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## Mary T. Smith in the Margins: Analyzing the Oppressive Parameters of Outsider Art

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Mary T. Smith in the Margins: Analyzing the Oppressive Parameters of Outsider Art

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of the Arts]  
of Bard College

by  
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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to me.

## Acknowledgements

To all who put money on my books and sent prayers my way...OBASHATA Lord we thank ya!

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## Introduction

Art, in all of its subjective glory, is an important aspect of life which we should all have the freedom to enjoy and create. However, art has been commercialized, and artwork is now a symbol of social standing. As all American hierarchical systems, black people are not given the upper hand or even a fair chance at creating, especially when financial profit is involved. The expression of human critical thought and skill is done through artistic practices, and enjoyed as decoration, cultural expression, a declaration of belief systems, and therapy. Art and artistic talent is a symbol of class and social standing because of the price and time that it costs to invest in fine arts schooling and creating work. Going to an art institution and being educated in traditional skills is a privilege not widely accessible. Therefore those who have acquired artistic expertise outside of traditional institutions tend not to be critiqued in the same way as a trained artist would. This includes older southern Black people who have been marginalized or oppressed in this country from having a seat at the table in the conversation of art and artistic practices, because of a lack of resources and respect as artists and people. The entire system in which we learn about, perceive, and value art is from a white, western, classist lens that creates a racist trickle down effect for analyzing other cultures' artwork. There are many categories that art critics have developed in order to describe, organize, and analyze the works of anyone that is not white and western such as folk, tribal, outsider art, etc.

Art is evidence of culture, and the relationship that Black people have to art is one that demonstrates the humanity and strong sense of culture and community that white people tried to erase in order to have social control over enslaved people. As a result of slavery (because everything in this country has racial implications due to the heinous practice of slavery) Black

Americans have a special story to tell through creative means, including the visual arts. Art is a subject that is no stranger to the Black American community stemming from practices that were done in Africa and brought over to America through the slave trade. Esthetic and social issues in Black art history cannot be disentangled because art is representative of what is valued in society, and in society, intellect and creativity is valued. The relationship between esthetic and social issues is discussed in Eugene W. Metcalf's *Black Art, Folk Art, and Social Control*: "Art represents and sanctifies what is valued in a society; the ability to create and appreciate art implies a heightened human sensibility and confers social status and prestige. A people said to be without art, or with a degraded form of it, reputedly show themselves lacking in the qualities that dignify human experience."<sup>1</sup>

Slave owners did not want black people to engage with creativity and intellect because it would mean that they would relinquish social control and make black people equal parts of society by giving them humanistic qualities. During cultural rebirth such as the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and the Black Abstraction movement in the 1950s, Black people have demonstrated mastery in Western artistic skills, proving that we are people with critical thought and creative intuition. Black people have also preserved and mastered traditional artistic practices. Metcalf says, "Long before black Americans learned European fine arts and were taught to be ashamed of their folk practices as evidence of slavery, they had mastered these African-derived traditional art forms."<sup>2</sup> Black people had so much artistic talent that was ignored by the western art world, that Black southern artists were wrongfully categorized, devaluing the

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<sup>1</sup> Metcalf, Eugene W. "Black Art, Folk Art, and Social Control." *Winterthur Portfolio* 18, no. 4 (1983): 271–89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1180989>.

<sup>2</sup> Metcalf, "Black Art, Folk Art, and Social Control." 271



culture from which this talent and work has arrived. Black people's artwork has been labeled "naive", "primitive", folk, outsider, self-taught. These categories become problematic when they are in reference to someone's artwork if there is a lack of critical thought towards the technique in which black artists use in order to create. This mishandling of labels when describing black art is also testament to the exclusivity of the art world away from black people. Because of this, there has been a call for inclusion of black art into museums in efforts to try and solve some of the problems of racism in the art world, leading to foundations and movements to help aid in this process.

The Souls Grown Deep Foundation is an example of inclusionary based efforts at including black artists. The foundation has donated works of Southern Black people to museums and given grants to artists for studio space and materials. The foundation has several exhibition books showing the work of these artists and explaining context about the social climate in which these artists create. In the book *Souls Grown Deep*, Mary Tillman Smith was introduced as a vernacular and folk artist in the 1970s-90s with great fame as an acclaimed outsider artist as well as self taught artist. She has been featured in many major folk art exhibitions and sold hundreds of her pieces, but was not valued as a person or treated equitably after reaching artistic fame. She was not compensated for her artwork despite her many accomplishments, interviews, articles, or shows. Is inclusion of black art into the museum institution worth it if the institution has racism so deeply rooted in its foundation that black artists are exploited and given little control over their own artwork? This question will be explored in great detail as we discuss the life and work of Mary T. Smith.

In Chapter One, I describe Mary T. Smith's life from childhood until death and the way she gained fame over the span of her career. Most of what is written about Smith comes from the book, *Souls Grown Deep* by Paul and William Arnett. William Arnett conducted interviews with Smith and her closest family members to gain information about her life and to gain insight into the meaning of Smith's paintings. This chapter details the hardships of Smith's life and emphasizes that these factors of her life are the things that inspire people the most about her artwork.

Next, I will conduct a visual analysis of Smith's work in Chapter Two. I will start by explaining the history of yard shows and analyze the construction of Smith's yard. I will then look at the types of work that Smith creates including analyzing the materials she uses. Then, I will focus on specific pieces of her work to analyze her visual aesthetic, including contrasting colors and her line work. Lastly, I will end the chapter comparing and contrasting the definition of the terms outsider, folk, and vernacular art and discuss how Smith has been categorized between all three genres.

In Chapter Three, I will be evaluating Smith's reception in chronological order along with the patterns of her fame. I will discuss how she was originally labeled a folk artist and the cultural significance of this. I will create a timeline of her reception as a vernacular, or outsider artist and discuss the implications of being considered an outsider artist. I will analyze how she was treated during her fame as an artist using interviews and website articles. I will also illustrate how Smith's biography was written about more than critical analysis of her work because of the romanticization of artist struggle stories.

Chapter Four analyzes Smith's reception specifically, how the art world categorizes Black artists in the outsider category without actually critically engaging with their work. I will also describe how other artists received Smith's work, including comparing and contrasting her work with that of other artists. Ultimately I will argue that her work should be considered through the lens of a specific kind of abstraction. Finally, I will discuss the Souls Grown Deep foundation and the implications of the inclusion of black southern artists into art institutions as a result of the foundation's efforts.

## Chapter One: The Life of Mary T. Smith

*“With a private space that was hers to create, to define, and to decorate, she would spotlight herself for the world surrounding her. It was a world of people who had at their worst laughed at her and been contemptuous of her, and at their best had simply tolerated her as someone who was different and insignificant. Now it was Mary T. Smith’s turn.”<sup>3</sup>*

Slavery was said to have ended in 1865, releasing some black people from bondage into freedom with the infamous promise of 40 acres and a mule as a starter pack to the American dream. However, black people were not given any chance at equal social standing after slavery, and of course, not given the acres or the mule promised to them. After being freed, many black people found themselves homeless and unemployed, forcing them to rely on sharecropping to support themselves. Sharecropping is a type of farming system originating in the South of the United States where black people would rent land on a plantation and grow crops for the owners in order to pay their rent and make a living. Post slavery, Black southern families were still bonded to plantations where they, or their family were enslaved. As enslaved people were being freed and leaving plantations, there were not enough people available and willing to work under slave like conditions to harvest the crops that grew in mass on the plantations. Sharecropping kept black families hostage under unjustified debts given to them by greedy plantation owners that desperately needed the mass labor black people to tend the land. This was a practice across the south including southern Mississippi where Mary T. Smith was born, specifically Copiah County. Mississippi was underdeveloped in the late 1800s and early 1900s; during which Smith

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<sup>3</sup> Arnett, William. “Mary T. Smith.” Mary T. Smith | Souls Grown Deep. Souls Grown Deep, 2000. <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/mary-t-smith>.

was born to a family of sharecroppers. She and her siblings helped work the land by wrapping and picking vegetables.

Most well known information about Mary T. Smith was collected by William Arnett in interviews between him, Smith herself, her sister Elizabeth Alexander, and her son Sheridan L. Major between the years of 1985-88.<sup>4</sup> In conversation with her family, they revealed that there were always signs of Smith's artistic ability. "She found an outlet in drawing, and according to Elizabeth, 'When the rest of us were doing hopscotch, Mary would get on the ground somewhere else and draw pictures in the dirt and write funny things in the pictures.'"<sup>5</sup> This distinguished her from the other children and was a material manifestation of the artistic genius that she is often said to have displayed. Elizabeth is one of the younger sisters of Mary T. Smith; there were thirteen children in the Tillman family. Smith was born the third oldest child in Brookhaven Mississippi. She went to school until the 5th grade and was ostracized by her peers due to her hearing impairment.<sup>6</sup> This led her to harness her creativity in solitude during the times that most children would have been playing, hence the drawing pictures in the dirt that her sister Elizabeth mentioned. Despite seeming unintelligent to others in her community, her siblings recognized her exceptional intelligence through her artistic abilities.

In her young adult years Smith had two marriages; both of which ended as a testament to the values that Smith held dear to her, and provided her opportunity to move throughout the counties of Mississippi. In response to the end of her first marriage, Smith stated to Arnett,

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<sup>4</sup> Arnett, William. "Mary T. Smith." Mary T. Smith | Souls Grown Deep. Souls Grown Deep, 2000. <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/mary-t-smith>.

<sup>5</sup> Arnett, William. "Mary T. Smith." 112.

<sup>6</sup> Arnett, William. "Mary T. Smith." 112

“Anybody that tells that big a lie, I can’t stay with,”.<sup>7</sup> She then married another sharecropper who was being cheated out of his earnings. After doing meticulous calculations and defending her husband, he was told to take a new wife if he wanted to continue working the land. With this on the table, Smith gathered her things and left for Hazelhurst in her 30’s allowing her to gain freedom and independence.

Smith has displayed an incredible amount of independence and creativity throughout her life that has not gone unnoticed, especially given that she was raised during a time where young women did not have the same autonomy or opportunities as men did. Spacesarchives.com says, “These events in Mary Smith's life as a young woman, in a time and culture that almost required her to have a husband for economic and social survival, paint a picture of a woman who was fiercely independent and willing to risk all for her integrity.”<sup>8</sup> Her willingness to stick to her values and create a life for herself is what southern Black women have to have in order to sustain within this country, especially during this time in history. Smith’s resourcefulness and intelligence were proven by her ability to calculate her husband’s missing earnings and support herself in the largest city of Mississippi. Smith supported herself by working as a domestic servant for a family that she developed a close relationship with. Her value to creating a community for herself was emphasized by the fact that she maintained this relationship with the family, evidenced by them communicating every year on her birthday.<sup>9</sup> She then gave birth to her only child Sheridan L. Major also known as “Jay Bird” in 1941.

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<sup>7</sup> Arnett, William. “Mary T. Smith.” 112

<sup>8</sup> Jay Wehnert, “Mary Tillman Smith,” Spaces Archives (Spaces Archives, July 14, 2020), <http://spacesarchives.org/explore/search-the-online-collection/mary-tillman-smith/>.

<sup>9</sup> Georgia Folklore Collection, Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection, University of Georgia Libraries, Athens, Georgia

Her house was built by Sheridan's father and became the greatest canvas of all for Smith to work with. That house was not only a representation of her freedom and independence, but was also her first art studio, the central birthplace of her artistic creativity. It was then that Smith had the space to nurture and grow her artistic abilities and access to the resources she needed to make the ideas of her artwork truly come alive. In that house, Smith had all she needed to sustain herself independently. She had a garden that she tended to and grew vegetables from using her knowledge and experience in sharecropping. She began painting in the 1970's, and traveled to the garbage dump near her home in order to gather free supplies to make a fence around her yard. Having a home built for her, and maintaining her own garden in order to grow food, she no longer needed a job. She was able to sustain herself as a single mother by having her own home and no husband, meaning she only had to consider herself, her son, and her art.

With her space being solely her own, she was able to create by using supplies she found in a garbage dump near her home. She utilized materials such as wood, house paint, and scrap metal. She used the outside of her home to display her artwork (fig 8). This method of displaying artwork was a tradition during the Reconstruction era amongst southern Black Americans called yard shows.

