Texas and Chicago, she writes in the liner notes for the EP featured in the exhibition, “I found myself looking for way-finders to help me navigate a terrain which was simultaneously familiar and alien.” One of those way-finders was the poetry of Wanda Coleman (1946–2013), known as the “unofficial poet laureate of Los Angeles.”



Cauleen Smith, *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, 2024 (still). Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker. © Cauleen Smith.

Coleman’s word craft is beautiful and brutal at once; her work offers up a layered, interpenetrating description of Black womanhood and of a city that has been both its home and tormentor. In her poetry, vulnerability and aggression are inextricable. She was a deeply unsentimental writer, and fiercely refused any whiff of respectability politics. (Her 2002 *Los Angeles Times* essay on Maya Angelou’s *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* is a diss track in the form of a review so unrelenting that it got Coleman banned from a reading at one of LA’s most important African American bookstores.) Coleman’s verse is remarkably musical—“from the infinite alphabet of afrobues . . . i cull apocalyptic visions,” she wrote in “American Sonnet 61” (1998). That quality inspired Smith to invite artists to interpret a series of Coleman’s poems, including the aforementioned sonnet. There are tracks by singer and cellist Kelsey Lu; multidisciplinary performer, vocalist, and writer Shala Miller; poet, musician, and activist moor mother with trumpeter, composer, and DJ Aquiles Navarro; singer Meshell Ndegeocello, who won a Grammy this year for best jazz album; guitarist and composer Jeff Parker and his daughter, singer Ruby Parker; singers and songwriters Alice Smith and Jamila Woods; and the avant-garde music collective Standing on the Corner. Some turn Coleman’s lines into spoken-word performances accompanied by moody music in a range of genres; others sing her poems; still others home in on resonant phrases or single stanzas, transforming them into haunting refrains.



Cauleen Smith: *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, installation view.
Courtesy 52 Walker.

“In that Other Fantasy Where We Live Forever” (2001), reimagined on the album by both Alice Smith and by Jeff Parker and Ruth Parker, presents the city as the prism through which Coleman remembers, with tender nostalgia and deep heartbreak, a past love. When she recounts the relationship’s end (“when you split you took all the wisdom / and left me the worry”), she seems to be speaking as much about the loss of Black Los Angeles as she is about the breakup. (From its high point in the 1970s and 1980s, the African American population has dropped consistently, thanks in large part to gentrification and other forms of structural racism.) Cauleen Smith’s cinematic choices reiterate and translate Coleman’s admixture of longing and grief. Observations from a day in the life of the city, from sunrise to sunset, appear on two long walls—suitable for panoramic shots—and two narrow segments of a third. There is the sea, of course, and beaches, but also Pacific Park amusement park, flower stalls, a neon motel sign, cars on freeways, crows on power lines, purple bougainvillea, the Hollywood Hills, oil wells, hikers in twilight, a skateboarder, liquor stores, and more. Tony Tasset’s “Rainbow,” a ninety-four-foot-high painted steel sculpture installed at Sony Pictures Studios (formerly the MGM lot) shows up, as does Watts Towers, the sculptural fantasy built between 1921 and 1954 by self-taught artist Simon Rodia out of broken pottery, old pop bottles, seashells, and other humble materials. A Chinatown faux-pagoda and Yves Klein–blue coral reef–like structure embedded with Asian souvenir-shop figurines is carefully examined by the camera, becoming a kind of landscape. An image of graffiti reads “DEATH TO TAGGERS” next to skulls-and-crossbones. A parade of lowriders drives past. Every so often, we see a stack of Coleman’s books on a table or arranged on a shelf, or a close shot of a single page, or a hand riffling through a volume faster than we can read it. The music from the album plays alongside this footage without being a synced soundtrack—it depends on viewers to operate the turntable, so there is an everchanging interplay between audio and video.



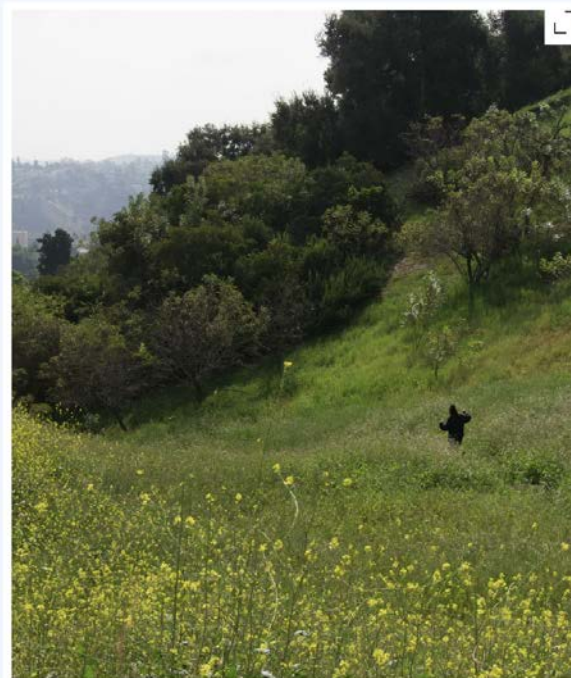
Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook, installation view.
Courtesy 52 Walker.

Cucolorises, contraptions used in the film industry to cast shadows or silhouettes, create non-cinematic imagery in corners and behind the DJ table. One throws a helicopter on the wall; another, based on a viral photograph by Estevan Oriol (“the Ansel Adams of LA”), presents “LA fingers”—a pair of ring-clad hands forming initials of the city. Yet another shows an Olmec head with a broad nose and lush lips—a nod to Afrocentric myths that have arisen around the possible origin of these colossal sculptures (and the Olmecs themselves) in Africa.



Cauleen Smith, *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, 2024 (still). Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker. © Cauleen Smith.

Smith's visuals are precise: though not an exclusively working-class view of LA, or a Black and brown one, it is at least one that sees the city's toniest neighborhoods from a distance, and its less-privileged areas proximally. There is a leveling effect in her shooting technique—the camera moves slowly and deliberately, no matter what it fixes upon, and there is a softness to the editing. There is no judgment here, no moral hierarchy—no indication that what we are looking at from one moment to the next is good or bad. Beauty, decrepitude, and sheer ugliness exist in equal measure. Smith's camera tracks horizontally and vertically, but—as far as I could tell—never zooms in; people or things may move toward it or away, but it never impinges on their space. For decades, the classic, almost clichéd views of Los Angeles have been shot from police helicopters, whether OJ Simpson's slow-motion ride in his white SUV or Rodney King's beating, or any number of less notable car chases and pileups. Smith avoids this point of view. She doesn't look down on the city—figuratively or visually—but only across and up. When we do see a clip of a police helicopter, it is from the ground, spied behind one of Watts Towers' spires.



