

Sunny Smith: The Compass Rose



By Evelyn
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How many layers of family experience can be attached to an object? What is the significance of the past for those who hold these objects now? Histories can be complex, coated with layers of trauma that are absorbed within objects, passed on from one generation to the next. Sunny A. Smith's genealogical exhibition *The Compass Rose* (on view from January 13 through March 12, 2023) highlights the deep interconnection between familial bonds and the physical objects that carry weighted ancestral histories. Smith's aim is to understand how the history of our ancestors shapes the way we view ourselves and our place in the present.

Smith, the Dean of Fine Arts at California College of the Arts, is a non-binary queer artist. They currently live and work in the San Francisco Bay Area. Through their artistic practice, Smith is interested in historical reenactment as a way to expose unresolved cultural trauma. Smith then endeavors to unpack and analyze these generational traumas through the display of intentional handcrafted items. The sheer amount of objects within the family ancestral collection and experience is truly a marvel.

The Compass Rose, the title of this show, is a concept that draws from alchemical diagrams, nautical navigation, and solar elemental maps. Smith's family originated in Europe and came to the Americas in the first wave of United States colonization. Their compass rose records the traumas that their ancestors inflicted on others through colonization, and traumas that vicariously and directly impacted Smith's ancestors. Tracking the types of trauma that were experienced and re-imagining and envisioning these perspectives gives a healing space for the current generation, and gives a space for reflection and growth for current and next generations.

Sharing these told and untold histories holds emotional space. Smith uses the circular display of a compass rose to analyze and visualize their own family lineage through the work entitled *Ascendant Chart, Broken Rays'* (2023). They created a compass rose diagram that visualizes 13 generations of their family lineage.

Each name within the spiral has a colored thread attached to it, representing a type of trauma that that individual endured or afflicted. As told by Smith, each colored strand of this work has an original meaning. As a viewer of the gallery, each color deserves to be explained.

Each color represents, for example, someone who crossed over. Another color represents a person moving from one culture to

another; someone who broke with their culture of origin; who left the land they were on. Another description in correlation to a color, Smith describes as someone directly implicated in violence toward Indigenous peoples and/or the destruction of Indigenous communities and cultures. Or, someone who experienced armed conflict and its consequences firsthand; someone who killed or was killed at war. One color is dedicated to someone who owned a plantation; someone responsible for the enslavement of others or who claimed human beings as property. Something memorable represented within the *Ascendant Chart*, is a child who lost a parent before the child reached the age of 15. Even more shocking is the representation of someone who experienced a sudden, tragic death, such as by drowning, gas poisoning, or a broken heart. There are vulnerable and relatable things that are shared and expressed from the previous and the following strands of color with the chart, including someone who caused or was hurt by a fire. Other instances include someone who suffered from neurodivergence or mental illness, or was incarcerated for it. These experiences range from someone's gender or sexuality resulting in undeserved psychic or physical harm to themselves, to someone who crossed over the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender. Finally, an example of someone who held a position of authority, influence, or the indoctrination of others: royal, religious, or governmental leaders, teachers, police officers, and spies.

Visitors are encouraged to take home their own blank poster version of Smith's compass rose. The purpose is to fill out the compass with your own genealogy, bringing the ancestral family archives into everyday view, adding more family histories and ancestors into the present. Each family has untold and told histories, all holding emotional weight carried by the present generation. Through processing and understanding, healing can begin to take place for the pain of the past and the present.



Ascendant Chart, Broken Rays

2023

archival pigment on linen, wool

43 ½" h x 43 ½" w

**Photo credit Josef Jacques. "Sunny A. Smith: The
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