Yard shows were used as a manifesto among African American artists to illustrate the experiences and ideas of black people in a way that is accessible and public within black communities.<sup>10</sup> As Smith began to age, her hearing worsened, and she started to become isolated within her home. She was uncomfortable going places in Hazlehurst because of her hearing impairment and received negative attention from other people in the community. Before her

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<sup>10</sup> Gundaker, G., & McWillie, J. (2005). *No space hidden: The spirit of african american yard work*. University of Tennessee Press. Refer to this text for more information about yard shows.

hearing worsened, she frequented church but after being ostracized, Smith found comfort and safety with staying in her home because she could be away from the negative attention that she would receive out in public.<sup>11</sup>

Smith's paintings were originally exclusively portraits of Jesus, but over time she drew her family, friends, and eventually visitors to her home. She painted a blue figure of Jesus in 1987 (figure 23). She also used her artwork to honor her relationship to religion and her admiration for Jesus Christ. Information about the religious subject matter of Smith's paintings are discussed either in the texts she writes on her paintings, and through her interviews with William Arnett in the 1980s. She suffered a stroke around some time during the 1980s which prompted her to stop painting in the 1990's. She unfortunately passed in 1995 without having her house preserved as a cultural site. Even though her work was featured in numerous folk art, Smith was not considered a folk artist by the state of Mississippi. She didn't earn money for her work commensurate with its critical attention, and died with no earnings. compensation for the attention that her work got, so she died with no earnings from her artwork.

In the early to mid 2000s, Smith achieved great fame within the outsider and art brut community. She has been written about on many occasions for being self taught, and has been featured in numerous group exhibitions and some solo shows after her death. The categories that arts discourse platforms have placed her in include folk, outsider, and vernacular art. Her artwork features many paintings on wood or tin pieces. She also has sculptures that stand up in her yard. Her paintings are mostly religious and depict the people she holds closest to her. She paints her siblings, her son, and images of Christ, as seen in the introduction or earlier in this chapter .

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<sup>11</sup> Arnett, William. "Mary T. Smith." Mary T. Smith | Souls Grown Deep. Souls Grown Deep, 2000. <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/mary-t-smith>.



Smith used her artwork in her yard to be vulnerable and tell her life story, religion being a huge part of that, she frequently advertises Christ because her belief in him has inspired her. She wanted to share her work with the world by often painting portraits of visitors with their hands in the air welcoming guests to come and see her work.<sup>12</sup> (Fig 4) In this untitled painting created in 1980, Smith painted a male figure holding his hands in the air on a wooden door. She painted him using black to outline his features, and the other people in the background of this piece also held their hands up. She has the main figure of the painting in a yellow, red, green, and brown striped shirt. There is a yellow line underneath the group of black figures on the left side of the painting. Accompanying this, is text on the painting written in black brush strokes that is eligible to anyone other than Smith who creates these notably coded texts. Smith's texts have been described as cryptic.<sup>13</sup>

Smith combined the use of text and images in order to attract attention and visitors to her artwork. She lived near a billboard and applied some of the artistic marketing strategies from it to influence her work's ability to attract viewers.<sup>14</sup> (Fig 3) She painted a portrait of somebody who is unidentified on a triangular slab of tin titled "Reds Don't See." The figure here is drawn again, against a white background but this time in red. The figure is also wearing glasses. The words that are written on this painting are more legible than the last saying, "I wont me or wife" and "Reds Don't See." This could be one of her husbands or her son who is wanting to get

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<https://www.soulsgrowndeeper.org/sites/default/files/styles/grid-hub-4/public/SG201843427.jpg?itok=taq6TEkE>

<sup>13</sup> <http://spacesarchives.org/explore/search-the-online-collection/mary-tillman-smith/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.antonhaardtgallery.com/products/mary-t-smith>

married. There are many assumptions one can make of Smith's work because of her ambiguity in titling them, and the abstract figures she paints.

Smith used a few strategies to animate her work. For example, she writes catchy slogans alongside some images and vibrant contrasting colors against white backgrounds. Some strategies that she used "catchy slogans" alongside her paintings and contrasting colors against white backgrounds to make her work stand out (Fig 2). In figure 2, we see Smith standing next to her work with pride as she smiles. She stands next to her work proudly and smiling. She shows connection to her artwork and pride in it by matching her dress to her artwork. Smith's dress was handmade by her, and was black and white just like the portraits painted alongside the fence that she is standing next to. It is known that Smith has an extensive dress collection that has not been researched or written about exclusively.

As an analysis of Smith's art style, William Arnett writes "That is how one gets a message across: Attract attention with a picture (a face, an object, an animal) and accompany it with words. Down below the billboards, Mary Smith decided that she could compete, and she counter-advertised herself and her worldview. In the space of a billboard, newspaper ad, or television commercial, an advertiser presents a picture and a terse line of copy. Smith adopted those means."<sup>15</sup> This illustrates how Smith used the world around her to influence the style of her work.

Smith's life is an important aspect of her career as it has become a symbol of resilience and independence to the art world. She shares similar upbringing with other yard artists of which she is compared to in later chapters. While her story is inspiring, it is a result of the injustices

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.soulsgrowndeeep.org/artist/mary-t-smith>

that Black people face in this country, and art critics should acknowledge this is writing about Smith. Acknowledging the ways that the art world has created biases around the work of black people is a first step to creating a more equitable space for artists.

## Chapter Two: Visual Analysis of Mary T. Smith's Artwork

Yard shows are a pivotal part of African American art history, and originally stem from African practices and cultures. In the United States, the practice has been noted during slavery where enslaved people would spend their free time furnishing their quarters or maintaining personal gardens. This was an act of resilience, gaining ownership or autonomy of space as an escape from enslavement. The practice of decorating the yard is passed down between African Americans through generations. Smith was raised with sharecropping as her family's main source of income, stemming from the free labor that black people were forced to provide through slavery. With the affects of slavery still fresh in the American south where Smith grew up, the tradition of yard shows did not miss her as she created beautiful artwork to adorn her yard.

Smith's work, like the work of other African American yard artists, has gained attention worldwide having audiences of the "art brut" community, folk art community. She began drawing as an escape from being ostracized and expanded into beautiful paintings and structures being constructed and displayed in her yard. The religious aspect of her work mentioned in the previous chapter appealed to other African Americans that share the same beliefs. Her artwork was created in Hazlehurst Mississippi between the 1970s through the late 80s. Her artwork is representative of the longevity of cultural tradition and artistry of black people.

In order to create such bold and eye-catching paintings, Smith used pieces of tin and wood found in a nearby garbage dump. She would gather the pieces and drag them on foot to her house. She also used house paint, most likely to be also found at the local dump, to color her pieces. She incorporated these items along with clothing to construct sculptures such as scarecrows and three dimensional pieces. Although Smith's siblings recognized her talent, her

family had no way to provide access to art supplies. Growing up with her sharecropping family, she was not exposed to fine arts or taught any traditional way of painting, which is why her artwork has been considered “raw art” as well as folk art.

Smith’s house was located on one acre on highway 51 in Hazlehurst Mississippi. This large parcel provided Smith with a substantial amount of work space. Additionally, her house sat on a main street next to a billboard, therefore gained attention from locals and people who were interested in seeing her artwork. She used inspiration from the billboard within her style of art, making sure to turn heads and make people wonder with her artwork.

Smith had her artwork overflowing the yard. She had paintings, scarecrows, sculptures, and signs displayed all along her fence and house. She produced three most notable different kinds of artwork including paintings, sculptures, and architectural structures that she worked on by herself. Photos of her yard art from interviews allow us to reconstruct her yard, highlighting the ways that she organized and exhibited her artwork. Figure 1 depicts a plain overview of a part of Smith's yard and garden. In the figure, her house is white with a white fence around her yard, giving her more than enough space to grow her gallery of work. This white background is a trend that we see in most of her earliest works, using black to illustrate the subjects of the paintings. In the figure, you can see Smith using paint to draw against the white background. For example, she does this in the yellow and green pieces seen closest to her porch in the image. Further from the porch near the left corner of the fence, you can see that she uses brown paint to fill in the skin color of the figure. It depicts a racial difference between the figures with white backgrounds and the figures who are clearly racialized. This photo depicts her yard having subtle

pieces of her work embedded into her already constructed fence and house structure. In this photo, her yard is mostly clear, and not saturated with artwork as it would soon become.<sup>16</sup>

We continue to see Smith's style, using a white background to emphasize color contrast for her paintings in Figure 2. This photo was taken by Tom Rankin in 1984. These paintings feature a close view of her more vibrant and eye-catching pieces, maintaining that design element of contrasting colors which is found in all of her works. We can see her work more in depth within this photo noting that she has variety in her scales and subject matter of painting. These paintings are hung on her fence as she poses next to them in the photo standing tall and proud of the work she has produced. The white background brings into the view more details of the figures. These paintings range from a small scale to almost life sized paintings of people. The smaller scaled paintings feature multiple subjects while the bigger pieces have one central subject where we see the entire body of the figure. To the right of the photo she also paints two male figures against a white background using varying thick and thin green lines. The hands and arms of this specific painting are thin green lines, creating the hands using three lines attached to the "arm" of the figure. Between the two figures is a yellow T- shaped set of lines. The top line is above the head of the two figures, while the other line divides both figures, but their hands reach out to each other. These are very simplistic and hold very concerned or nervous facial expressions. Her use of line makes up the majority of the figures that she paints.

Smith's work also tells stories of the interactions within her world by painting people she knew and her family in addition to her religious paintings. In the third figure, Smith has constructed an "out house" on which she has displayed more of her paintings. Within the

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<sup>16</sup> The photos of Smith's yard are sourced from [Spacesarchives.com](https://spacesarchives.com) and taken by William Volkerz, who she had an interview with in the 1980's.

paintings on the out house, there is again this significance of skin color within the figures. She has two paintings in which the figure has brown skin. This suggests that Smith is immersing herself and her life into her artwork. It can be assumed that Smith used her artwork to reflect and simulate that social circle that she missed due to being ostracized.

The painting above the house on the top right of the photo is painted on tin and depicts a black man. The colors that she uses within this painting, red, green, and black, are also synonymous with the Pan-African flag. There is a red “X” drawn in the chest of the man. He is painted with a boxy, rectangular frame. His neck and shoulders are outlined with red, and he is painted with green eyes. Green also surrounds his head. Along with his clearly, racially black skin, he has an afro which can be seen on many of her portraits. The text that accompanies the painting says, “MNAME” on the left, and “I Am Man I Look Onto Lord” on the right. Smith demonstrates her faith within the picture by saying “I Am Man I Look Onto Lord”, because of the Christian belief that all mankind should follow God. She is saying that she is just human, therefore she looks to the lord for guidance and assistance in life.

The second picture featuring a visibly black subject is at the bottom of the out house towards the middle of the structure. The man represented is painted differently from the previous man. This figure has a larger sized head. Only the head is painted with brown paint, as the neck and body of the figure is yellow like the background of the painting. This piece is almost a caricature because of the proportions between the head and the neck of this figure. Smith also outlines the painting with brown paint. There is text on the picture that says, “198(unrecognizable number) Mr BO H.”<sup>17</sup> Smith also adds short, red, vertical dashes, which

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<sup>17</sup> *Mary Tillman Smith*. Spaces Archives. (2020, July 14). Retrieved April 20, 2022, from <http://spacesarchives.org/explore/search-the-online-collection/mary-tillman-smith/>

function as a design element. The dashes disrupt the balance of the image because the dark bolded text draws more attention to one side. This might have been a person that she knew personally because she was known to have created portraits of her family and friends.

The way in which Smith poses with her paintings suggests confidence and pride toward own work. In the sixth figure, you can see Smith standing in the center of her large yard surrounded by her artwork. Most of the paintings surrounding her are portraits of her peers or pictures of Jesus. They are all positioned in this part of her yard facing the same direction, while she stands left of an arranged structure of her artwork. These paintings are facing inwards looking into her yard which is strategic placement as if she wanted to cocoon herself into her yard. The positioning of the work in this part of the yard seems more personal and her position towards the paintings informs us of her relationship to them. She had a relationship with each of her paintings because of the ways in which she displayed them. This alludes to the community that she created for herself through her artwork. This is also noted in her positioning of the paintings in figure seven. She is sitting on a white bench next to her painting that she displayed on the bench. When she is sitting on the bench she is not alone because she is with the people in her painting. This can be in a literal sense, assuming that she herself personified her paintings as actual people, but it is actually in a spiritual sense that she has these paintings in places where multiple people can be.