Cauleen Smith, *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, 2024 (still). Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker. © Cauleen Smith.

These formal strategies are also political strategies—a refusal to heroize or demonize; an insistence on witnessing everything, including those sights too often overlooked; a call to sit with the contradictions of Los Angeles, and perhaps of the whole complicated, infuriatingly vital world we live in. “LA is a shy one, a real one, and a terrible beauty,” Smith writes in the liner notes. “You can’t really see how gorgeous it is in a drive-by, you have to sit with the banality, the horrors, the wildness of the city until it begins to become legible.” With *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, she’s created the perfect space for us to do just that.

Aruna D’Souza is a writer and critic based in New York. She contributes to the New York Times and 4Columns. Her new book, on the treachery of emotions, will be published by Floating Opera Press this spring.

““Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook” at 52 Walker, New York.” *Mousse Magazine* (February 15, 2024)
[ill.] [online]

MOUSSE

“Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook” at 52 Walker, New York



“Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook” at 52 Walker, New York, 2024. Courtesy: 52 Walker, New York

The Wanda Coleman Songbook is an immersive video installation that enlists scent, sight, and sound to explore the multidimensional depth of poems by Wanda Coleman (1946–2013). Coleman was widely considered the unofficial poet laureate of Los Angeles, and her work guided Smith’s reacquaintance with the city after a sixteen-year absence. At the heart of *The Wanda Coleman Songbook* listening room, visitors are invited to drop a needle on the eponymously titled, limited-edition two-color vinyl 12-inch EP with commissioned contributions by Kelsey Lu, Shala Miller, moor mother and Aquiles Navarro, Meshell Ndegeocello, Jeff Parker and Ruby Parker, Alice Smith, and Jamila Woods and Standing on the Corner.

Also called the “LA Blueswoman,” Coleman cultivated her fearless voice through the city’s myriad cultural and political landscapes, as well as through initiatives like the Studio Watts Workshop and her experiences writing for television, editing, teaching, and performing. Invigorated by Coleman’s intimacies with and revelations in the city, Smith familiarized herself deeply with the poet’s oeuvre after returning to Los Angeles in 2017 and considered them alongside her own histories and feelings of rediscovery there. At 52 Walker, Smith not only creates a cinematic environment translating Coleman’s lyrical and adventurous verse but also a contemporary soundscape that captures the longing, tenderness, fury, and grief of the writer’s poetry and prose, which so often revealed the unruly and untamed aspects of the major West Coast metropolis.

Carpeted in rugs and furnished with comfortable couches, *The Wanda Coleman Songbook* switches on all senses. Smith transforms the gallery space to create an atmosphere akin to that of a live recording studio: friends and familiars hanging out and symbiotically absorbing energies while advancing their respective projects. The central hub of *The Wanda Coleman Songbook* is the record itself: Smith shared a selection of Coleman’s poetry with the participating artists and invited them to interpret the writer’s words. Spanning genres and experimentations, the commissioned songs on the EP reflect the collaborators’ heterogenous approaches to Coleman’s euphonious poems and ultimately cohere to present a narrative that is sensitive to the textures of her Los Angeles. Cloaked in a new film that Smith shot on location in fall of 2023, the walls of the gallery envelop visitors in panoramic moving images that capture the expected Los Angeles clichés—the Hollywood Hills, palm trees, Griffith Observatory—as well as a Black Los Angeles that is slowly disappearing into the cultural and geographical periphery.

A bespoke fragrance designed by agustine zegers greets gallery attendees and brings to mind a hike in Griffith Park, Los Angeles’s largest public recreational area and the site of many impressionistic moments in Coleman’s life. Parts of her poems are printed onto blotters so that visitors can extend the temporal experience of migrating scent beyond the gallery walls while activating olfactory memories of their own.

at 52 Walker, New York
until March 16, 2024

“Kelsey Lu, Moor Mother, Meshell Ndegeocello & more on new 'Wanda Coleman Songbook' EP (get the vinyl).”
Brooklyn Vegan (February 13, 2024) [ill.] [online]

Brooklyn VEGAN



Interdisciplinary artist **Cauleen Smith** produced a new EP, *THE WANDA COLEMAN SONGBOOK*, featuring contributions from an impressive list of musicians including **Alice Smith**, **Jamila Woods** and **Standing on the Corner**, **moor mother** and **Aquiles Navarro**, **Jeff Parker** and **Ruby Parker**, **Shala Miller**, **Meshell Ndegeocello**, and **Kelsey Lu**. Each track is a free interpretation of a Coleman poem, and you can see the names in the full tracklist below. It's been pressed, meanwhile, to two-color 12" vinyl, limited to 500 pieces, and you can **get your copy while they last**.

The EP is also the soundtrack to Smith's new exhibition, *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, which is on view now at **52 Walker**, an art gallery in NYC, through **March 16, 2024 (52 Walker Street, New York, NY)**. The immersive video installation features a listening room where visitors can drop a needle on the vinyl. *New York Times* writes:

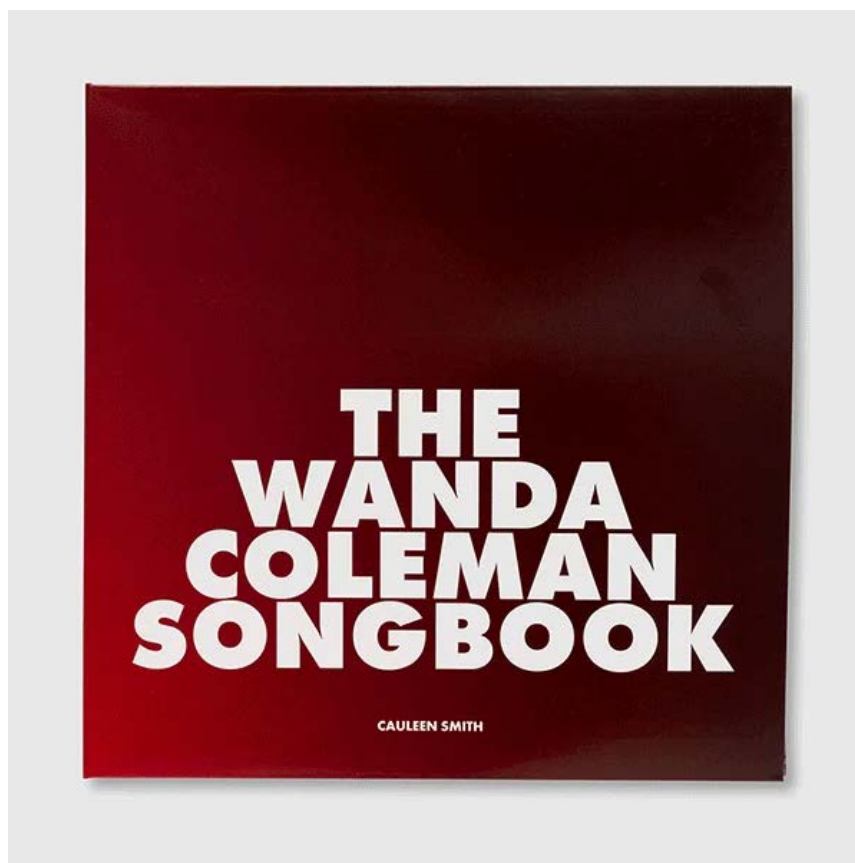
“ Video — four channels projected floor-to-ceiling — is just one part of this multi-sensory experience. In lieu of a soundtrack there’s an album of seven specially commissioned songs from musicians like Meshell Ndegeocello and Kelsey Lu — each one a free interpretation of a Coleman poem. Visitors may lounge on sofas and drop the stylus on the EP, which runs the same length as the video but can be started at any point.

Completing the immersive effect, shadows projected on the rear wall evoke Los Angeles street art and sights — an Olmec head; a raven on a power line. A bespoke scent — inspired by the earth and flora of Griffith Park — wafts through the gallery.

With its layers and synesthetic appeal, the project, which was curated by Ebony L. Haynes, the director of 52 Walker, explores Smith’s conflicted love for a city that is hard and getting harder — notably for the poor and for the city’s declining Black community, now 8.2 percent of its population — yet infused with disconcerting beauty.

”





THE WANDA COLEMAN SONGBOOK TRACKLIST

Side A – MILES IN THE NIGHT

“ALICE SMITH REBELS” by Alice Smith

“WANDA IN WORRYLAND” by Jamila Woods & Standing on the Corner

“AMERICAN SONNET 61” by moor mother & Aquiles Navarro

“IN THAT OTHER FANTASY WHERE WE LIVE FOREVER” by Jeff Parker & Ruby Parker

Side B – THE WEATHER

“SATURDAY AFTERNOON BLUES” by Meshell Ndegeocello

“BLACK HANDED CURSE” by Shala Miller

“AMERICAN SONNET 18 – AFTER JUNE JORDAN” by Kelsey Lu

GET THE VINYL [HERE](#).

Orlov, Piotr. "LA BLUES." *Artforum* (March 1, 2024) [ill.] [online]

