

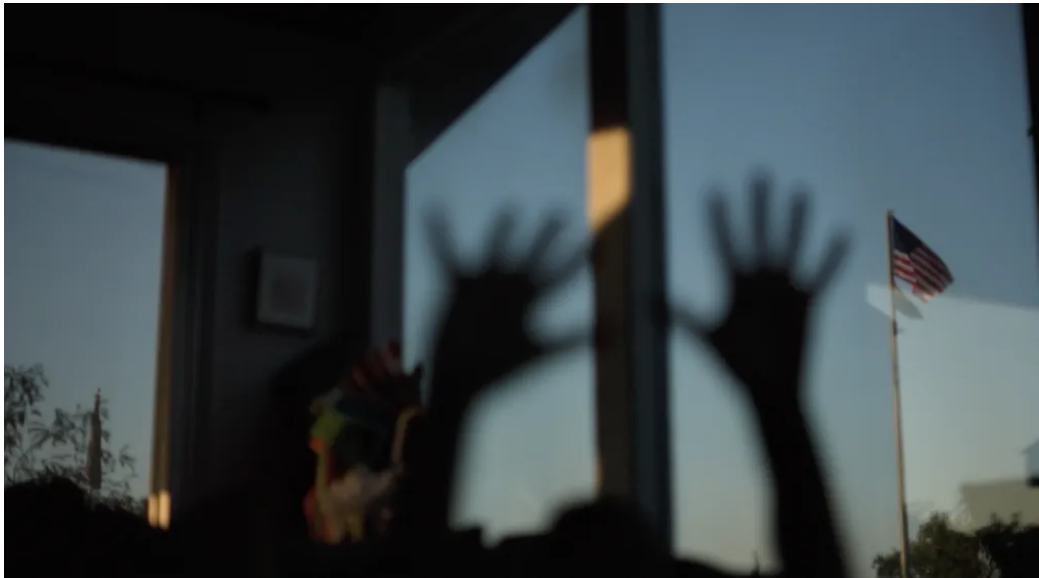
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“Sable Elyse Smith Says Research Isn’t Separate From the Art—It Is the Art.” [Artnet News](#) (October 14, 2026) [ill.] [online]

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Sable Elyse Smith Says Research Isn’t Separate From the Art—It Is the Art

In a conversation tied to “Clockwork,” at the FLAG Art Foundation, Smith explains why choosing a material is never separate from the act of making.



Video still from Sable Elyse Smith's *skin suit* (2026). Courtesy of the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Sable Elyse Smith has spent the better part of her career investigating the underpinning architecture of power—the furniture, footage, and language through which institutions discipline, surveil, and categorize. On view through February 13, 2027, at the **FLAG Art Foundation** in New York, “**Clockwork**” builds on the themes of Smith’s earlier show of the same title that was on view at **the Contemporary Austin**, but through a decidedly new lens.

Curated by the FLAG Art Foundation director **Jonathan Rider** and deputy director **Caroline Cassidy**, the show marks Smith’s receipt of the 2026 Suzanne Deal Booth / FLAG Art Foundation Prize.

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Across sculpture, video, neon, and photography, Smith repurposes objects like prison waiting-room stools and appropriated police footage, using repetition and layering to strip them of their original context and expose the systems that they were built to serve. And a new video work, *skin suit* (2026), was made specifically for this new presentation. Ahead of the opening, Smith spoke about reshaping an existing exhibition for a new city and audience, her research-driven approach to materials, and why she resists defining her role as an artist in any single way. Find the conversation, which has been lightly edited for length and clarity, below.



Sable Elyse Smith. Photo: Tommy Kha.

“Clockwork” originated at the Contemporary Austin, and has been reframed by expanding its more cinematic elements. What has that shift in scale allowed you to express that perhaps the earlier presentation could not?

The shift in scale shifts focus. The intimacy of the rooms at FLAG forces you to see differently. And here at FLAG we focused on a sparse hang, again giving full attention to individual moments. Austin had a density which was important to that version of the show, but even still sometimes giving the viewer too many options, a kind of overdrive of frenetic energy, can fracture focus and attention. In that sense, a different narrative thread is able to surface.