Smith presents her artwork organized by theme as seen in figure two because it is presented in similar themes. She has several sheds with her paintings displayed on them. She creates her own exhibitions of her artwork with the way she organizes it. In figure nine, this exhibition of paintings follow the same color scheme, white, black, red and blue. There is also a



quote “Lord Is Good” painted in black on a piece of white tin. It is positioned to connect the two portraits. There is more detail on the painting in the figure that is in front of the “lord is good” sign. This painting features thick brush strokes of black paint to create the hair of the person depicted. The hair is shaped in an afro, in contrast to the painting to the left of the “lord is good” sign which does not have the same hair and has thinner lines painted. Both paintings have a red line painted at the bottom of the paintings, which shows that these two people are connected in some way. Behind these two paintings, there is a long, rectangular piece of tin picturing simple images of people. These images are vague and do not have many details on them; they are also painted in black and white with blue accented shapes like circles and an x- mark.(fig 9) There are also black circles painted on a white piece of tin at the bottom of this series of paintings. This could represent more heads of people as if a crowd or a distant view of people.

The sculptures that Smith creates are a mixture of paintings, materials from the nearby dump, and yard materials. In figure ten, the red, white, blue, and black combination of colors remains present. Smith organized her paintings in an open shed, and the left side of the shed hangs paintings done on wood. While these paintings feature a white background, which is usual for Smith’s early works, the skin of many of the depicted figures is pastel yellow. This is an indication of symbolism within her work. Yellow could suggest holiness or spirituality of specific figures. One person is painted with a green face and pigtails, while the yellow faced person has orange hair and a dark colored nose. There is variety in the hair of the people in these paintings that is not present in her other paintings around the yard.

Smith’s use of red is widespread throughout the artwork on the shed. The red is used as borders around the paintings that are inside the open shed. These paintings feature the bright red

and blue colors as the clothing of the figures. Two figures are positioned towards the top left hand corner of the front of the shed. They are wearing blue, pin striped clothing and holding hands. Both figures are smiling, and there is a smaller figure drawn in the upper most left corner of this painting. In this area, Smith has tended to feature groups of people. The shed has blue chairs that are turned over and wooden panels painted blue, coordinating the colors of the shed and the paintings. The display of materials is strategically curated, the purposely flipped chairs are indication of the meticulousness that Smith had while creating and staging her artwork. This shed is a reliquary of paintings featuring texts like "the lord nome". She used these paintings as an active display of her faith, which puts her artwork in its own sphere of consciousness.

Smith took care of her yard and her home on her own. This work included mowing the lawn, maintaining a garden and also maintaining the artwork that she displays in her yard and her home. In figure 11, an overview of the opposite side of her yard is pictured. Through these photos we can see that Smith tends to her work space, as she is pictured mowing the lawn. In the yard there is a smaller guest house. Her fence was made of both wood and tin that she found from the local garbage dump. Both sheds are green and have paintings above them labeling them. One has a painting of an animal and the words "hose" on it which indicates that this is a house for her dog. She enclosed her garden, and has multiple sheds that are labeled and functional, meaning that her yard was not only for display but also for practical use.

Smith's use of color and ambiguity in her figures keep the viewer entranced looking deeper into the process of her painting. While she does have scripts on her paintings sending a message to the viewer, most of her paintings are untitled, giving the viewer more freedom to interpret her work. She goes through an evolution of color usage throughout her career, starting

with classic white and black pieces with some sparse color, then she begins to saturate her figures with more color in her line work.

She also experiments with materials, alternating between painting on wood or tin surfaces. One of her earliest paintings listed on her *Souls Grown Deep* chapter website is untitled and was painted in 1980. This is an image of two groups of figures to the left and right of one central male figure. Smith uses a wooden door to paint these figures on. The door serves as a white background for the black and white figures. The central male figure is outlined in black with an orange, red, and green outlined garment on. Only the top half of the man is depicted with a small amount of negative space below him. Both of the male figure's hands are raised, he also has a yellow outline on the left arm indicating some type of holiness or importance because he is the largest figure with the most color. To the left of the figure is a group of three figures painted in black at a smaller scale, and lower than the left arm of the central figure. The three figures have similar, more textured hair than the central figure and right most figures, whose hair is smooth yet circle shaped.

The materials that Smith uses give her work texture. The difference in texture of the figures show a difference in race despite illustrating skin color, resembling a kinkier or curlier texture of hair seen on most black people, than the other figures. The right three figures are painted above the right arm of the central figure and underlined in black. These figures are also painted in black and white. These figures are painted with less saturation of color on the upper body, showing a difference also in class of the two groups of figures. This piece also has her scripts that were sometimes easily understood, sometimes not. She signed her name to the bottom left hand side of the painting, and above the figures she has indescribable text. On the

right side of the picture in the top right corner above the figures, she dates the painting. Below the figures she has the text “Have HL A BuL”. In the space between “HAVE,” she has the shadow of a word that she attempted to cover with white paint.<sup>18</sup> (Figure 18) The painting’s overall religious mood swings through the painting because of her use of color and scale, using her knowledge of scale to show character importance and dominion over the smaller characters. The painting has elements of spirituality, showing figures with no lower bodies. This suggests that they are otherworldly beings because they are not shown walking or standing on solid ground.

Mary T. Smith demonstrates an understanding of the line element of design. She uses thicker or thinner black lines to establish differences in the figures. She shows incredible attention to detail in painting the floating trios of figures on the opposite sides of the central figure. Smith’s technique uses lines to express color (instead of sketching), and then adds color to the sketch to create the figure. Evidence of this is the thick lines used to draw the figures on the right side because they make the figures appear more clothed while the other figures are perceived as more bare because they have only the outline of a body. The texture of the door absorbs the paint, also attributing to the thickness of the lines. The figures do not have realist faces, more general outlines are used to represent the face. Smith includes eyes, noses, mouths, and eyebrows on the faces of the figures symbolizing that these figures are human. The scale of the painting is 72x32 inches making these figures large enough for viewers to see the details of the facial features of the figures and recognize Smith’s use of lines.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/mary-t-smith/work/untitled-3>

Smith continues using a similar color palette as her previous painting, also untitled, and created in 1984. This painting represents a figure of ambiguous gender. This picture is similar to the previously discussed 1980 painting because of the black, green, and orange paint used. The painting is 49.5 x 26 inches, meaning its large scale makes the piece almost life sized. Through this painting, we can see an evolution of Smit's skills. She uses the green paint to outline the upper body of the figure instead of the black that she used previously to outline her figures. The painting is executed on a rectangular piece of tin, positioned horizontally, and Smith uses the tin ridges to explore texture. For example, she allows the paint to drip down the ridges, creating a drip effect. The head of the figure is painted with black, coloring what could be a hat or hair. It is abstracted, as there is no particular distinction from the hair and the clothing. She brings the black paint down onto the chest of the figure with two thick, straight, vertical lines. She uses that white background to add to the color of the figure that she is painting. Within the painting there are about two grooves of tin with no color on it between the overall figure and to the left of it is a green line that seems to continue the painting. She paints a green and orange striped shirt onto the figure. She paints the eyes of the figure with black paint and the circles around the eyes are colored with green paint. The nose of the figure is also in green, but there are no other distinct facial features (fig 16). Here, we see a shift in the way that Smith uses the white background into a piece of the painting instead of the background of the painting.

Later in her career, Smith has employed an amazing use of color to her artwork, moving away from black and white paintings and using the white background of her materials to provide the color of her figures. In 1987, she painted another untitled piece with blue and yellow paint on wood with a scale of 48 x 32 inches. Her pieces have remained large in scale over the years

which gives her attention to detail by seeing the piece on a bigger surface. In this painting, there are four figures. Two figures are positioned vertically on top of each other, while the other two figures are smaller and are on the left and right side of the larger figure at the top of the painting. The bodies of these figures are painted a solid, bright blue and outlined with a thin line of yellow paint. The background of the painting is white, peaking through around the figures and brightening up the piece. Wood is a porous material that absorbs paint, and we see this in the bodies of the bigger figures. There are spots within the overall blue paint that the white washed background peaks through. This painting has very soft and blurred lines because of the material she paints on. She added yellow dots to the background, making use of the negative space that was surrounding the figures. The smaller, left most figure has a white face with yellow features outlined. It also has yellow dashes painted along the neck and chest of the figure. The smaller right figure has more blue in the face and only the eyes, eyebrows, and nose are yellow. The yellow in the nose is apparent on top of the blue paint but does not mix with the yellow making the face green.

The top large figure is about two times the size of the other two figures to the left and right side of it. It is painted with its hand on the hips and two “feet” below it. This figure has no legs or distinct clothing as might be seen in previous works by Smith. The face of the figure is white with blue facial features. This is a contrast from the smaller figures who both have yellow facial attributes. There is one yellow dot below the face of the figure. The figure below has its hands raised and is looking up at the figure above it. It looks to be giving praise to the other figure while the smaller figures are angels accompanying the larger figure. The bottom figure also has a white face with no yellow facial features. This looks to be a depiction of a person in

active praise of Jesus as Smith was a Christian and frequently painted religious iconography. The top larger figure is the most holy of the figures because it is made with a similar face as the bottom figure. Christians believe that they were made in the image of Jesus Christ. Presumably so, she would paint Jesus with human qualities. She adds the yellow dot on the throat of the larger top figure and has it positioned in the sky to show the difference in holiness between the top and bottom figures. She also paints the word “NO” in yellow on the top of the figure to the left of its head. Next to the no on the other side of the figure’s head there is “TT” that is almost illegible.

Smith uses writing strategically in her images, although sometimes the writing is not fully legible. We see Smith’s use of legible writing in figure 25, which pictures a structure Smith created. There are five figures representing people in the sculpture. Two figures stand upright, and those figures are the largest in the sculpture. There are three other smaller figures positioned next to the centered larger figures. The two larger figures are positioned next to each other like partners. The figure on the left is painted on a rectangular piece of tin wearing a dress. The dress is designed using red and green paint. Smith uses dashes to color the dress, outlining the dress in red and filling the negative space with green dashes. She adds a red line of dashes in the middle of the dress. The head of the figure is painted in brown paint. It has green facial features and yellow cheeks. The head and shoulders are outlined in brown paint, but are not filled in with this brown paint. There is text on the right side of the figure’s head that is illegible. It is interesting to see which texts Smith makes legible aside the text that she makes very clear to the audience. In the smaller figure on the left side of the dressed figure we just discussed, we can see that she makes the righting clearer. This figure is of a black man, inferred from the way that the figure is

filled in completely with brown paint. The painting is on a square piece of tin, of which Smith outlines the top with red paint. The text on the painting says, “HEAR I AM” descending vertically on the left side. On the right side it says, “ I THANK THE LORD”.(fig 25)

Smith paints this figure with both a hat and a full suit that is multicolored with green, yellow, and red lines. This figure’s full body is depicted, his legs and feet make an appearance in this painting which is unlike any we’ve discussed so far. The figure’s hat is painted with black and yellow stripes. Protruding underneath it is the head of the figure painted in red paint. Smith paints the features of the figure in red, and the glasses of the figure in green to create a clear contrast between the face and the glasses. The feet of the figure are outlined in green. Next to this figure is another one positioned to lean on the bigger figure. This figure is painted on a slightly larger piece of tin than the first smaller figure discussed. The piece of tin is rectangular. Smith paints red and green lines on the bottom of the tin and adds the figure above these lines, adding negative space between the two. This makes the figure appear to be floating because the feet are not touching the ground that Smith created. This figure could be the depiction of a holy being because it possesses non-humanistic qualities, such as not walking on the ground.(figure 25) She paints the clothing of this figure only using one large box outlined in red and filled with green paint. We know that this figure is wearing a garment because she paints red buttons along the middle of it. Next to this figure, there is a smaller one painted in yellow along a small piece of tin. The writing along this painting is the most important aspect of this piece because it contrasts most from the background, therefore catching the attention of the viewers. The words on the painting are difficult to decipher from photos, but say something along the lines of “I hear for a Jesus” and “ho iz better lee W”.



Smith has an interesting way of enclosing collections of hers that have a similar theme. Smith uses long pieces of wood to create an enclosure around her paintings which complete the sculpture. To the right side of the sculpture, there is a piece of wood painted in yellow. There are green “y” and “x” shapes painted along the wood, and between them are simple figures also painted in green. Attached to this is a tin strip with bright colored figures drawn in less detail. The figures are orange, green, yellow, and brown and continue to be in this pattern for the two top most tin strips. She writes “What you doa” in black paint along the first tin beam. On the left side of the sculpture, she puts “I LOVE THE NAME OF THE LORD” in black paint. In front of this, she paints the numbers 1-12 on a tin beam in green paint along a white background. This is the number of months in a year. Positioning this in front of “I LOVE THE NAME OF THE LORD” suggests that she loved the lord all the time, even twelve months a year. Ongoing devotion to Christ is important in Christianity and Smith emphasizes her ongoing devotion in her paintings.