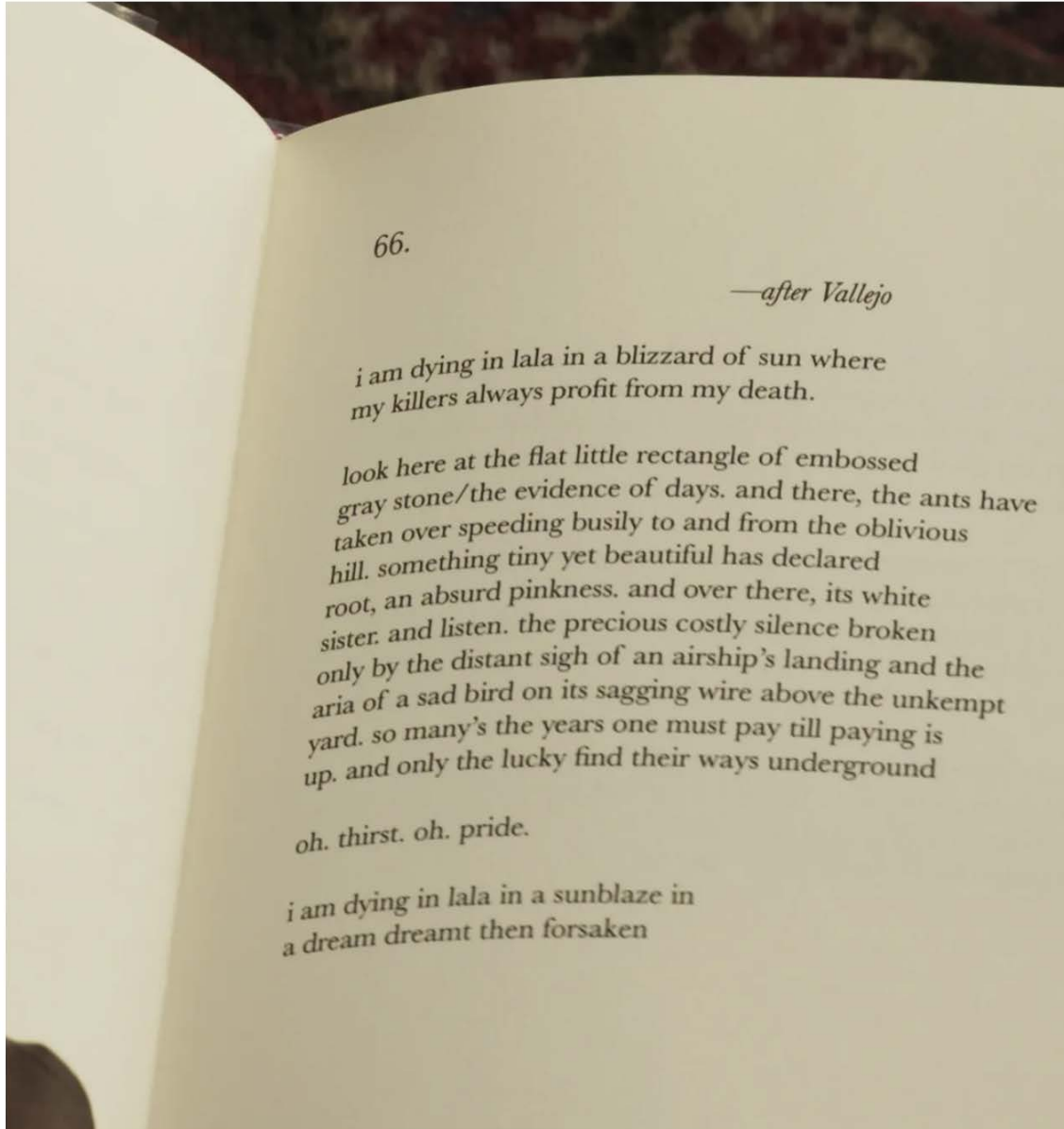
ARTFORUM

MUSIC

LA BLUES

Cauleen Smith's lyrical immersion in the poetry of Wanda Coleman

By Piotr Orlov



Cauleen Smith, *The Wanda Coleman Songbook* (detail), 2024, still from the 4K four-channel video component (color, sound, 27 minutes 13 seconds) of a mixed-media installation additionally comprising a 12-inch vinyl record, a record player, a console table, scent, cucolorises, couches, and rugs.

WANDA COLEMAN'S POEMS radiate musical lyricism. The act is conscious, the sound and vision explicit and vibrant yet steeped in the timelessly familiar. Coleman said her landmark “American Sonnets,” which helped cement her reputation as “the unofficial poet laureate of Los Angeles,” were “jazz poems.” Mirroring the music's “open form” and “rhythm structure,” they gave her an opportunity, as she put it, to “blow my soul.” In a 2005 essay, Coleman also admitted to a lifelong “Blues Love Affair”: “There was something . . . profound and magnificent . . . going on under the surface of language in its marriage to sound,” she wrote of a music introduced to her by her father, which decades later she still turned to “instead of seeking the head shrinker’s couch or pharmaceuticals.”

Spend a little time trawling the internet for videos of Coleman’s readings, and you’ll find her musicality in action, unadorned at solo recitals, but it emerges even more vividly when she’s backed by musicians, as she was at an event at California State University, Los Angeles, a few months before her 2013 passing. Coleman’s notoriously tough, no-BS demeanor—the armor she wore to navigate LA’s literary, civic, and academic establishments as a working-class Black woman poet (a frequent narrative topic)—is replaced by a radiant smile each time the call-and-response between poet and jazz trio connects in a way that fits the emotional resonance she seeks. The music helps her *feel it*—and she shows it!

Artist Cauleen Smith tells an anecdote of Coleman showing up at readings with a number of her own poetry collections bookmarked. “She would pick up a book, start reading, put it down mid-poem, pick up another book, and start reading mid-poem—riffing, improvising with her own poems. I was like, ‘What??? That is not done!!!’ An artist who can do that with their own work [has] trust in the form.”

Having grown up in California, Smith moved back to Los Angeles from Chicago in 2017. She surveyed friends for an LA reading list, and the poet LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs recommended Wanda. Coleman's 2001 collection *Mercurochrome* clicked. "She was reminding me about the trials and challenges of living in LA," says Smith. "Declaring her total rage and a refusal of the system that she had to deal with, but with so much humor and a wicked, wicked intellect. I felt that her amazing writing, but also her stance, her position was a really useful tactic for surviving the city."

Coleman's musicality, control, and expressiveness are primary elements of Smith's new project, "The Wanda Coleman Songbook," which pairs those verses with music by contemporary musicians. Smith invited Meshell Ndegeocello, Kelsey Lu, Jeff and Ruby Parker, Alice Smith, Jamila Woods & Standing on the Corner, and Moor Mother & Aquiles Navarro, all artists who swim with great purpose in Black American music's rich interpretive waters, to provide Coleman's words with original settings. You'll find little identifiable jazz or blues faux-thenticity here, but ancestral ghosts clearly populate the studio machinery at play in the construction of these tracks, perfect foils for Coleman's piercing insights into the different strata of people navigating LA, words poet Douglas Kearney once described as "clinics in polyvocality."

Kearney wrote liner notes for the vinyl record *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, the culmination of Smith's project, which plays at 52 Walker in TriBeCa, New York, through mid-March. Visitors are instructed to put on and flip over the record at the turntable station; there's no gallery attendant, so there's no audio without audience participation; this interactivity is important to Smith, a champion of vinyl. All the while, an ambient film that Smith shot in and of Los Angeles is projected onto the walls: her own visions of driving the city, its natural wonders (sunsets, palm trees and urban wildlife) next to the street-level alienation (the homeless pushing shopping carts, the carless waiting at a bus stop) but also shots that track Coleman's everlasting negotiation of LA's psychosocial landscape. There are images of Coleman's books and poems, stacks of which are strewn across 52 Walker's couches, her original sharp words at hand. Bathed in a reddish soft-noir light, the installation reads like a love letter and a perceptive warning, an invitation across time and space, artist to artist to audience, words and images from one city to another.

Moore, Charles. "Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook." *The Brooklyn Rail* (March 1, 2024) [ill.] [online]



Cauleen Smith: *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*

By Charles Moore



Installation view: *Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, 52 Walker, New York, January 19–March 16, 2024. Courtesy 52 Walker, New York.

Artist and filmmaker Cauleen Smith (b. 1967) has expertly crafted a love letter to California—and delivered it straight to New York. 52 Walker Gallery presents a multisensory experience in *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, featuring Smith's compelling video work and a range of multimedia accompaniments. On view until March 16, 2024, the show blends scent, sight, and sound to explore the depth of renowned poet Wanda Coleman (1946–2013), who was broadly considered the unofficial poet laureate of Los Angeles during her lifetime.

