Alexandria Smith
Monuments to an Effigy
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Alexandria Smith’s *Monuments to an Effigy* takes the histories of the Olde Towne of Flushing Burial Ground and the Macedonia A.M.E. Church in Flushing, Queens as points of departure for an exhibition that evokes an altar. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Burial Ground was a cemetery for African-Americans and Native Americans. Parishioners of the nearby Macedonia A.M.E. Church, a hub for Flushing’s historic African-American community, were among those interred there. (Although Flushing today is known for its East Asian immigrant population, it hosted one of New York’s biggest middle-class African-American communities until the 1950s.) In the 1930s, the Parks Department paved over the site, naming it Martin’s Field and building a playground in 1938. But—due to the tireless work of many—in 2006 the site was renamed the Olde Towne of Flushing Burial Ground in recognition of its original use. A meditative area respects the hundreds still buried there; a new memorial plaza will open in 2020.

In her work, Smith explores narrative, memory, and myth through the lens of the Black female form and psyche. For this exhibition, the artist responds to the lives of those who were buried at the site. Of the four marked gravestones discovered at the burial ground, only males are listed. Smith’s work honors the unnamed women laid to rest at the burial ground as well as those who participated in the Underground Railroad network active in Flushing which included the Macedonia A.M.E. Church.

The artist’s fragmented characters, landscapes, and architectural surrogates pay tribute to these histories by rooting or lifting themselves in space. Eyes, pigtails, masks, limbs, breasts, and fingers sprout from the ground and defy gravity. Smith’s works, installed in pairs or doppelgängers, embody a complex and often divided self across generations. How can we rectify the stories that have been erased? The symbols in *Monuments to an Effigy* are at once ancient and otherworldly, as the artist channels the ancestors whose stories continue to be reclaimed and reimagined.

A cornerstone of the exhibition is *At Council; Found Peace*, a music composition by Liz Gré in collaboration with Smith. This piece for cello, soprano, and spoken voice combines the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks with gospel tonality and explores the process of seeking guidance from those who came before. As Smith’s work connects with the spiritual realm, her visions of Black women in moments of empathy, joy, and pain recognize the resilience and strength that will continue to shape history.

Alexandria Smith (b. 1981, Bronx, NY) earned her BFA in Illustration from Syracuse University, an MA in Art Education from New York University, and an MFA in Painting and Drawing from Parsons The New School for Design. She has exhibited her work in solo and group exhibitions at venues such as deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum Lincoln, MA (2019); Boston University, Boston, MA (2018); MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA (2018); The Union for Contemporary Art, Omaha, NE (2017); Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT (2016); International Print Center, New York, NY (2016) and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY (2015). Smith is the recipient of numerous awards including a Pollock-Krasner Grant and the Virginia A. Myers Fellowship at the University of Iowa. She has been an artist-in-residence at MacDowell, Bemis, Yaddo, LMCC Process Space Residency and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. From 2016–18, Smith was co-organizer of the collective, Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter (BWA for BLM).