Smith’s work demonstrates the use of skills that could be taught in art classes despite being a self taught artist. Her work has exceptional attention to detail and use of symbolism seen in the writing on her paintings and her line work. She was innovative and meticulous about the techniques she used in her work, showing the tradition that her work follows. Her work is a part of the folk art genre, and has been categorized as such throughout her reception. Folk artists are usually described as lower class, rural, and self-taught. Folk art has shared characteristics of outsider art, and the term folk art has been used interchangeably with self taught and outsider art. Muri says, “Folk art is frequently considered to be a catchall term that includes the art of

stylistically naive, primitive and ‘Sunday’ painters.”<sup>19</sup> This genre of art has not been considered important until recently, the 19th century. The cultural climate of the 19th century romanticized the ‘simple life’ which is that of a rural lifestyle, and the artwork of these people became folk art mainly focused on illustrating traditional living.<sup>20</sup> Folk art was created as a term by white, Christian, well educated men as a way to describe arts and crafts. Some types of things made and called folk art include architecture, painting, sculpture, and printmaking. Dwelling houses and religious buildings were discussed as folk architecture. In the case of Mary T. Smith, her home was the place in which her art was made, stored, and displayed. Her house could also be considered a Spiritual building because of all of the votive paintings that she has of Jesus. Votive paintings are also considered folk art or crafts. “The term “folk art” may also encompass art produced by ethnic minorities in more developed societies, who have succeeded in preserving their beliefs and customs by living in separate communities apart from the mainstream.”<sup>21</sup> The “folk” of today’s folk artists are black people, and the characteristics of the folk artists that are most discussed is their biography.

While outsider art and folk art possess similarities, there is a difference between the two genres that is explained in Jennifer Borum’s *Outsider Art*. Borum Notes that, “The difference between these two styles of art reveals more about the individual critiquing the art than it does the artwork and artist that they are intended to identify.”<sup>22</sup> The outsider art community became popular in the early 20th century. Psychiatrists recognized the drawings of their patients as

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<sup>19</sup> Muri, Simone Alter. “Folk Art and Outsider Art: Acknowledging Social Justice Issues in Art Education.” *Art Education* 52, no. 4 (1999): 36–41. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3193772>.

<sup>20</sup> <http://visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/folk-art.htm>

<sup>21</sup> <http://visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/folk-art.htm>

<sup>22</sup> Muri, Simone Alter. “Folk Art and Outsider Art: Acknowledging Social Justice Issues in Art Education.” *Art Education* 52, no. 4 (1999): 36–41. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3193772>.

artwork.<sup>23</sup> Artists saw the work of these patients and decided that their artwork is raw and untouched by mainstream culture because they have had no formal art training. Mary T. Smith was considered an outsider artist because of her isolation from her community and the fact that she was self taught.

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<sup>23</sup> BORUM, JENIFER. "Outsider Art." In *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 23: Folk Art*, edited by CAROL CROWN and CHERYL RIVERS, 143–45. University of North Carolina Press, 2013. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469607993\\_crown.37](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469607993_crown.37).

### Chapter Three: Mary T. Smith's Reception

With this chapter, I aim to illustrate the timeline of Mary T. Smith's reception stemming from the 1980's in order to analyze the way in which critics, curators, and other artists perceive her work. Through this, we will gain an understanding of how deeply the art world valued her artwork and romanticized her journey to artistic creativity. There is an eclecticism within the way her artwork has been categorized, from the moment she attains widespread fame to her posthumous reception. Smith's social standing as a hearing impaired, single, uneducated, southern, black woman is addressed frequently amongst articles and interviews written about her. It is because of racial and gendered biases that there is not a surplus of academic writing analyzing her work critically. However, there are many articles that detail the life story of Smith and demonstrate awe at her talent and ability to produce artwork despite her circumstances. Mary T. Smith was discovered in 1970 for her alluring artwork, and gained most of her fame after her death in 1995. Her artwork was featured in numerous exhibitions and written about in books and arts websites such as *Baking in the Sun: Visionary Images from the South* and Hyperallergic.com. Smith was recognized as an artist in the late 1990s, and participated in recorded interviews with William Arnett and William Vokerz. Smith has since regained fame during the 2000s when outsider art was popularized because her work has been categorized as both folk and outsider art.

The writing surrounding Smith's artwork details more of her biography than overall interpretations or thoughts about her work or her artistic skill. The general information that is identical amongst most biographies of Smith is the fact that she was the daughter of a sharecropper, she has had failed marriages, she was deaf, and she did not marry the father of her only son Sheridan L. Major. Articles say things like, "from an early age Smith had a serious

hearing impairment that made it difficult for others to understand her speech,”referencing her hearing impairment and difficulty being accepted by her community.<sup>24</sup> Smith growing up poor is used in headlines of articles such as the Christianberst.com article. The article says, “A poor child of Mississippi condemned to the hardest work, this African-American woman began, in the evening of her life, a work that resembles a real graphic blues.” The “hardest work” that Smith has endured in her childhood relates to the labor that she did as a sharecropper.

While these are important pieces of Smith’s life, writing about them constantly in an almost identical manner across many platforms is evident that there is a lack of critical thought about her work. There is a trend of considering the work of black southern artists folk or outsider considering only their biographical circumstances instead of using critical analysis in categorizing their work. This romanticizes the struggles of black artists in order to further market their artwork instead of recognizing the talent of these artists. Borum Says,

*“American museum curators and art dealers adopted the catchy outsider art designation, recognizing its dramatic appeal and ostensible usefulness in marketing self- taught artists, heretofore often called folk artists. Curators, dealers, and collectors systematically recast artists across the country, and especially in the South, as outsider artists. At best, the term outsider art created benign chaos; at worst, the term opened the door to regional, racial, and social stereotyping”.*<sup>25</sup>

In the case of Mary T. Smith, her story of being ostracized from her community and then becoming an artistic genius as a result is a story that neglects the fact that she has harbored this talent in her youth (as told in *Souls Grown Deep* by her sister). The story of a black woman being an outcast without education becoming an incredible artist is more marketable to the art world

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.outsiderartfair.com/artists/mary-t-smith>

<sup>25</sup> BORUM, JENIFER. “Outsider Art.” In *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 23: Folk Art*, edited by CAROL CROWN and CHERYL RIVERS, 143–45. University of North Carolina Press, 2013. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469607993\\_crown.37](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469607993_crown.37).

than just a talented black woman creating art to decorate her yard. This shows the biases of the art world and the relationship that American culture has with trying to profit off of the talent and labor of black people.

In analyzing the reception of Mary T. Smith, writing surrounding her work must be organized chronologically. Her work became popular following the popularity of the Folk and Outsider art movements. From the Ngram book viewer, it is shown that Folk art was written about most between the 1940s and 1990s while Smith began painting in 1970. ( Fig 26) In the beginning of her career she was heavily identified as a folk artist because it was the most popular self taught genre of the time. She was later identified as an outsider artist with its rise from 1990 until the early 2000s, but this was after her death when her work was most popular. The media we will use to analyze Smith's reception was created between the years of 1986 to 2022.

Smith was featured in interviews in 1984 and 1986 which have been recorded and placed into digital archives. William Vokerz interviewed Smith while she gave him a tour of her yard. This was featured in the archives of the Smithsonian museum, of which her artwork was displayed. The editors note confirms that the interview with Volkerz was conducted over many years. The website says, "This transcript is from a series of recordings made by Willem Volkersz over a number of years. They are not formal interviews, but rather records of conversations, often taped during photo-taking tours of the artist's studios or home collections."<sup>26</sup> Volkerz was accompanied by Allan Winkler on this interview, and the two took pictures of Smith's yard while she deciphered the text on her paintings. In a short clip of this interview, he asks her simple

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<sup>26</sup> Volkerz, W. (n.d.). Transcript of interview with Mary T. Smith. *Archives of American Art*. other, Smithsonian American Art Museum . Retrieved from <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/items/detail/transcript-interview-mary-t-smith-22699#transcript>.

questions because of her hearing and speech impediment. It was hard to decipher most of her words.

“MS: Yes sir, "The Lord's birth day." And up yonder outside there are the r-e-s-t-r-o-o-m, restroom!

WV: Uh huh.

MS: Restroom! (laughs) Restroom. That's the place, ah hah. Yes, Lord.

WV: Great.

MS: Uh huh. And down yonder, "The Lord is head of the world."

WV: Ahh.

MS: "The Lord is head of the world."

WV: I get it, uh huh”.<sup>27</sup>

Here we can see Smith’s intelligence and the spiritual beliefs that she alludes to within her work. Most of her work discussed in this interview was of Jesus or the story of Jesus’ life. She talks about Christmas being his birthday. She also discusses her materials saying that she drags the materials from the dump nearby her house. “Take care! Be careful, don't be care, what. Out in the woods up yonder, down under the ground, almost. And I couldn't reach it, and I dug. I hit something down under, down in the ground, and I come to find this thing! I put it up there”.

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<sup>27</sup> Volkerz, W. (n.d.). Transcript of interview with Mary T. Smith. *Archives of American Art*. other, Smithsonian American Art Museum . Retrieved from <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/items/detail/transcript-interview-mary-t-smith-22699#transcript>.

Interviews of her are used to get more of an understanding of Smith's work since she does not make all of her texts clear. You have to have a relationship with Smith to really understand the work she is producing. In the 1986 interview, her painting process is highlighted. It is not said who interviewed her within the digital archive, however it can be assumed that William Arnett was interviewing her because he stated in the *Souls Grown Deep* book that he had interviewed her from the 1970s to the 1980s, and most information gathered in this interview is also in *Souls Grown Deep*. Smith's sister Elizabeth helps translate between Smith and Arnett. Elizabeth also answers the majority of the biographical questions about Mary's life, detailing her jobs over the years as well as her marriages. Elizabeth additionally remembers Smith drawing in her youth. Smith was even prompted to paint within this interview where we see her process of mixing the paint and using the brush.

Following these interviews, Smith was featured in two major folk art exhibitions. One in 1987 is titled, *Baking in the Sun: Visionary Images from the South at Old Capital Museum in Jackson Mississippi*. The exhibition is "a selection of collections" from Sylvia and Warren Lowe, who donated these works to the University of Lafayette in Louisiana's Hillard museum. The exhibition was published into a book featuring Smith with a brief description of her work followed by three of her pieces. This is an exhibition book, which is not only to showcase the work, but to offer criticism of it. In this book, there is nothing critical about Smith's work being said. However, The information presented is her biography and her attitude towards her work. This book was written during the period of art history where folk art was being written about most, solidifying her status as a folk artist. This book was published during Smith's prime as an artist, and chose to highlight how she felt about her work in the present. The analysis of Smith's



attitude towards her artwork is a refreshing approach in contrast to other articles that highlight the parts of Smith's biography that posed a challenge in her life.

Smith is featured on page 75 of the book and described as energetic and independent. Her independence is something to note as we continue to explore her reception because it aids in the romanticizing of Smith's struggles. It is something that people are in awe of, therefore they will be more interested in her work because it is more marketable. The description of Mary T. Smith says, "Energetic and fiercely independent, Mary Tillman Smith...Married twice, Smith spent most of her adult years as a tenant farmer or cooking for other families. She speaks proudly of the days in the fields when she would harvest eighteen to nineteen bushels of potatoes on her own."<sup>28</sup> Smith was proud of her days in the fields, harvesting and contributing to the family sharecropping business. However, this was a point in history where black people faced the repercussions of slavery being abolished, and thus was an incredibly difficult time to be a black woman. Smith made light of her situation, and most writing about her work doesn't discuss in detail the social and political context in which she functions. This early text about Smith is referencing more of her life than any detailed information about her artwork. A fact that the book highlights is that Smith was open about sharing her yard work with people passing by or visiting. The author writes, "She appears not to know what to make of the attention her work is beginning to receive and joyfully greets visitors to her outdoor gallery with hebephrenic energy, squealing come look!"<sup>29</sup> This description of her attitude and energy about sharing her work beautifully

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<sup>28</sup> University of Southwestern Louisiana. (1987). Mary T. Smith. In *Baking in the sun: Visionary images from the South* (pp. 72–76). essay, University Art Museum, University of Southwestern Louisiana.