The Wanda Coleman Songbook honors Smith's conflicting sentiments around her move back to Los Angeles, following a sixteen-year absence during which she lived in Texas and Chicago. Tasked with rebuilding a life in the city she once knew, she turned to poetry, embracing the works of LA artists including Douglas Kearney, Harryette Mullen, and Wanda Coleman. More than anyone else, Coleman appeared to address Smith directly, through poems she compares to "tender pus-filled wounds, cauterized lacerations, and blue-purple bruises." The recognition of combined curiosity and terror—and humor—pushed Smith to address Coleman in turn: to amplify the poet's thoughts on the challenges of Black female vulnerability, especially in a world that discourages any display of weakness. Coleman, Smith describes, highlights the value of finding respite—of seeking levity—even in our darkest moments. The poet achieves this in a manner that's free from sentimentality or apology, instead speaking bluntly and precisely about her rage. Born in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, Coleman spent much of her childhood reading books, ultimately penning 20 collections of poetry and prose—focusing extensively on racism, poverty, and what it means to feel like an outcast in an otherwise glamorized world. Known colloquially as the "LA Blueswoman," she found her voice in the vast sociopolitical landscape of her metropolis, and in initiatives like the Studio Watts Workshop, a community arts organization not far from where she grew up. To celebrate Coleman's contributions, Smith hand-selected poems to feature alongside her videos; in "Wanda in Worryland," published in the 1993 *African Sleeping Sickness* collection, the poet writes:

i get scared sometimes

and have to go look into the closet to see if his clothes are still there

*i have been known to imagine a situation and then get involved in it,
upset, angry and cry hot tears*



Cauleen Smith, *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, 2024 (still). © Cauleen Smith. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker, New York.

Here Coleman's words are no longer isolated on the page. Smith has veered away from an official soundtrack, instead opting to commission a two-color, vinyl, 12-inch EP of songs from musicians like Kelsey Lu, Shala Miller, Jamila Woods, Standing on the Corner, Jeff Parker, Ruby Parker, and Meshell Ndegeocello—each one interpreting a specific Coleman poem. Translating the poet's lyrical verse into a modern soundscape, Smith directs viewers to Side A, Track 2 of the exhibition's EP, all while projecting a video of a young Black woman with a somber yet controlled expression, driving her car through the intermittent concrete and greenery of the city. The gallery resembles a recording studio or a movie set in this way; it's an exchange of energy, and a record of both Coleman's and Smith's experiences navigating Los Angeles.

Smith has created an immersive environment, with four video channels projected floor-to-ceiling. The videos depict Los Angeles in full splendor: vintage cars, garden-style apartments erected in close quarters, a lone raven on an electric line, and the pink cadence of the ocean at dusk. Smith keeps audience comfort in mind: inspired by the lush verdure of Griffith Park, a delicate scent drifts through the space, while thoughtfully located rugs and sofas are available for visitors to lounge on. Meanwhile, sound is a separate object entirely in that audiences can start the accompanying record at any point in the video, releasing the stylus on the album at the time of their choosing. The objective is to fuse the senses when the moment feels right—a personal decision that Smith leaves entirely to the viewers.



Installation view: Cauleen Smith: *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, 52 Walker, New York, January 19–March 16, 2024. Courtesy 52 Walker, New York.

“LA is a shy one, a real one, and a terrible beauty,” says Smith. “You have to sit with the banality, the horrors, the wildness of the city until it becomes legible.” And so, the artist has done her part to make the city legible—inviting audiences to experience Los Angeles in the same way she and Coleman have. Multilayered and sensational, *The Wanda Coleman Songbook* balances comfort and conflict, depicting the discomfort and overwhelming beauty of the area, and of those who call it home. Audiences will embrace the opportunity to be led through the streets of Los Angeles—by Smith, and posthumously by Coleman.

Contributor

Charles Moore

Charles Moore is an art historian, writer and curator based in New York and author of the book *The Black Market: A Guide to Art Collecting* and *The Brilliance of the Color: Black through the eyes of art collectors*.

Harris, Jane Ursula. "What to See in the US This Spring." *Frieze* (March 8, 2024) [ill.] [online]

FRIEZE

What to See in the US This Spring

From Cauleen Smith's elegiac songbook to Marcel Dzama's surreal landscapes of Canoe Lake, here's what not to miss this March

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[Cauleen Smith](#) | 52 Walker, New York | 19 January – 16 March

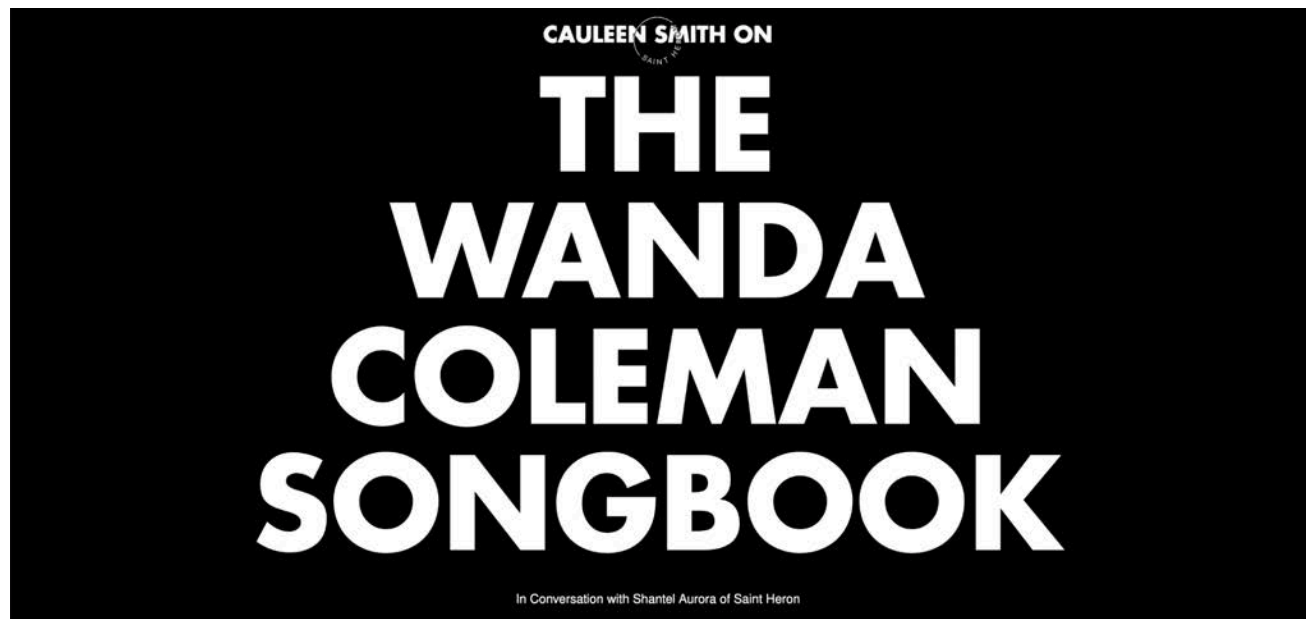


Cauleen Smith, *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, 2024, film still. Courtesy: the artist and 52 Walker, New York

Wanda Coleman is a poet's poet, known for her biting lyricism and deeply-felt explorations of the quotidian and personal. Alternately dubbed 'the LA Blueswoman' (by poet Tim Joyce) and 'LA's unofficial poet laureate' (by the *Los Angeles Times* in her 2013 obituary), her raw vulnerability and unwavering resilience recently inspired artist Cauleen Smith to turn Coleman's work into a collaborative songbook. Featuring ten musical artists and bands – Kelsey Lu, Shala Miller, moor mother and Aquiles Navarro, Meshell Ndegeocello, Jeff Parker and Ruby Parker, Alice Smith, and Jamila Woods and Standing on the Corner – the resulting EP, *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, like the eponymous exhibition it spawned (both 2024), is a remarkably tender ode to both the late poet and her native city.

