

Artforum  
5 June 2020

# ARTFORUM



Ming Smith, *America Seen Through Stars and Stripes*, New York City, New York Painted, 1976, ink-jet print, 24 × 30".

LONDON

## Ming Smith

PIPPY HOULDSWORTH GALLERY  
6 Heddon Street  
May 21–July 5, 2020

In 1976, Ming Smith composed a multimedia print called *America Seen Through Stars and Stripes*, New York City, New York Painted, as part of an ongoing series in which the photographer overlaid her signature multiple exposures with streaks of paint. The crimson and white here amplify the cascading American flags that enmesh a black figure who, in turn, gazes coolly outward from behind mirrored shades. By adding layers of exposure and pigment, Smith took what might have been a lyrical scene in the vein of Helen Levitt and infused it with the turbulence of an era in which questions of race and belonging were variously envisioned by the Black Arts Movement, AfriCOBRA, and the Kamoinge Workshop, of which she was the sole female member.

“Being a black woman photographer was like being nobody,” Smith recently recalled. “It was just my camera and me . . . It wasn’t like I was going to make money from it, or fame—not even love.” But in June 2020, *America Seen Through Stars and Stripes* has only gained in prescience and resonance. It is part of a career-spanning survey, “Painting With Light,” that demonstrates the consistency with which Smith has engaged black Atlantic life from Abidjan to Harlem. While she has photographed contemporaries such as singer Betty Carter and dancer Alvin Ailey, her practice extends beyond documentary—arriving at truth through poetic distortions. Even through the compression of the virtual viewing room, the surreal sweep of Smith’s camera and the unsettling materiality of her prints cut through. One misses the physical presence of these remarkable objects, but this exhibition is no less timely or potent for it.

— *Ian Bourland*

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