<sup>29</sup> University of Southwestern Louisiana. (1987). Mary T. Smith. In *Baking in the sun: Visionary images from the South* (pp. 72–76)

illustrates her intentions. She wanted her work to be shown and invited people into her yard to enjoy her artwork with her.

Smith's work is initially shown in black and white as our introduction to her art within the book. Showing her work without color does not allow us to fully experience it because it is altered. The book shows her paintings titled, *C and W* and *I Come Back*, in a moderate size so we can see some detail of her work. Her first painting featured, *C and W*, was created in 1983. (Fig 20) It is made of enamel paint on tin and is an illustration of two people with a "C" and "W" on their clothing. Both figures have different skin tones but similar hair textures. From the initial black and white photos of this piece, we do not know the color of the skin of the figures. We can only see that one figure is darker than the other. Showing her work in black and white in the beginning of the exhibition book simplifies her work upon first glance. The painting *I Come Back*, is on page 74, and shows a painting of a male figure with legs and arms extended from the tin panel. (fig 21) Showing her and her work in black and white creates a distance of time between the reader and the artwork within the exhibition book. We associate color with the present, or modernity in the case of fine art, because we experience everyday life in color. When thinking about how pictures can change how close we feel to the present, the difference between a black and white photo and a colorful photo will produce different experiences with Mary T. Smith's artwork. Colorful photos of her, her paintings, and her yard look more modern and recent than photos of her and her work in black and white. Using black and white in photos of her and of her artwork makes her seem like a part of history, when she was still alive during the time that the book was published. This changes our perception of her artwork because we see it

as an older, more historical version of her work whereas we want to see her work fully appreciated during her life.

Although Smith's work participates in continuing the yard show tradition dating back to generations before her, art critics seem amazed at her ability to paint without formal training. The viewer's ability to cultivate authentic reactions to her work is lost when we are introduced to it in black and white instead of color. However, the book later shows her paintings in the index, with color. They are shown with no description of the image which is a disservice because the description of her as an artist does not describe all of her pieces featured in later pages. Showing these images in color brings the viewer back to life with Smith's art because they are able to engage with it fully. I saw the work from a more modern lens, and felt more of a connection to the work because of both the social context of yard shows and the detail in which I could now see the paintings. The vibrancy of her color choices and powerful brush strokes catches my attention on any scale that the work is shown in. As always, there will be no other alternative to authentically experience the work other than standing in front of it on display.

In 1988, Smith was featured in the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. Her artwork was categorized within the self taught genre and was featured in "Way Out There: The Art of Southern Backroads," an exhibition that celebrated the region's self-taught artists. It also offers a look at how the self taught world converged with contemporary American photography and literature.<sup>30</sup> Smith's painting, "Untitled (figure with halo)" is featured on the High Museum of Art's website under Folk and self-taught art. This painting features a yellow and blue figure and red painted etching. It has a white halo and red circle painted around green eyes. (Fig 22)

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<sup>30</sup> <https://high.org/Press-Release/discover-the-art-of-southern-backroads-at-the-high/>

Through observing how museums categorize Smith's artwork through marketing, themed exhibitions, and collections, we are told the general academic opinion of her work by the art world. Her artwork was considered an environmental installation as her tin women figures were showcased. In the description of this exhibition, there is very little information provided about Smith's work. The article describes her artwork's contribution to the exhibition by considering it as feminist and saying that her artwork featured was a "feminist gallery of tin-scrap women".

The article says,

*"Along with individual artworks, the galleries will be anchored by environmental installations that will replicate the majesty that Williams, and other travelers, would have experienced first-hand when visiting the artists during their lifetimes. Standout moments will include sci-fi-inspired art by Royal Robertson, the multicultural utopia of Eddie Owens Martin, commentary on human nature in concrete and pencil by Dilmus Hall and a feminist gallery of tin-scrap women by Mary T. Smith."*<sup>31</sup>

Like many southern black artists, her artwork was only critiqued from a biographical standpoint. As a result of this, her artwork was considered feminist because Smith was so independent as a Black woman. She moves through these genres of art based on nothing but her biography. Her work is being shown along with other yard artists, and is an example of her being categorized as a vernacular artist within this exhibition as well as feminist.

Furthering her reception timeline, Smith was categorized as a vernacular artist as well as folk and outsider. The term vernacular art was written about most in the early 2000s from 2002 and then declining around 2010.<sup>32</sup> In 2001, she was featured in the second volume to a set of books written by the Soul's Grown Deep Foundation titled, *Souls Grown Deep*. This book refers

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<sup>31</sup> *Way out there: The art of southern backroads. High Museum of Art. (n.d.). Retrieved February 10, 2022, from <https://high.org/exhibition/way-out-there-the-art-of-southern-backroads/> (May 2019)*

<sup>32</sup> Refer to figure xx to see the chart.

to her as folk, outsider and vernacular, and also offers essays explaining the implications of these categories. The book is written by father son duo, William and Paul Arnett, both of whom researched much of Smith's biography. This book served as a catalyst for her fame offering primary sourced information about Smith, accompanied by an understanding of the work that she makes. The second volume of the book focuses particularly on Black, Southern, Vernacular artists during the reconstruction period in the United States.

The chapter "Her Name is Someone," written by William Arnett about Smith, begins by describing the historical context of yard shows and the ideas associated with them in the Black American community. Arnett writes,

*"From the late 1960s through the late 1970s, after the death of Martin Luther King Jr., a remarkable cultural phenomenon unfolded in the southern United States yet went almost unnoticed. As if in an unspoken response to a trumpet's reveille, black people throughout the region came out from their houses, or factories, or in from the fields, and intensified their creation of artistic environments or 'yard shows so the outside world could see what had been previously expressed in secrecy..."*<sup>33</sup>

The book provides a great context about the history of yard shows and the fact that they have been a hidden group of work titled vernacular art because of their outdoor nature.

Before the chapter on Smith's artwork, there is an essay by John W. Roberts titled *Tricksters, Martyrs, Black Firsts: Representations of the Hero in African American Folk Art*, which outlines some aspects of folklore that black southern artists exemplify. In Robert's essay, he discusses a folklore hero for the African American community being Jesus. Robert says, "In fact, we might argue that the prototype of the martyred hero for African Americans is the crucified Christ...whose sacrifice on the cross represents the preeminent sign of his commitment

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<sup>33</sup> Arnett, William, and Paul Arnett. *Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art*. 2. Vol. 2. Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2001.

to liberation for all human beings.”<sup>34</sup> Smith’s artwork fits into the genre of folk art based upon the parameters described by Roberts by having elements like a folk hero (Jesus), and having some type of oral storytelling element. Robert states that there is a verbal expression of folklore, and that it “reflects a tendency in folklore scholarship to elevate oral expression over the material and the visual.”<sup>35</sup> Smith was very verbally expressive about her artwork and her religion, seen in video interviews of her painting and discussing her work. Emphasis in language is also seen in the text she writes on her paintings. She makes the folk hero of her art explicitly clear by adding her slogans to her paintings, saying things like “Jesus is all she needs.” Jesus represents a martyr for the black community, especially after slavery because he endured great suffering and sacrifice. It is taught that Jesus should be thanked and worshiped because he has paid the ultimate price for the sins of man. Christianity provided a creative idea that aligned with the hopes and dreams of freedom that black people had during slavery, and passed through generations. This prompted me to think about Smith’s work in a more spiritual way because she references religion often and depicts Jesus in many of her paintings.

Another essay featured in the book is “Self Taught and Trained Artists: an Evolving Relationship” by Lowery Stokes Sims. Through this essay, the relationship between self taught and trained artists is put into conversation. The essay describes parallels between “tribal” art and authenticity. Folk art is often associated with more authenticity because it is normally a traditional genre of art where the methods of art or the oral tradition of folklore is passed down

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<sup>34</sup> Arnett, William, Paul Arnett, and John W Roberts. “Tricksters, Martyrs, Black Firsts: Representations of the Folk Hero in African American Vernacular Art.” Essay. In *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South* 2, 2:74–91. Atlanta, Georgia: Tinwood, 2001.

<sup>35</sup> Roberts, John W. “Horace Pippin and the African American Vernacular.” *Cultural Critique*, no. 41 (1999): 5–36. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354519>.

generationally. Although Smith's work is not consistently focused on language, it often had text messages that helped to convey the meaning. The words that she painted alongside her figures is an example of that oral folklore tradition being made accessible.

Bringing these essays together in a discussion of Smith's work allows the reader more of a better understanding of the way that she is received. Smith's art aligns heavily with the elements of folk art, and considering her an outsider artist ignores black American history by not acknowledging the cultural nuances of creating yard art. *In Outsider Art, Vernacular Traditions, Trauma, and Creativity*, Daniel Wojcik says, "Many of the assumptions underlying the study and collection of outsider art are deeply problematic from the perspective of folklore studies...the concept of outsider art, somehow produced completely free from societal influences is inaccurate."<sup>36</sup> Smith's work comes from a line of societal influence, (generational tradition) in which should be taken into consideration when understanding the historical context of yard art. The book notes that she was featured in many major folk art shows in 1987. She has been featured in a number of shows including *My Way: African American Art From The Black South at Rockford Art Museum*, *Mary T. Smith: Mississippi Shouting #2* at Christian Berst gallery, Home at Shrine gallery, *Ombres et Lumières, l'Art déconfiné à la galerie Penthievre* at Galerie Françoise Livinec, Matignon, *Souls Grown Diaspora* at Apex art, *A Different Mountain: Selected Works from The Arnett Collection* at Marlborough in New York, and more. Smith was ultimately considered an "eccentric" artist that does not fit the requirements to be a folk artist in order to have her home saved as an historical site. William Arnett noted that, "When I notified the proper

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<sup>36</sup> Wojcik, Daniel. "Outsider Art, Vernacular Traditions, Trauma, and Creativity." *Western Folklore* 67, no. 2/3 (2008): 179–98. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25474913>.

authorities in Mississippi in 1987 that I believed Smith's yard represented an important cultural site in need of preservation, and offered to take the financial initiative to do so, I was told that Smith is considered an eccentric artist who does not fall under any of the categories of folklore that interests the state."<sup>37</sup> In 1987 folk art was wildly popular, so not considering her house for historical preservation was an act of racial bias, not an accurate critique of Smith's work. This is a clear depiction of the injustice that black artists face when being categorized in a socio-political system that does not value them the same as other artists. In the early 2000s, after 2001 when *Souls Grown Deep* was published, Smith was still categorized as a Vernacular artist.

Labeling her as a vernacular artist took place again in 2005 in the book *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*. She is featured in Chapter Ten titled "*Vernacular Artists Against the Odds*." Paul Arnett describes vernacular art as "a language in use that differs from the official languages of power and reflects complex intercultural relationships charged with issues of race and education." Smith had issues of both being a black woman and being uneducated. She also creates her own language by combining English with her own interpretation of the English language. For example, she writes "LoRD iz Good" on a wooden beam in her sculpture, pictured in figure H, changing what would be an "s" to a "z" because that is how it sounds to her. Vernacular artists are perceived as rural, uneducated, isolated, spiritual, and childlike.<sup>38</sup> These assumptions of artists are classist and, like the outsider art term, neglect the intelligence of black southern artists by assuming that their lack of formal education makes them less likely to create artwork. When these artists create, their stories are

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<sup>37</sup> Arnett, William, and Paul Arnett. *Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art*. 2. Vol. 2. Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2001.

<sup>38</sup> Farrington, L. E. (2011). *Creating their own image: The history of african-american women artists*. Oxford University Press.



used to categorize their work again to market artists to consumers, which is evident in the case of Mary T. Smith.

Using the information provided for us on the chart of outsider art writings, conversation about outsider art declined between the years of 2003 to 2010.<sup>39</sup> In 2010 there was a small increase in the discussion about outsider art, while folk art was still on a steady decline. However, there is a small increase in the discussion about folk art towards the early 2010s. This increase is in 2011 where Smith is mentioned in the book *American Folk Art: A Regional Reference*. In the book, the author discusses Mary T. Smith's artwork, and presents us with a picture of her famous "Black and Red Male Figure with Upraised Arms" painted in the 1980s. (fig 25) This figure is another example of how she practices her spirituality within her art because of the position of the figure. The figure's hands are raised in a position of praise as Smith constantly expressed her love for the lord. The description of Smith as a folk artist remains the same in this text, describing her as fiercely independent and hardworking. In reference to her techniques as an artist, the author says "Her early works on tin were large, from five to seven feet high. Later works were created on plywood, cardboard, and paper. No matter what the surface of the work was, her approach rarely varied. The background was painted a solid color, and one or two colors made the figure, which was often an outline."<sup>40</sup> As seen in the visual analysis chapter, Smith's later works actually do vary over time. Her earlier paintings were what is being described in the book, however Smith began mixing colors in figure 14. This painting is of simple figures made using drawings of circles and short lines. There is a large circle in the

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<sup>39</sup> Refer to figure xx to see the chart of outsider art

<sup>40</sup> Congdon, K. G., & Hallmark, K. K. (2012). MARY Tillman Smith. In *American Folk Art: A regional reference* (pp. 335–337). essay, ABC-CLIO.

middle of the painting surrounded by other red and yellow circles with lines attached to them. This is all applied on top of a blue background. Smith mixes the blue paint with a small amount of black in the center of the painting, giving the center of the piece gives the blue background more depth. It is also evident in this painting that she did not allow the paint to dry before adding different colored paints on top of it. Texts written about Smith should implore more attention to details of her paintings in order to offer better analysis of her work.