Smith, who grew up in Sacramento, began digging into Coleman's prodigious output in 2017, when she moved to LA and found herself trying to navigate its startling mix of natural beauty and sprawling poverty. That dissonance, along with the alienation limned by Coleman in her evocations of the racism she endured as a working-class Black woman in her hometown, imbue both the EP and the multi-sensory installation with a particularly elegiac or 'bluesy' register. – *Jane Ursula Harris*

Aurora, Shantel. "THE WANDA COLEMAN SONGBOOK." *Saint Heron* (April 12, 2024) [ill.] [online]



No matter the medium, art is known to be a creative manifestation of primitive ideas, revelations, feelings and memories. When it comes to heritage and history however, for Black Americans, art also has the potential to be a stably surreal encounter with divine power. *The Wanda Coleman Songbook*, created and produced by interdisciplinary artist Cauleen Smith, is that kind of encounter, sonically emoting the poetics of Wanda Coleman (1946-2013) as praise songs and prayers. Limited to 500 vinyl pressings, *Songbook* is a musically driven compilation of select Coleman poems interpreted by an array of artists and musicians, and the inspiration behind 52 Walker's multi-sensory installation and immersive listening experience, *Cauleen Smith: The Wanda Coleman Songbook* (closed March 16, 2024).

Born Wanda Evans on November 13th in LA's Watts neighborhood, she is a griot of generations that survived poverty, prejudice, Black feminine malaise, and abuse. Married with two children at 20 years old, Wanda had been an avid reader all her life and a natural force in poetry and performance art. She authored twenty books of poetry and prose, edited the first six issues of *Players* magazine, and won an Emmy as part of the writer's room on the soap opera 'Days of Our Lives.' But this was the work of a woman who, on the side, waited tables and worked other temp jobs to make ends meet. Frustrated with the plight of Los Angeles' Black women, herself included, Coleman's Bluesy Jazz-infused poetry projected the LA woman's love-hate relationship with the city making her the west coast's womanist pulse of poetry. In Cauleen's own words, "*Most poets know Wanda's work well. She's a poet's poet. But what she isn't, is quotable.*" She continues, "*she's not widely popular in a pop culture kind of way... but I wouldn't say she's just a local poet. She was pretty much an international phenomenon.*"

With A and B sides featuring commissioned contributions by Kelsey Lu, Jeff Parker and Ruby Parker, Standing on the Corner and more, the EP's opener is a gentle rapture performed by Alice Smith. In a refrain centered on eternal life fed by the bliss of love, Smith incants her own interpretation of Coleman's original poem "In That Other Fantasy Where We Live Forever." For her rendition titled "ALICE SMITH REBELS," she centers the profound youthfulness of carefree rebellion. What is likely to raise the hair on your arms, is the B side opener "SATURDAY AFTERNOON BLUES." With a melancholic serve to savor, recording artist and musician Meshell Ndegeocello fatalistically echoes, "can kill," the opening line of this piece by Coleman in which she declares herself "a candidate for the coroner." It's difficult to do anything but empathize with and/or personally recollect the lovesick despair behind romantic degradation and neglect. At just over 32mins, 'Songbook' closes with a five-minute meditation guided by Wanda's spirit — though the typewriter soundtrack, I learned, is actually Cauleen's own sonic offering dedicated to the "LA's Blueswoman." It's peaceful, and gorgeously intoxicating, and altogether akin to a hymnal for Black women. These are the psalms of Coleman's faith in poetry to lift the veil of allusiveness and directly confront the personal and political tenors of feminine Black-American life. Cauleen Smith summons that ancestral faith in Songbook, where communion is meditation with the reverberating lore of the gospel according to our foremothers; in this case, the indomitable Wanda Coleman.



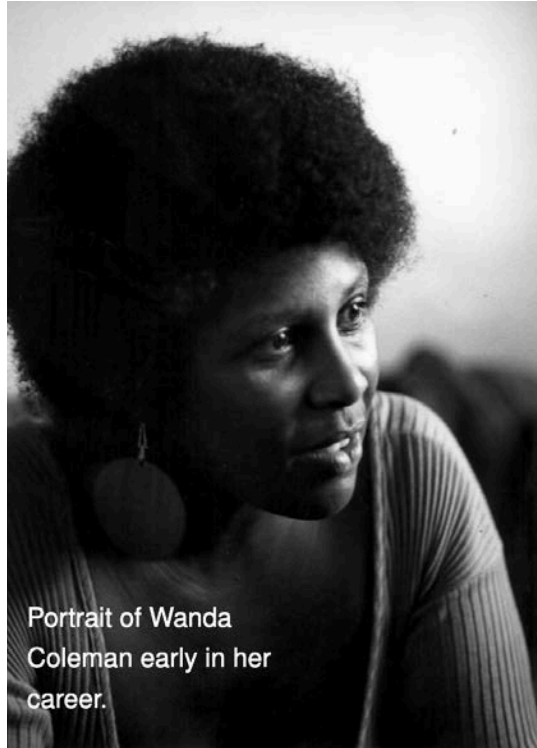
SA: How did you first learn of Wanda Coleman's work or what is your earliest memory related to an encounter with her writing?

CS: I don't really know when I first encountered her work. I've always known about her, but it was when I moved back to California in 2017 from Chicago that I really started revisiting her work and really finding her to be such a great guide and navigator for the Los Angeles that I was experiencing as a Black woman, and the very different experience that we have from pretty much anyone else in that city. So I really found her to be crucial and an important voice.

