

# Exhibition Review: “The Compass Rose” by Sunny A. Smith



By Yizhou  
Zhuang

If there are multiple dimensions beyond the ones that we have been used to, as physicists insist, is there anything that may cross the boundaries between them? Is there a way for mankind to peek into that? And if so, what may that look like? In their exhibition, *The Compass Rose*, Sunny A. Smith provided a look into an alternate dimension through their dreams, memories, and imaginations. They created a career-spanning installation rooted in their family history and the historical significance of objects. As the Fort Mason website indicated:

*"In Sunny A. Smith's 'The Compass Rose,' the artist creates a radiant genealogical wheel and a series of artworks to navigate the complex legacies of inheritance and lineage – and invites viewers to consider how material things play a role in driving narratives of history, nationalism, family, and the self."*

In this exhibition, Sunny A. Smith delivered narratives about concrete objects and inspired the audience's imagination. From looking at Smith's work, the audience was invited to follow the artist's experience and to seek connections among objects, family, and history. *Nahoruby - Upwards 10*, as an example, was made after Smith visited the address believed to be the birth location of their third great-grandfather in the Czech Republic. This painting depicted the scene of a dilapidated blacksmith shop on plywood. Smith created this piece with brush strokes in a documentary way; they did not attempt to polish the scene, but kept the tone gray and the scene dilapidated. In contrast, the artist provided colors and utilized real material on certain objects; these objects were able to jump out of the canvas and delivered their narratives to the audiences. The space then became vivid and alive. The audience was not safe while these objects crossed the boundaries of dimensions and aggressively invaded, having no choice but to be overwhelmed by Smith's journey seeking the root of their family. Smith apparently had a mental connection with that land and the creativity gushed out while this artist returned to the place where their family was born, after a long absence.

*Nahoruby - Upwards 10* was created after a journey seeking the root of the family. *River Channels Ocean* (2018-2021), on the other hand, can be seen as a diary about Smith's journey to another universe. This series of drawings is where the audience could find hints about the source of this artist's creativity, where Smith was connected with themselves in another dimension and had conversations. In this work, Smith had a chance to seek into their dreams and document the scenes, objects, and mysterious rituals that they encountered in an alternate reality. In these

dreams, even Smith was not able to rule, but all that mattered was to dive into the other world. If mankind might be able to contact the edge of an alternate reality, Smith has provided a vision of that. Once these contents were expressed in Smith's drawings, they became a mirror that reflected the artist's family memories that were deeply rooted in their subconsciousness, so that the audience was led into a wonderland and able to establish a mental connection with Smith in the other dimension. Such a connection went beyond the boundaries of space and bodies, throughout Smith's unique artistic practices over the last 20 years. As the Dean of Fine Arts at CCA, Smith has provided the local art community with their pursuit, challenging the boundaries and seeking the deep connections of history, family, and self.

Yizhou Zhuang is a product designer currently  
graduating from the MFA Design program.