In 2013, she was featured in the *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 23*. This book takes a more serious critical approach than any preceding texts about Smith. The author writes, “Religious iconography, such as portraits of Jesus and the Christian Trinity, appeared in abstracted form all along her fence.”<sup>41</sup> The ways in which Smith has displayed her work is crucial to the construction of her yard, and has not yet been described as abstract until this book was published. This approach to understanding her work differs from the previous one of using things mentioned in her biography to broadly categorize her as an artist. The author brings attention to the thoughtfulness that Smith has when she is creating and showing her work in her yard, whereas she had been seen as primal and very improvisational. The author describes her methods by saying, “She adopted the advertiser’s method of presenting a picture and a terse line of copy by depicting bold, easy- to- recognize images with a quick explanation, a pithy slogan, a name, or a reverential declaration.”<sup>42</sup> This small amount of critical thought towards Smith’s work provides an entire new perspective of yard shows and does more for the reader than recite her biography without referencing her work.

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<sup>41</sup> Wilson, C. R., Thomas, J. G., & Abadie, A. J. (2013). *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>42</sup> Wilson, C. R., Thomas, J. G., & Abadie, A. J. *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. 40

In the late 2000s, articles played the most marketable role in renewing fame and interest around Smith, using her biography the most in order to promote her work. Within their introduction of Smith, her failed marriages are mentioned as they are in almost every artist bio of her. Mentioning her failed marriages in her artist bio tells us how she came to Hazelhurst to become an artist, but does not provide any real detail about her work. It gives us context of her personality, of which we may benefit from in order to understand her paintings. Burak writes, “Both of Smith’s marriages ended abruptly. She caught her first husband deceiving her, so she left him.”<sup>43</sup> This shows that Smith had integrity and did not tolerate being deceived by leaving this husband that deceived her. The author also writes, “Her second husband, a sharecropper, left her by request of his landlord- She had threatened the landlord after she discovered that he was cheating her husband out of his rightful earnings.”<sup>44</sup> Using these two examples of her marriages paint the picture of Smith being a woman who honors trust, honesty, and integrity. It also shows how firm she was in asserting her boundaries to leave a man in the Reconstruction era, a time where black people were trying to gain citizenship and equality. During this time women were dependent on their husbands for survival, but Smith was willing to leave whatever husband she had if they did not align with the things that she valued. While this is an endearing and inspiring trope of Smith, it is also one of the many examples of focusing on black artists’ lives in order to market their artwork.

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<sup>43</sup> Arnett, William and Stephanie Burak. “Smith, Mary Tillman.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 23: Folk Art*, edited by Carol Crown and Cheryl Rivers, University of North Carolina Press, 2013, pp. 412–14, [http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469607993\\_crown.232](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469607993_crown.232).

<sup>44</sup> Arnett, William and Stephanie Burak. “Smith, Mary Tillman.” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 23: Folk Art*, 413

It is when writings about Smith emphasize the fact that she did not marry her son's father that raises concern about the picture that is painted about her as a single mother in Hazlehurst Mississippi with no husband and a hearing impairment. However, it shows the capabilities that she had being independent and an artist with a child in the 60's already isolated as a child from her hearing impairment. It is true that one can understand more of Smith's personality through interviews with her and closer analysis of her artwork, not just her proximity to the men in her life.

Outsideraffair.com is a website dedicated to the artwork and exhibitions of outsider artists, featuring Smith in 2013. The things that make Smith an outsider are factors of the environment she was born into. She is an outsider in a world created without her or other black southern women in mind. Southern Black artists are wrongfully categorized as outsider artists when their work mostly aligns with that of folk artists. Categorizing Smith as an outsider artist shows that she is not only an outsider to the art world but also an outsider to America because of the racism and oppression that black people, especially black women face in this country. The website tells us about the religious iconography that is featured numerous times throughout the artwork of Mary T. Smith. "Smith's love for Jesus was present throughout her yard, and she painted numerous portraits of him and conceived a variety of ways to depict the Christian Trinity."<sup>45</sup>

Evidence of the story of Mary T. Smith being most inspiring to people about her artistic abilities lies in the Mississippi Shouting review of her artwork. Joan Blanche in 2013 wrote "I enjoyed Mary Smith's art, the style intrigued me, and I appreciated the apparent simplicity to her

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.outsiderartfair.com/fr/artistes/mary-t-smith>

paintings. However, it was upon reading her story that I really understood and found pathos in her pieces. She died penniless and exploited, unrecognized for the importance of her work. It is right that the Christian Berst gallery should be showing this exhibition. It is deserved.”<sup>46</sup> It is important to note the pillar that she was for black southern folk art. To see her not fully recognized for her work until after her death several years earlier for the work that she has done is a similar experience for black artists across multiple genres of art. As the years go by there is more appreciation of Smith’s work, but a scarcity of fresh academic analysis following her work. There are, however, numerous interpretations of how her life has impacted the overarching themes of her work.

Hyperallergic.com is a website where they discuss Smith’s “I We Our” collection. In the article about the collection, they give a brief biography as every other website source does. However, this website glosses over her past relationships in a way that highlights her artwork independently from the men in her life. This is a true testament to her independence, resilience, as other websites draw out her biography to overshadow the realization that there is a lack of academic writing about her. “Smith later worked as a domestic servant for white families and was married twice, but it was with her third partner that she had her only child. Although Mary and that son’s father never married, he built her a house in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, in which she brought up their child — and it was there that she discovered a sense of personal freedom, creating a home and transforming the yard around it into an open-air space for making and

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<sup>46</sup> Blanche, J. (2013, January 31). *Mary Tillman Smith – mississippi shouting review*. atractivoquenobello. Retrieved April 23, 2022, from <https://www.aqnb.com/2013/01/31/mary-tillman-smith-mississippi-shouting-review/>

presenting her art.”<sup>47</sup> Her personal freedom is expressed in pictures of Smith with her artwork as she is willing to pose with her artwork and live among it. The website has little visual analysis of Smith's work. The website says, “Smith’s palette often includes black and red, set against white or brightly colored backgrounds, although sometimes rich blue-grays or dark greens take the place of her form-defining black. A natural Pop colorist, occasionally she ditched her signature dark outlines, instead using yellow or other bright hues to shape her central motifs and create energetic compositions.”<sup>48</sup>

Articles written in 2021 about Mary T. Smith do not say much more than William Arnett did about Mary T Smith’s artwork. She is featured in Spacesarchives.com and Christianberst.com. It is also particularly peculiar that she died penniless if she was recognized for her work and even being interviewed in 1995 about her artwork.

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<sup>47</sup> Gómez, E. M. (2019, June 6). *The bold, blessed paintings of a sharecropper's daughter*. Hyperallergic. Retrieved April 23, 2022, from

<https://hyperallergic.com/503923/the-bold-blessed-paintings-of-a-sharecroppers-daughter/>

<sup>48</sup> Gómez, E. M.. *The bold, blessed paintings of a sharecropper's daughter*.

## Chapter Four: Reception Theory Part Two

With this chapter I aim to explore the reception of Mary T. Smith through other artists who were inspired by her work: Jean-Michael Basquiat and B. Thom Stevenson. I will also be comparing Smith's work to other yard artists, Dinah Young and James Arnold. I aim to further explain the position that Smith was put in after being a world renowned folk and outsider artist. I will provide a new perspective in which to conceptualize Smith's art as well as the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Following this, I will also explain the implications of inclusionary efforts on behalf of black southern artists.

Jean-Michael Basquiat was a New York born painter working in the 1980s known for his raw style of painting graffiti images with texts. Both Smith and Basquiat have been categorized as outsider artists. It is well known that Basquiat was a fan of Smith's artwork and their work has been talked about together as a part of the Neo Expressionism movement in the 1970s and 80s.<sup>49</sup> Smith's *Two Red Figures*, painted in 1980 was listed amongst other paintings including Basquiat's *Boxer*, which was painted in 1982.<sup>50</sup> Through these two paintings, we can suggest that Basquiat admired Smith and was inspired by her paintings based upon some similarities between their work. In *Boxer*, Basquiat paints an expressive figure and adds letters to his painting.<sup>51</sup> His work is very gestural, similar to Smith's. The figure has a very expressive face in Basquiat's

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<sup>49</sup> Gustlin, Deborah, and Zoe Gustlin. "5.3: Neo-Expressionism (Late 1970s–Mid 1980s)." Humanities LibreTexts. Libretexts, March 18, 2022. [https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/History\\_of\\_Modern\\_and\\_Contemporary\\_Art\\_\(Gustlin\\_and\\_Gustlin\)/04%3A\\_Untitled\\_Chapter\\_5/4.03%3A\\_New\\_Page](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/History_of_Modern_and_Contemporary_Art_(Gustlin_and_Gustlin)/04%3A_Untitled_Chapter_5/4.03%3A_New_Page).

<sup>50</sup> The two paintings referenced are featured on this website also with a description of the Neo Expressionist movement

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[https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/History\\_of\\_Modern\\_and\\_Contemporary\\_Art\\_\(Gustlin\\_and\\_Gustlin\)/04%3A\\_Untitled\\_Chapter\\_5/4.03%3A\\_New\\_Page](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/History_of_Modern_and_Contemporary_Art_(Gustlin_and_Gustlin)/04%3A_Untitled_Chapter_5/4.03%3A_New_Page)

painting, similar to how Smith would use lines to create the expressive faces of her figures. Using the paint as a pencil and using lines in order to cover is a technique that they both use heavily in their work. Smith didn't become famous until her death but was in the prime of her career in her 60s. The two have also had some similarities in their lives that attribute to their outsider art status. Both artists were uneducated and self taught.

Considering that Smith regained fame in the mid to late 2000s, she has inspired a new audience of artists. She has had a joint show with Artist B. Thom Stevenson titled, *DO YOU NO ME*, and it was on display at the Shrine art gallery in New York City in 2016. In an interview between B. Thom Stevenson and Scott Ogden, Shrine gallery owner, similarities between Smith's work and Stevenson's were discussed. The gallery owner chose Smith and Stevenson to do a joint show because both artists' work look similar. The techniques that Stevenson uses in his painting is an imitation of how he assumed Smith. A description of the show says, "Mary T. Smith, who was born in Mississippi in the early 1900's had a life-long, deteriorating hearing disability, which in turn impaired her capacity to verbally express herself. Her artwork became her means of communication through which she filtered the people and things she saw around her. Similarly, B. Thom Stevenson reworks the imagery and language from the books and films he's grown up with and reimagines them in his work."<sup>52</sup> Stevenson basing his art off of the books and films that he has seen growing up does not explain why his artwork looks similar to Smith's or why they would belong in a group show. Smith created her way of painting from teaching herself, whereas Stevenson has a degree in fine arts. Creating his work to look similar only

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<https://purple.fr/diary/an-interview-with-b-thom-stevenson-on-his-joint-show-do-you-no-me-with-the-late-outsider-artist-mary-t-smith-at-shrine-gallery-new-york/>



suggests that Stevenson appropriated Smith's work in order to create association to outsider art with hopes of making his work more marketable.

Ogden discusses a relationship between the artwork of both artists as to why they were in a joint show together. He says, "What's also funny about the work of both of them is that she's definitely painting herself and people in her small town of Mississippi. She painted what she saw. Same thing with B. Thom, he grabs images from things he's been attracted to or come across. Just responding to what's around him."<sup>53</sup> Stevenson's work is identical to the traditional, cultural, folk art that Smith created even though he had no connection to the traditions or customs of Black American culture. Being a highly educated white man, from Massachusetts that lived on a farm and paints things that he remembers from movies does not compare to being a black woman, growing up sharecropping, and creating traditional yard shows. the circumstances in which Smith painted are overlooked when she is put in comparison with artists who cannot relate to her in any way.