SA: I have to ask about her American Sonnet series. The Wanda Coleman Songbook has two, one of which is after June Jordan — one of my favorite writers literally ever — who penned a similar ode in tribute to Phyllis Wheatley; and I love how these women saved a space in their work to love on each other. When I was reading about Coleman's sonnets, much of the criticism was that her particular style of writing broke the technical rules of "THE sonnet" in poetry. Is there anything you can tell us specifically about her 100 American Sonnets, or the significance of the two, "AMERICAN SONNET 61" and "AMERICAN SONNET 18," selected for 'Songbook'?

CS: Oh, well, that book [*Heart First into this Ruin: The Complete American Sonnets*] is a pretty recent release, and I think it's long awaited. I don't really know much about the politics of the publishing world, but I know a lot of people are just really happy to see it because she would write the sonnets along with all these other forms that she experimented with. So if you collect her books you can read them all, but to just have them, all 100, it's really amazing to read them. They are just so dazzling, so it's just exciting to have them in one place so you can study the sonnet through Wanda.

In the process of making the record and talking to the artists, I collected about 20, 25 songs that I thought cohered and really represented Wanda's whole body of work, but also could make a good record, maybe make interesting songs, the ones that I heard music in. I gave them to all the musicians and they chose. Alice Smith and Kelsey Lu chose their poems immediately. Those were the ones that spoke to them. Then I asked Jeff Parker to write a song based on the same poem that Alice was interested in. And it's so interesting how they took really different directions with the same sonnet, and somehow they still hang together really beautifully. The artists knew what worked with them, which is what I was interested in. And I was like, "I hear so much music in Wanda's poems. I wonder what musicians would do with Wanda's poems."



Portrait of Wanda
Coleman early in her
career.

SA: That was actually my next question. Did you select the poems or did they? So they had already known of Wanda Coleman also, you're saying.

CS: A couple of them had not. I feel like when I spoke with Kelsey, she was like, "Wow, thanks for introducing me to Wanda." I remember having that conversation with many of the musicians where they're like, "I didn't know about her. I'm so happy I do. She's blowing my mind." You know what I mean? "This is so intense." But I really curated and selected [Wanda's poems] because I was obsessed with her. I've read almost all of her books. I haven't read the novels, but all of the poems at least once. You know what I mean? But I thought I should pull out the ones that are the reason that I wanted to make this record. So that allowed them to focus in on things and not be overwhelmed, because 25 poems was already a lot.

With Shay Miller, I was like, "I love this 'Black-Handed Curse' song. I love this poem so much. This is the most hilarious thing. To be so mad at someone that you sit your butt down and you write the nastiest pecks you can think of is hilarious. I want to offer that of Wanda, the Vicious Wicked Curse. You know what I mean?" And Shala was like, "Okay, I can do it."

SA: It is just so good. I think it's my favorite. And her voice is amazing on it.

CS: Yeah! The wicked laughter...

SA: YES!

both laughing

SA: I read your conversation with George Evans, Wanda Coleman's brother, for the LA Times. You said, "...the way in which I wanted to work with Wanda Coleman's work was through music, because so many of her poems are songs. Of what I could find on YouTube, I never really saw her sing, but she's such a powerful performer." And my original question was how did you arrive at the idea to turn her poetry into a musical compilation, but I learned from you and Mr. Evans that she was actually into music and theater. And it is really clear through her spoken word performances, now with that info. I didn't really catch that before. Can you talk a little bit more about the process of translating that variety through the music, and more about collaboration with the artists? Was there anything revelatory or perhaps just really special that came from *Songbook's* completion?



CS: Yeah. I mean, for me, it's stumbling on some poems where she literally used a blues limerick. It's a very common thing for her, and I love blues limericks, and it's not a fashionable... Well, Black artists are not into the blues right now, not in that old-timey sense. You know what I mean? So I knew it would be a hard sell, even though that's how I approached every musician. I was like, "I'm trying to make a blues record and I want you on it." And they're like, "What do you mean by the blues?" Meshell Ndegeocello was literally like, "Tell me what blues artist you like, just tell me who you like." And I was like, "Well, I love John Lee Hooker. I love him." And so there's this really nasty guitar blues riff in her song, which I feel like is an ode to that.

But what was amazing to me was how the artists, through their own work, their own sound, their own style, really arrived at something really true to Wanda's vibe. I was not sure that the record would cohere with six or seven different radically different artists from Jamila to Jeff Parker's daughter Ruby, who's I think maybe 20 years old who's just starting out, to someone like Alice Smith who's grand diva. I was like, "How is this going to cohere?" But it's because of Wanda's poems and the way that they had to really get inside of those words and lyrics and find their own way that it all hangs together.

SA: That's really beautiful. Admittedly, I know very little about Wanda Coleman's life and I only first heard of her a couple of years ago. My curiosity took me down a JSTOR rabbit hole of anything I could find on her. A lot of it was informative, but quite a bit of it had a tone that centered her momentary rift with Maya Angelou and her overall demeanor as brash and combative. It seems, despite being the first Black woman to win the Lenore Marshall Award (1999) and all the other prestigious nominations and honors, the then predominantly white literary establishment intended to erase her simply for having the audacity. I'd love to broaden the narrative of her personality with the layers I'm sure existed. I see a woman who unapologetically shamed cowardice and fraudulence, and was as proud of her identity as she was sickened by her identity's conditions for survival. Can you share a bit about her life, upbringing, spirituality, family or anything about Wanda the woman vs the poet? Like, I knew that she was a single mother, but I had no idea she was a single mother of three working multiple jobs "to make my mark on the literary landscape" as she wrote in the introduction to *Greatest Hits 1966–2003*. What more can you tell us about her?



Cauleen Smith at *The Wanda Coleman Songbook* immersive installation at 52 Walker in NYC. Photography by Rafael Rios.

CS: Talking to George about her was really lovely. George is her younger brother, and he just really looked up to her. Wanda was the smartest kid in school. He was like, "*We always knew Wanda would be amazing. I was just trying to get by, but Wanda was incredible.*" And he's actually the person responsible for introducing her to Black Sparrow Press and getting her all inside of the beat poetry scene in LA. As kids, they were down in the hundreds in LA. If you know LA the further south you go the Blacker it gets. And George ended up going all the way to CalArts, which is the Foothill Mountains, North LA and Wanda and he were hanging out in Silver Lake, which is still like, hipster Central. It was then too. You know what I mean? She fell in love at 18, had a kid fresh out of high school. George hated all of her husbands.

