

An introduction to the exhibition

Allison Smith: Needle Work

February 5–April 19, 2010

Artist Background

Allison Smith is the 2009–10 Henry L. and Natalie E. Freund Visiting Artist in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts. Working in collaboration with faculty nominator Lauren Adams, assistant professor in the College and Graduate School of Art, Smith concluded her residency with the exhibition *Needle Work* at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum.

Smith is known for creating large-scale performances and installations that critically engage popular forms of historical reenactment, along with crafts and other traditional cultural conventions. Previous projects have involved the artist's appropriation of a variety of traditional crafts such as quilting, pottery, and wood carving to redo, restage, and refigure conceptions of history and collective memory. These projects often call attention to uncomfortable aspects of American culture, such as slaveholding, war mongering, and racism.

Needle Work

Like much of Allison Smith's art, *Needle Work* (2010) focuses on ways in which objects and their making reflect how we construct narratives of history as well as of personal and national identity. Through this project, which began with the artist's fascination with the rudimentary nature of early (primarily World War I European) gas masks, Smith takes the performative act of creating objects through traditional handicraft techniques into the context of contemporary art. The resulting installation consists of handmade masks with simulated "identification tags" arrayed in military museum-style display cases; staged photographs of the masks being held or worn; parachutes, suspended from the ceiling, imprinted with research photographs of original masks; and a corner display rack of the original research imagery.

The development of Smith's project was a fourfold process:

- While visiting military museums in the United States and France, Smith became intrigued by cloth gas masks that were used by soldiers during World War I. She found them both "haunting and heartrending. . . ; somehow lovingly made, and functionally inadequate."¹ For her, these masks called to mind the tremendous violence that penetrated the twentieth century as a result of technological and scientific advances such as gas warfare. The artist secretly took pictures of these masks with her cell phone camera and then later found more images on the Internet. She researched the origins of these masks, but found that there was limited material available as to who designed and created them. Even though most of them were factory made, their construction from common materials—canvas and leather—brought her back to the question, "who made this?" Her interest then spread into the realms of Klan culture, prisoners of war, and Halloween costumes in contemporary culture. Another springboard for the project was her own experience following 9/11 when she noticed that New York City police had begun to carry special compact gas masks—a reminder that today we are confronted with potential threats of other kinds of environmental warfare, such as biological weapons, epidemics like SARS and H1N1, or even Internet crimes.
- Together with a group of students at Washington University, Smith created handcrafted versions of these early European and American gas masks, as well as other types of masks and masklike objects, dating as far back as World War I and into the present, including the Christmas Eve bomber. Smith held a "making bee" and provided students

¹ Allison Smith, "Interview: Allison Smith," in *Allison Smith: Needle Work* (St. Louis: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, 2010), 39.

with “kits” consisting of select everyday items (plastic bottles, plastic tubing, staples), fabric and other materials that are readily available at craft stores or recycling centers.

- After making the masks, Smith staged photographs of students and their professor “performing” the masks in a variety of ways—wearing them, holding them, sometimes showing them in the process of being made. In this way, Smith emphasizes that the act of making is performative in and of itself, a “gesture of attempting to capture a feeling or forge a connection to something distant and somewhat terrifying.”² The individuals wearing the masks in the photos reanimate them as objects that are otherwise inanimate, while the pictures also bring into focus how they act as “props for demonstrating acts of survival, cruelty, modesty, camouflage, or disguise.”³
- A final component of the multifaceted installation is the silk parachutes. In collaboration with Washington University’s Island Press printmaking studio, Smith created large parachutes onto which she printed the research images of gas masks.

Focus Questions

- 1) Consider the last time you wore a mask. What was its purpose?
- 2) People have used various props throughout history to both tell stories and create identities for themselves and others. Reflect on the function of the mask and give some examples of how the mask can be used to conceal or create an identity. How do the objects and photographs in the exhibition function in terms of your examples?
- 3) What kinds of associations do the masks in this exhibition evoke for you? What kinds of experiences do they bring to mind, including those you have had or have heard or read about?
- 4) Think about the placement of the parachutes in the gallery. How does their presence affect your experience of the other objects in the installation?
- 5) How do the portraits of people with the masks influence your perception of the masks themselves?
- 6) Sometimes thought of as a purely documentary medium, photography is also a major part of contemporary art practice. Consider the different ways Smith has used photography in this exhibition—the identification tags on the masks, the staged portraits on the wall, and the research imagery on the parachutes and in the corner display. How do these various uses function in the context of this exhibition, and how do they impact your understanding of the objects?

² Ibid., 41.

³ Ibid.