Stevenson discusses his process of painting this collection of work by saying, "What's so beautiful about Mary's paintings is the impulsiveness of the paintings. It looks like she painted fast. I try to make it look like I painted fast. I will paint something over and over in order to familiarize myself with the form, and paint it fast enough to give it that feeling. I try to paint as fast as I can to give it a spontaneity to communicate passion."<sup>54</sup> He misinterpreted her work by saying that Smith's paintings were impulsive. Smith created a process and style that evolved over

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<https://purple.fr/diary/an-interview-with-b-thom-stevenson-on-his-joint-show-do-you-no-me-wit-h-the-late-outsider-artist-mary-t-smith-at-shrine-gallery-new-york/>

<sup>54</sup><https://purple.fr/diary/an-interview-with-b-thom-stevenson-on-his-joint-show-do-you-no-me-wi-th-the-late-outsider-artist-mary-t-smith-at-shrine-gallery-new-york/>

the years she painted, and she also used the world around her to teach her new styles of painting. Her work was well thought out and considering it impulsive shows lack of critical thought of Smith's work overall. Her meticulousness surrounding her work can be illustrated through the pattern in which she displayed her artwork. Her artwork had a cultural nuance that Stevenson does not bring to his artwork because he has no connection to the history that Smith does in order to create her pieces. Trying to create an "artist from the struggle" narrative in order to relate to Smith was a marketing tactic because Smith is a renowned outsider artist, and outsider art gained relevance in the early 2000s until the middle of the 2010s.

Other yard artists that were also mentioned in *Souls Grown Deep* include Dinah Young and James Arnold, who both relate to Smith more than B. Thom Stevenson would because they are all Black artists from the south that were raised in the reconstruction era. Dinah Young is from Newbern Alabama and begins her introduction almost identical to Smith. She was one of many siblings and grew up working hard for the family business. Her family collected and sold wood, so she and her siblings aided in cutting and hauling the wood. Young has had many jobs to support herself such as catering and taking care of the elderly people in her neighborhood.<sup>55</sup> She creates yard work that differs greatly from Smith's because her work centers wooden sculptures. Her work focuses on the use of what was given to her by nature, so she did not use any paint to color the wood she uses in her sculptures. Opposite of young, James Arnold created his yard work out of red and white materials creating a cohesive look across his yard. Like Smith, Arnold was also a sharecropper in his younger years, helping his family grow cotton. He does not consider the sculptures in his yard to be art, only things that he puts up in his yard. The

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<sup>55</sup> Reference Young's Biography and artwork using this link  
<https://www.soulsgrowndeeep.org/artist/dinah-young>

similarities between their lifestyles and upbringing, would make for a better joint show than trying to compare Mary T. Smith and B. Thom Stevenson's work.

The Souls Grown Deep Foundation has been an incredible catalyst for the inclusion of black southern artists such as Smith into museums and galleries, however with inclusion comes implications. The Foundation's president is Maxwell L. Anderson, who has also been director of the Whitney museum. Because of his career, he has been entrusted with the responsibility of leading foundation initiatives and overseeing operations. One of the foundation's founding members is William Arnett who has done extensive research and writing on most of the artists in the *Souls Grown Deep* Book. While these two people have done great things like doing ample research on black artists in order to educate viewers of the culture that surrounds the work and acknowledging the problems within the art world, they aid in the appropriation and misinterpretation of the work of these artists. Because this book brings to the forefront these somewhat hidden artists, more people are able to engage with an already heavily appropriated black culture.

The practice of doing yard shows and creating the kind of work that Smith makes is one specific to the black American south. When other artists such as B. Thom Stevenson is put in conversation with Artists like Mary T. Smith and Dinah Young, it makes their work seem easily reproduced and no longer sacred or specific to Black people. Black people have had their culture demonized while simultaneously being appropriated by non Black people in America and even globally. Including the artwork of black people into museums only benefits the museums, as the story of black artists not making money from their work is one that repeats time and time again.

Arnett also acknowledges the flaws of the art world and how it is exploitative of black people similarly to how black people have been exploited through slavery and sharecropping. “It is all very familiar. Listen to Black Americans who were born in the rural south at the turn of the century: their stories often seem interchangeable. But everyone knows that. Everyone knows about the pain and degradation, the exploitation,” he says while explaining how Smith was exploited by the art world.<sup>56</sup>

In the beginning of her career, Smith’s yard was full of pieces that she had already created. Buyers purchased most of her yard work, leading her to have to continue painting in order to meet the demands of the art market. Her yard was colonized due to the attention she got from the exposure of her artwork. Painting became a job as more and more people wanted to buy her work. Arnett says, “Once collectors and art dealers located her yard on Highway 51 on the south side of Hazelhurst, her yard changed from a powerful and energetic art environment to a sparsely decorated yard. Smith attempted to keep up with the demand by painting quickly and replacing the bought art, but the buyers were ultimately too numerous.”<sup>57</sup> What started off as a woman just decorating her yard and claiming her space, became a woman who was painting in order to maintain the demands of the art world. Art critics and buyers did not see Smith as a person, only an artist for the production of profitable artwork.

The art culture of the United States has a long history of exploiting and mocking Black people from slavery, to sharecropping, to minstrelsy, to broad and misinformed categorization of

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<sup>56</sup> Arnett, William, and Paul Arnett. *Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art*. 2. Vol. 2. Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2001.

<sup>57</sup> [http://www.msgw.org/copiah/Resources/Reference/Profiles/Smith\\_Mary\\_Tillman/smith\\_mary\\_tillman.html](http://www.msgw.org/copiah/Resources/Reference/Profiles/Smith_Mary_Tillman/smith_mary_tillman.html)

artwork made by Black people. Smith was recorded in interviews, and asked to paint in order to prove her ability and intelligence. Smith's talent should be recognized by analyzing her work for its innovation, religious context, center of display, symbolism and line work more so than her biography, and should be categorized with these things in mind.

Smith's work is multifaceted and can also exist in the category of Abstract art.

Steve Locke has written about the correlation of Black artists and abstraction stemming from minstrelsy in the early 1900s. His take on minstrelsy as a form of cultural or artistic abstraction puts the position of Smith's artwork and reception into question because of how she was treated as an artist. Minstrelsy was considered abstraction by Locke specifically because the actors who perform minstrel shows would create themselves to be numerous stereotypes of Black people put into one character. This created an abstract idea of who Black people are and what they acted like. With this stereotypical idea of black people already in the heads of Americans, actual Black people who contribute to the entertainment industry, including art, were viewed only for the labor they did in order to produce this entertainment. This applies to Smith, as she was notably recognized for her work, but received no money for selling her work, and was generalized in understanding of her work. White artists are able to do joint shows with Smith and profit off of her work, even when she could not profit from it herself. Her work represents a range of subjects and aligns with abstraction because her work makes you think about what is being presented to you. The scripts that Smith paints on her work and the ambiguity around her figures allow you to create your own interpretations of her work that would only make sense to other southern black people who are familiar with yard show paintings and Black southern culture. Abstraction is known for its ability to make the viewer think about what is being shown instead of just showing

them through figures the subject of the painting. While abstraction is known for the non figurative, it is not devoid of figures including Smith's paintings. Smith's figures do not resemble people in hyper realist or scientifically anatomical ways. Her work sparks questions of what she is trying to teach the viewer about herself, and her religion.

In an interview I conducted with a member of the Souls Grown Deep foundation, it was revealed that inclusionary efforts within museum institutions are not as simple as only having Black people in the decision making positions. Although having Black people in the decision making positions when it comes to Black cultural artwork would be ideal, curators, artists, and collections are only a small part of the politics of the art world. Each piece of the structure has to answer to a higher power in order to have decisions made. Gestures of inclusion that the Souls Grown Deep Foundation have made do not ensure that the artists that are featured are compensated, and creates a complicated conversation about the way that the art world treats Black artists. While this topic is too broad to be explained in detail in this essay, it should be researched in order to understand how museums make decisions, and how those decisions impact Black artists in order to enact positive change.



## Conclusion

The terms outsider, folk, and vernacular art have been used interchangeably in reference to Mary T. Smith's artwork, and each term creates a different way to perceive her work. Being recognized as a folk artist acknowledges the traditions of the Black south and the history of slavery and reconstruction. Being labeled an outsider artist ignores that tradition and emphasizes the ways in which artists do not fit into the White Western aesthetic. The difference between these categories reside in how much attention critics pay to the artwork of those who they deem outsider artists. Black artists are wrongfully categorized as outsider artists due to racial bias in the art world, resulting in a lack of critical thought of the work.

The Souls Grown Deep foundation has made strides to bridge the gap between Black southern artists and the mainstream art market, however, allowing more access to these folk artists exposes the culture and traditions of Black people to more appropriation and exploitation. This was evident in the joint show that Smith had with B. Thom Stevenson at the Shrine gallery mentioned in Chapter Four. Stevenson appropriated Smith's work and misinterpreted her process because of the lack of academic writing about her work. Smith was methodical and meticulous in her creative process, but Stevenson interpreted her self-taught skill as impulsive and primal. This appropriation of work happens repeatedly in history with Black women's art.

Smith's art should be considered in other categories such as abstraction based on historical and visual elements of her work. The way that Smith was treated is evident of the dehumanization of Black people. She created her pieces as decoration for her yard, but once she was introduced to the art world, she had to produce more paintings to keep up with the demands of buyers. This transformed her yard from a place lively with color and figures, to a bare yard



that has been dried of all that she has created. Despite the fame she has reached, only her legacy lives on as her house has not been recognized as a historical monument due to the fact that she was only recognized as a folk artist for the benefit of institutions.

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## Images



**Figure 1:** Volkerz, William. *Image Courtesy of the Photographer, William Volkerz.* Photograph. Hazelhurst Mississippi, n.d. Mary T. Smith's house and yard overview.



**Figure 2:** Photo of Mary T. Smith next to her artwork from the Wilson Library's Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.





**Figure 3:** Rankin, Tom. *Image Courtesy of the Photographer Tom Rankin.* Photograph. Hazelhurst , n.d.



**Figure 4:** Rankin, Tom. *Image Courtesy of the Photographer Tom Rankin.* Photograph. Hazelhurst , n.d.





**Figure 5:** Arnett, William. *Mary T. Smith*. Photograph. Hazelhurst Mississippi, 1987. Souls Grown Deep Foundation.



**Figure 6:** Pierce, James Smith. *Mary T. Smith*. Photograph. Hazelhurst, Mississippi, n.d. University of North Dakota.





**Figure 7:** Volkerz, William. *Image Courtesy of the Photographer*. Photograph. *Spacesarchive.com*. Hazelhurst, Mississippi, n.d.  
<http://spacesarchives.org/explore/search-the-online-collection/mary-tillman-smith/>.



**Figure 8:** Volkerz, William. *Image Courtesy of the Photographer*. Photograph. *Spacesarchive.com*. Hazelhurst, Mississippi, n.d.  
<http://spacesarchives.org/explore/search-the-online-collection/mary-tillman-smith/>.





**Figure 9:** Volkerz, William. *Image Courtesy of the Photographer*. Photograph. *Spacesarchive.com*. Hazelhurst, Mississippi, n.d.  
<http://spacesarchives.org/explore/search-the-online-collection/mary-tillman-smith/>.



**Figure 10:** Volkerz, William. *Image Courtesy of the Photographer*. Photograph. *Spacesarchive.com*. Hazelhurst, Mississippi, n.d.  
<http://spacesarchives.org/explore/search-the-online-collection/mary-tillman-smith/>.





**Figure 11:** *Scarecrow in Mary T. Smith's Yard.* Photograph. Hazelhurst, Mississippi, n.d. Souls Grown Deep Foundation.



**Figure 12:** Volkerz, William. *Image Courtesy of the Photographer*. Photograph. *Spacesarchive.com*. Hazelhurst, Mississippi, n.d.  
<http://spacesarchives.org/explore/search-the-online-collection/mary-tillman-smith/>.





**Figure 13:** Painting by Mary T. Smith. Pitkin, Stephen. *Jesus's Supper*. Photograph. Hazelhurst, Mississippi, n.d. Souls Grown Deep Foundation.



**Figure 14:** Painting by Mary T. Smith. Jurgens, Dan. *Untitled*. Photograph. Hazelhurst, Mississippi, n.d. Souls Grown Deep Foundation.



