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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Solo shows by two widely-known artist in Winston-Salem, Greensboro

Tom Patterson

Dan Smith. "Nancy Rubins: Drawing, Sculpture, Studies", Weatherspoon Art Museum, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2014. "Study: Big Edge" is in the foreground of the image here.

After a typically slow winter on the Triad's visual-art scene, spring has brought several new exhibitions that are worth seeing.

On view for two to three more weeks in Winston-Salem and Greensboro are solo shows by two internationally prominent artists: Jaune Quick-to-See Smith and Nancy Rubins.

Smith, an American Indian artist originally from Montana, was recently in Winston-Salem for the opening of her exhibition at Salem College's Elberson Fine Arts Center. Since the 1970s she has been making art that deals with topical issues — race, gender, the natural environment, war, consumer culture and competing versions of American history, with an emphasis on indigenous traditions.

If You Go

Who: Jaune Quick-to-See Smith
What: Solo exhibition
Where: Main Gallery, Elberson Fine Arts Center at Salem College
When: Through April 28; 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday; 1 to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday
Information: (336) 721-2636

Smith's show is largely made up of paintings, drawings, prints and mixed-media works that prominently display her expressionistic, hands-on approach. The exception is a series of 18 black-and-white photographs — all life-size head shots of anonymous men and women, reminiscent of driver's license or passport photos. Its title poses a question: "Who Is an

American Indian?" The implication is that any or all of these people might have some American Indian ancestry, even though it's not necessarily obvious from their skin tones or other facial features.

A number of Smith's other works also pose questions — either directly or by implication — indicating the central role they play in her art. Another overt example is "Where Are We Going?" which speaks to issues of national identity.

In this watercolor drawing, a map of the United States is broken into three fragments, each with a pair of wings attached, as if they were birds flying off in different directions from a small, central image of a black-eyed mask. The individual states are outlined but not labeled, and a number of states in the Northeast, Upper Midwest and West are filled in with blue. Smith has hand-printed the title near the bottom, where it follows other questions — "Where do we come from?" and "What Are We?"

The issue of national identity is also highlighted in a monochromatic etching titled "Celebrate 40,000 Years of American Art." It's one of the largest pieces in the exhibition. The title, prominently stenciled in black ink, accompanies five variously sized silhouettes of a rabbit-headed humanoid reminiscent of an ancient petroglyph. This piece emphasizes that European-derived American art represents only a small, recent segment of American art history.

One of the show's most striking and enigmatic pieces is a painting with yet another question as its title: "Which Comes First?" It centers on an outlined image of a headless, armless figure with a large, radiant, red heart superimposed over the chest. Surrounding the figure on two sides are multiple images of large black ants, one of which appears to be crawling into or out of the mouth of a human skull in the upper right. The titular question suggests that this piece is about the relationship of life and death, and also, perhaps, the relationship of human beings and so-called "lesser" creatures such as ants.

This is one of several works by Smith that incorporate images of ants, which play important roles in the mythological traditions of several American Indian cultures due to their industriousness and cooperative instincts. In Hopi mythology, for example, the "Ant People" protected humans in underground shelters when life on the Earth's surface was wiped out in the prehistoric "First World."

Thought-provoking and replete with compelling imagery, Smith's exhibition is a rare treat that's not to be missed.

If You Go

Who: Nancy Rubins
What: "Drawings, Sculpture, Studies"
Where: Weatherspoon Art Museum at UNC Greensboro, Spring Garden and Tate streets
When: Through May 4; open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday; 1 to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.
Information: (336) 334-5770; www.weatherspoon@uncg.edu

At first glance, the large-scale sculptural assemblages for which Nancy Rubins has become widely known suggest the aftermath of catastrophic upheaval. Her unwieldy-looking, top-heavy

piles of boats, airplane parts, mattresses and other utilitarian objects look like they might have been left behind in the wake of natural or human-caused disasters: tornado, tidal wave or violent collisions.

Highlighted in her exhibition at the Weatherspoon Art Museum, such works are actually carefully constructed explorations in sculptural form — ambitiously engineered and so impressively balanced they appear to defy gravity.

The exhibition doesn't include any of Rubins' more towering, gargantuan pieces, but several are represented as small-scale studies, while others appear in photographs in the catalog. The show is augmented by three short films by Michael Rudnick that document work crews installing some of Rubins' largest sculptures.

Also included are 11 of her drawings — raggedly torn sheets of heavy-duty paper covered to the edges with dense layers of shiny black graphite, apparently applied by hand. Rubins and her assistants must have used up countless pencils in carrying out the latter process.

With the exception of one double-panel drawing that's conventionally framed, the drawings are pinned to the walls. They're wrinkled and buckled, lending them a sculptural-relief aspect. Most of them are also collages in the sense that they consist of two or more overlapping sheets of paper. Flagrantly eschewing the conventional rectangular format, they're jaggedly shaped and have few straight edges. In that respect most of them are reminiscent of big, all-black maps of islands and continents. Like her more widely known sculptures, a number of them impress by virtue of their substantial scale.

Also out of the ordinary is the manner in which some of the drawings are installed — not at eye level, but much higher on the walls near the gallery's elevated ceiling. One of the largest drawings ranges across two adjoining walls.

Drawing and sculpture are fused in the exhibition's centerpiece, which is also its largest work. Dating from the early 1990s and straightforwardly titled "Drawings and Hot Water Heaters," it consists of several big, irregularly shaped drawings that appear to be randomly piled atop about 20 cylindrical water heaters like those most of us have in our homes.

These battered, castoff appliances are likewise piled atop one another in a precarious-looking heap more than 8 feet tall. They're prevented from tumbling apart and rolling around on the floor by a network of tightly stretched, heavy-duty wires that secure them in place.

Rubins employs similar methods to cluster the rowboats and canoes from which many of her large, commissioned outdoor sculptures have been built in recent years. The rest of her sculptures at the Weatherspoon are miniature versions of these boat pieces, in most cases made from wood or plastic model boats and displayed on pedestals. Two of her pedestal pieces here are monochromatic bronze models, which call to mind eccentric boat-racing trophies.

Rubins' labor-intensive sculptures and drawings extend and expand on the legacies of abstract expressionism and minimalism. Her predecessors include Robert Rauschenberg and John Chamberlain.

Give her an A for effort and effect.