

# ARTFORUM

## Allison Smith

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View of "[Allison Smith: Set Dressing](#)," 2014–15. Photo: Michael Tropea.

*In "Set Dressing," [Allison Smith](#)'s first solo exhibition in Chicago, the Oakland-based artist shows photographs taken at living-history sites such as Colonial Williamsburg and Plimoth Plantation, where quotidian stories of American settlement and handicraft are daily reenacted and displayed. Smith's art subtly revises America's nationalist creation myths through interventionist tactics such as appropriation and humor. "Set Dressing" is on view until January 31, 2015, at the [Arts Club of Chicago](#).*

**I WAS RAISED** in the suburbs of Washington, DC, and was always aware of a strong patriotic aesthetic in my surroundings. My father worked for the CIA, which was terrifying for me as a child. I didn't understand what his life was like or who he even was. As a family, we attended Civil War reenactments and country fairs where people performed history. Our home decor was 1970s-style colonial revival. Moreover, my ancestors had had cotton plantations—I know the names of some of the slaves they owned. I see my upbringing as having been a historical reenactment in the everyday. All of this, combined with my own queerness and coming out at an early age, produced a lot of anxiety and shame—inner battles, if you will.

Through my work, I spy on the past; I'm both curious and critical. At the same time, I accept that I am a product of it.

I think I have been attracted to working with reenactors because there is a strong sense that they would have a radically different perspective from my own, or that I wouldn't be welcome in their world. Still, there are moments of redemption and reconciliation when I realize what a wide spectrum of people engage in that culture, whether for personal or political reasons. I have worked with war reenactors as well as people who practice early American trades. Often I find that even as they don't consider themselves artists, they have a similarly deep investment in what they're doing. Interesting questions always come from these interactions—for instance, questions of how categories and economies of art and craft are understood. There is a frame in the show (*Mirror*, 2014) that was made outside Boston at the Old Schwamb Mill, the oldest continuously operating mill site in the country. It's been making circular and oval frames for 150 years. This one was hand-turned by a man named David Graf on an original nineteenth-century lathe. My ethical framework is to give as much credit as I can to the people I work with, and to sometimes downplay my authorship, even though I identify strongly as a maker. I see myself as a jack-of-all-trades and, decidedly, master of none, preferring to give light to the moments of conversation between things.

Some of the photographs in the show were taken at Colonial Williamsburg, which has a main street with blacksmiths and basket weavers, tailors, potters, and so on. *Hand Dyed Wool, Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia*, 2014, builds on a photograph I took in a weaving studio where I found a rainbow spectrum of wool hanging to dry. The image is mirrored, printed on linen, and sewn into a protest banner, so what appears is a yonic image in the center. It's a familiar feminist gesture, but I think it also suggests the erotic possibilities and the fetishism of reenactment culture in general. Another piece, *Pockets, Lowell, Massachusetts*, 2014, suggests the lesbionic potential of pockets that colonial-era women wore under their dresses, before their clothing had those utilitarian features built in.

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