**Figure 15:** Painting by Mary T. Smith. Pitkin, Stephern. *Untitled*. Photograph. *Soulsgrowndeeep.org*. Hazelhurst, Mississippi, n.d. Souls Grown Deep Foundation. <https://www.soulsgrowndeeep.org/artist/mary-t-smith/work/untitled-1>.



**Figure 16:** Painting by Mary T. Smith. University of Southwestern Louisiana. *Baking in the Sun: Visionary Images from the South*. Lafayette, Louisiana: University Art Museum, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1987.

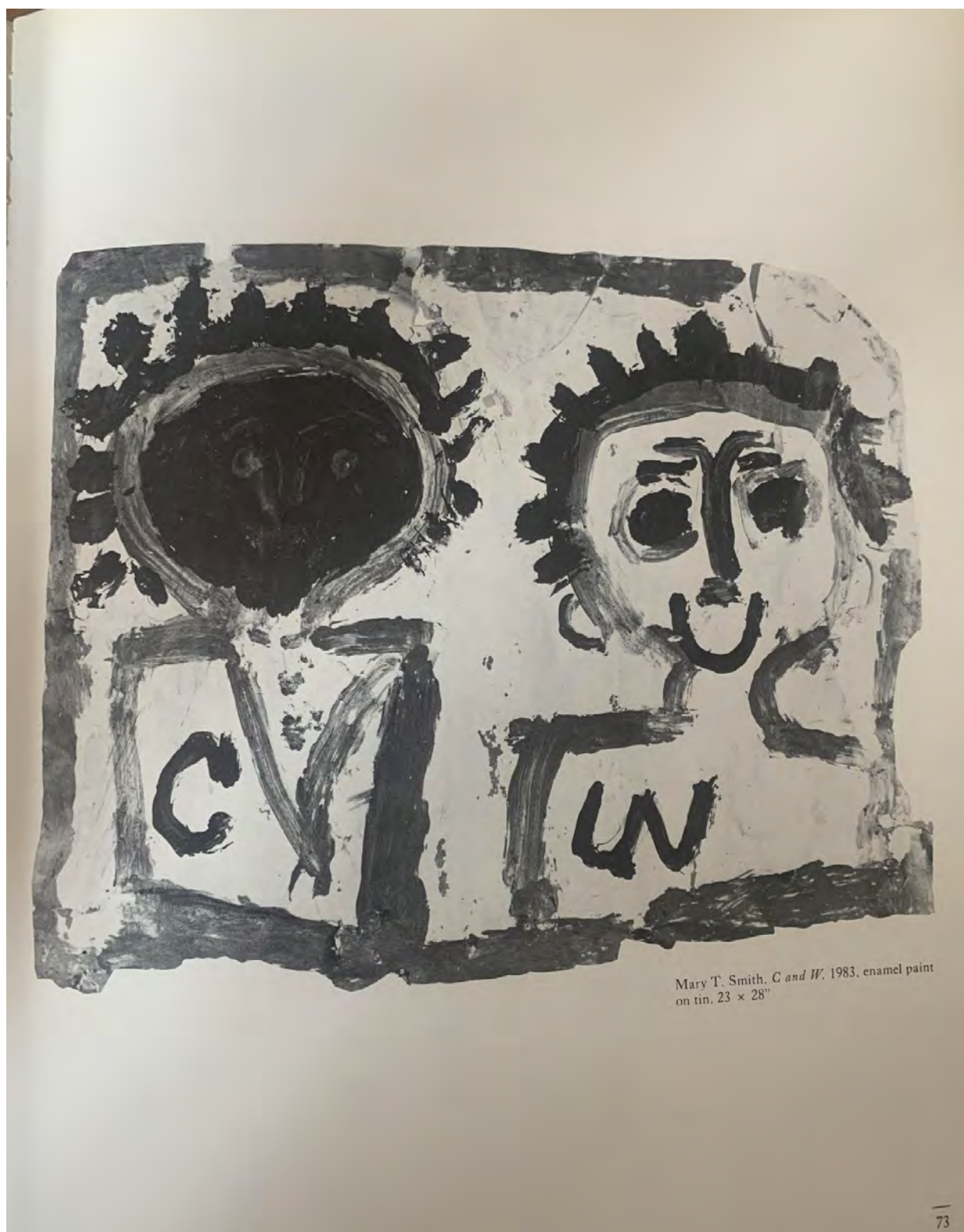




**Figure 17:** Painting by Mary T. Smith. Pitkin, Stephen. *Untitled*. Photograph. *Soulsgrowndeeep.org*. Hazelhurst, Mississippi, n.d. Souls Grown deep Foundation. <https://www.soulsgrowndeeep.org/artist/mary-t-smith/work/untitled-3>.



**Figure 18:** Painting By Mary T. Smith. Christian Berst. "Christian Berst - Art Brut." christian berst - art brut, November 21, 2021. <https://christianberst.com/en/artists/mary-t-smith>.



**Figure 18:** Painting by Mary T. Smith, *C and W*. University of Southwestern Louisiana. *Baking in the Sun: Visionary Images from the South*. Lafayette, Louisiana: University Art Museum, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1987.





**Figure 19:** University of Southwestern Louisiana. *Baking in the Sun: Visionary Images from the South*. Lafayette, Louisiana: University Art Museum, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1987.





**Figure 20:** Smith, Mary T. "Untitled (Figure with Halo)." *High.org*, n.d. High Museum of Art. Atlanta, Georgia. <https://high.org/collections/untitled-figure-with-halo/>.



**Figure 21:** Pitkin, Stephen. *Jesus*. Photograph. *Soulsgrowndeeep.org*. Hazelhurst, Mississippi, n.d. Souls Grown deep Foundation.

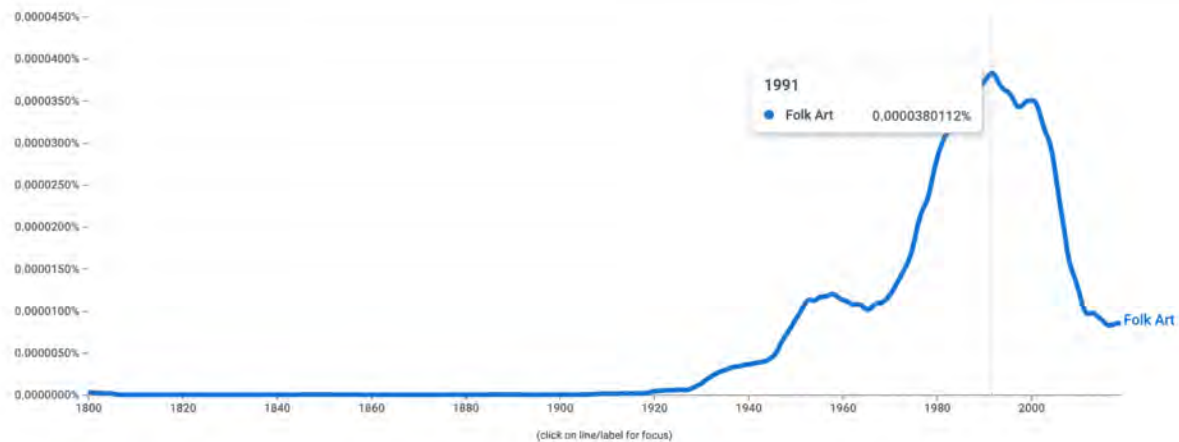
<https://www.soulsgrowndeeep.org/artist/mary-t-smith/work/untitled-3>.



**Figure 22:** Pitkin, Stephen. *Untitled Self Portrait*. Photograph. *Soulsgrowndeeep.org*. Hazelhurst, Mississippi, n.d. Souls Grown deep Foundation.  
<https://www.soulsgrowndeeep.org/artist/mary-t-smith/work/untitled-3>.

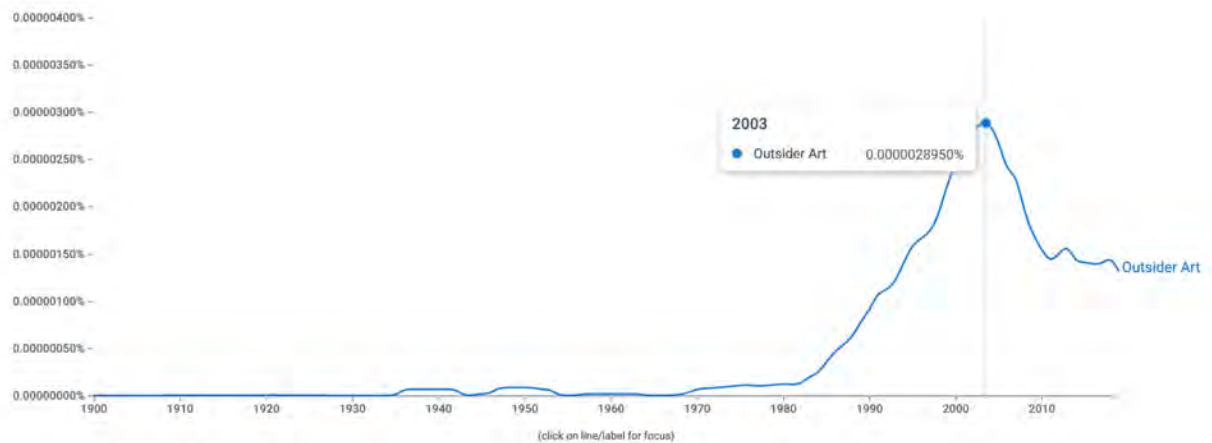


**Figure 23:** Smith, Mary T. “Black and Red Male Figure with Upraised Arms.” Black and red male figure with arms raised . <https://americanart.si.edu>, n.d. Smithsonian Museum. Washington D.C.  
<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/black-and-red-male-figure-upraised-arms-36127>.



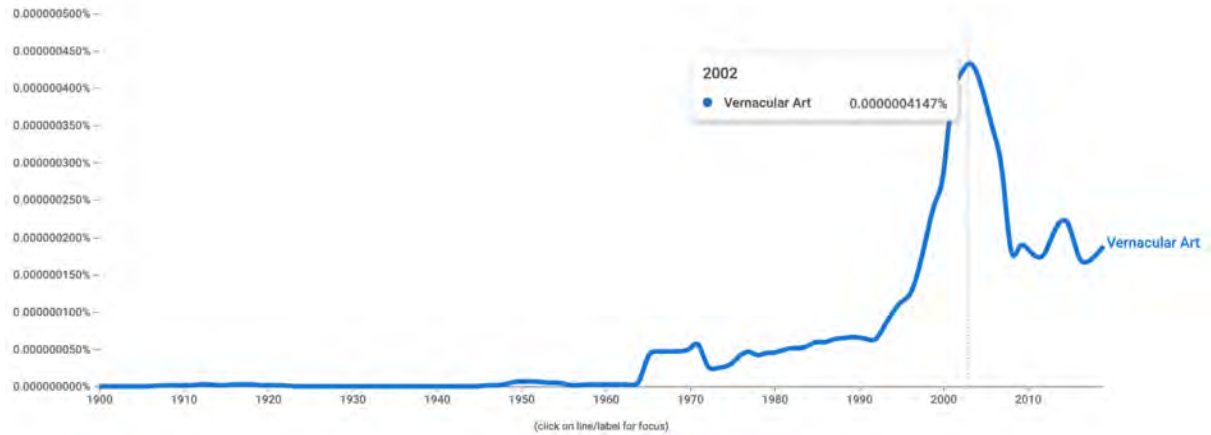
**Figure 24:** Chart of books written about Folk art from 1900-2010

Google. "Google Books Ngram Viewer." Google Books. Google. Accessed May 3, 2022.  
[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Folk%2BArt&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2CFolk+Art%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2CFolk%20Art%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Folk%2BArt&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2CFolk+Art%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2CFolk%20Art%3B%2Cc0).



**Figure 25:** Chart of books written about Outsider art. "Google Books Ngram Viewer."  
 Google Books. Google. Accessed May 3, 2022.  
[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=outsider%2Bart&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Coutsider+art%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2Coutsider%20art%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=outsider%2Bart&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2Coutsider+art%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2Coutsider%20art%3B%2Cc0).





**Figure 26:** Chart of books written about Vernacular art. “Google Books Ngram Viewer.” Google Books. Google. Accessed May 3, 2022.

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**Figure 27:** An example of the animals that Mary T. Smith painted “Mary Tillman Smith | Spaces - Spaces-Art-Environments.org.” spaces-art-environments.org. Accessed May 3, 2022. <http://spaces-art-environments.org/explore/collection/environment/mary-tillman-smith/>.