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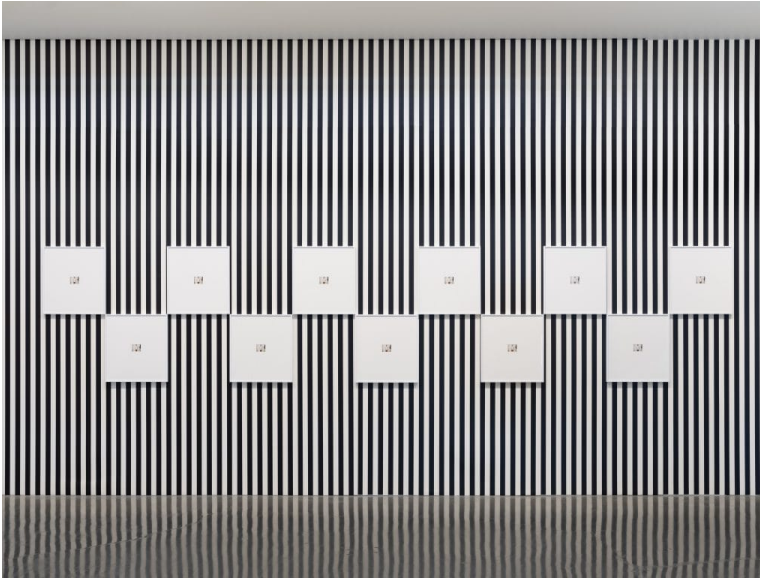


Sable Elyse Smith, *Landscape V* (2020). Courtesy of the artist; Bortolami, New York; and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

How did you approach reworking a show that already existed, rather than starting from a blank slate? Did the differences in the cities and their audiences influence any of your choices?

The different cities definitely influenced my choices. That was an easy filter through which to edit down the checklist. I hadn't previously had a solo show in Austin before, so introducing that audience more to my overall practice was important. New York is familiar with a lot of aspects of my practice, so that made space for many things to be left out. This exhibition could hold gaps and ellipses. Context exists here. I also wanted this show to have breath in-between gestures, space for recognition and then the next work, or the next gesture or room destabilizes that recognition. There is a montage happening in the videos, and I wanted that to be extended to the space as well.

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Sable Elyse Smith, detail of *Group of Thugs* (2023). Courtesy the artist; Bortolami, New York; and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Several of the works on view use repetition, doubling, and layering as strategies for obscuring an object's original meaning. What types of research or processes go into choosing a specific material or object to work with? What informs the ways you materially incorporate them into a work?

Lots of research goes into the selection of elements. But that research is the practice of art for me. The research is an ongoing preoccupation. My archive of material/elements is constantly growing. The material or the object is almost self-contained in a way. An object may be both the material and the concept. The context it comes from might be the subject. When I find something, I almost index the entirety of its existence to learn from it. To learn what is possible. How it circulates, etc. There isn't just one way I approach anything besides first asking what's already there, what's commonly understood about it. How does language shift it, then a gesture, and so on and so forth.

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Video still from Sable Elyse Smith's *LAUGH TRACK, OR WHO'S THAT PEEKING IN MY WINDOW* (2026).
Courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

***skin suit* (2026) was made specifically for this prize and exhibition. Did the context (a stage-set environment at FLAG) influence how you created it?**

The exhibition venues did not influence the making of the work. The work influenced what was possible in space, and an opportunity to expand the world in which video making is birthed. Image, circulation, context, text, space, and resonance. I think it allows for some seepage.

Alex Klein, the head curator and director of curatorial affairs at the Contemporary Austin, described your work as revealing that “the mechanisms of social control we often take for granted are in fact by design.” Do you see your role as an artist primarily as one of exposure, or do you see the work as doing something beyond that?

I have not defined what my role as an artist is to a subtitle or subheading. I'm a person who tries to pay attention in the world, and I process that through these creative impulses. That's important to me, and there seems to be a collective drive to do so. Encounters are the catalyst through which we learn, shift, become, recalibrate, create, etc.... and my most profound encounters have been through other's creative acts (and I don't just mean the things we call “art” with a capital “A” and have organized an economy around). I mean the most expansive definition of creation or making, willing something into being. So maybe I'm a part of that larger collective impulse. And possibly someone's encounter with something that I have placed in the world (all my acts of creation, not just what's in the gallery) in relation to all the other things they have encountered or witnessed will resonate in some sense.

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Sable Elyse Smith, *Riot III* (2022). Collection of Tamara White. Courtesy of the artist; Bortolami, New York; and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Taking into consideration the full arc of “Clockwork”—sculpture, video, neon, photography—what do you hope visitors take away from the show on the whole versus any singular piece?

I don't know; maybe an understanding of my relationship to language and writing. These are all proxies in a way.

“Sable Elyse Smith: Clockwork” is on view at the FLAG Art Foundation, New York, through February 13, 2027.