SA: I remember reading that.

CS: He can go on about it. Even listening to the songs made him really emotional because he could tell at what point in her life, which poem was written. Based on "the man I love" Meshell song, he spoke about that man, and he just didn't understand why Wanda was attracted to these really not good men. And if you meet George, you'll see, because he's the sweetest. He's like a big teddy bear sweetheart, a gentle man. So I can see how her vibe, the men she was into, he would be like, "No."

And then Douglas Kearney, I had a short conversation with him because he loved Wanda and said she was an intimidating figure, but what she required was respect and regard. And there's a really great interview on YouTube. This young Italian journalist is interviewing Wanda, and at first she's a little bit surly, and then he says, "*I read that when you were 13, you did this and that. Then in high school you did that.*" And she said, "*Oh, you did your research.*" And then her whole affect changed, and she was friendly and funny and very connecting with him. And I was like, "*Yeah.*" *I think as a Black woman in LA where you literally get so little respect, appreciation, regard on any level, I can understand her rolling like that. What I love is how Doug Kearney talks about her punching up. So when she criticized Maya Angelou, they came back at her as if, "how dare you?"* I think that, actually, for me is one of the things that's really important about her is her refusal to accommodate these aspirations towards Black respectability and her way of really revealing how toxic and limiting and maybe stultifying that those aspirations can really be.

Eso Won Bookstore, which was the bookstore that banned her, closed just recently, and I think it reveals a lot that when the owner decided to retire, he didn't sell the bookshop. He didn't pass it on, he just closed it up. And thank goodness there are two more Black bookstores in LA, run by women who are very open and are great replacements. But I feel this kind of desire to hold and keep and have territory and be proprietary is something that she really resented as a Black working-class person, not a middle-class person. She could really see how that was also meant to keep her in her place. She was not into it. I just love that about her. And I think it's an important conversation to have right now in our post-Obama terror zone of America. What did that get us exactly? And no shade on the Obamas whatsoever. Not at all. But we put a lot into that, and we saw the response to it in terms of policy and what was possible. But then when we look at working-class movements, that really does change the world. So maybe that's a place to look, and I feel like Wanda creatively, artistically is also that place to look.



Cauleen Smith's *The Wanda Coleman Songbook* video
Installation at 52 Walker. Photography by Rafael Pilo.

SA: Exactly. Listening to you talk about her confirms what I felt, she simply took no mess. I'm in awe of her and I read that she continued the hustle of working multiple side jobs even after writing on, what was it, *Days of Our Lives*? The soap opera?

CS: Won an Emmy for writing on *Days of Our Lives*. She edited, this is a whole project I haven't even got into, *Players* magazine; which is everybody's Uncle's *SKIN* magazine. The first six issues, which are actually beautiful, George, her brother, took some of the photos. And that magazine to me says everything about what she envisioned for Black culture, which was a complete integration of high and low. So you look at the letters people were writing in, there's brothers writing in from prison, and then there's brothers working in corporate America, all reading this magazine and having a discourse. There's film reviews for Ganja and Hess, and then there's an article about the best car to get the best woman. It's just all together. And she had this really clear vision, which obviously the publishers were not really into. It was like a Black *Playboy*, an intellectual side as well as this pleasure side.

People who really did know her, absolutely loved her. I watched on video the memorial for her when she died, all the poets getting together, it was just this outpouring of freaking love. *"I miss her. I love her. She was funny. She was fun. She was sweet. She was so fun to talk to."* I've run into so many people who met her and knew her and describe how actually generous she was. And this is one thing I really want to say, it's very important. In her poems, one thing I never heard her say, *"I had to learn how to love my Blackness. I had to learn how to love my body."* She never says that. Instead, she's angry that no one sees her and no one sees her beauty.

She understands it very well. And one thing she never permitted or allowed was the world to inform that relationship she had with her own understanding. She understood that she was not the problem. She innately understood that and all of her poems are so unapologetic. Even when the women in her poems are making mistakes, even when the women in her poems are really suffering. They don't apologize. They have dignity. They have self-determination. They are taking responsibility for themselves and have whole hearts. They're fully present, feeling, thinking people, even if we are in pain for them.

There's this one story she wrote, I keep talking about it because it just shook me. It was a story she wrote from the point of view of this young girl who needed money to take care of her kids, met these men, and they were like, "We can get you work." And basically turned her out. It's told from her point of view of how this happens to her. And at every moment where she's like, "This doesn't feel right, but I feel like if I can get some money..." And the moment in which she realizes they really are going to try and break her, or they do break her, she's like, "Okay." But she decides even as this is happening, even as she is being broken, that she's going to survive it because she has love. She has people she has to take care of. So she's just going to survive it. I've really never read anything where there's this most abject thing happening and so much dignity and beauty in the person that it's happening to. This refusal to pity someone like that, instead to say, "No, no. She understands exactly what's happening to her. This is what is happening, and she's going to survive it." It's just incredible. To me, that kind of complexity that Wanda was capable of is really, really precious and rare. Most people like to speak about themselves and their lives, particularly in poetry, as this process of self-love and this and that. And Wanda was like, "I don't need to talk about it. I already love myself, that's a given. Black people are amazing. We're brilliant. What I need to talk about is how fucked up this world is, how hard it is to love in this world, how hard it is to be in this world. It's not our fault." I just think that's so important.

SA: Truly an amazing woman. I want to ask about *Songbook's* ending which was sort of a beautiful meditation guided by Coleman's spirit where we hear the outdoorsy air turn to a storm, and then the click clack of typewriter keys. What's the significance of ending *Songbook* in this way?

CS: Thanks for asking. Most people never mention that.

SA: I loved it.

CS: So I'm producing this record, and I'm getting all this beautiful music from these brilliant musicians, and I wanted to be on the record too in some way. And my only real skill is filmmaking with sound.

SA: Oh wait! That's you?

CS: Yeah, and it really was a meditation about, I guess, the life of a poet, the life of a writer, imagining Wanda, the details I knew about her life. If you have to ride the bus sometimes in LA on a rainy day, and oh, you just want to get home and write. I was just imagining, just wanting that for her. For every poet. I was like, just get home and just get to your laptop, your typewriter, whatever. Just get there. I depend on that. So that was just my thank you, to say I know it's really about the work. You got to sit there and you got to write it.



Purchase Cauleen Smith's *The Wanda Coleman Songbook* EP at 52Walker.com

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