



The Way to Be, 1972. Barbara T. Smith.
Getty Research Institute, 2014.M.14

GETTYGUIDE[®] TRANSCRIPT

BARBARA T. SMITH

THE WAY TO BE

Narrated by Barbara T. Smith

 [AUDIO FILE](#)

On view at the Getty Center from
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Research
Institute



Entrance to the exhibition *Barbara T. Smith: The Way to Be* at the Getty Research Institute, 2023

Mary Miller:

Welcome to our exhibition, *Barbara T. Smith: The Way To Be*. I'm Mary Miller, Director of the Getty Research Institute.

This autobiographical exhibition, organized by senior curator Glenn Phillips and associate curator Pietro Rigolo, explores artist Barbara T. Smith's first 50 years, which were marked by dramatic upheavals in her personal life as well as the development of her most pioneering works, including her Xerox art and radical early performances.

On this audio tour, you will hear from Smith, in her own words as she guides you through her works that strike at the core of human nature, including sexuality, physical and spiritual sustenance, technology, and death.

To use this player, look for audio icons on the object labels, then enter the number beneath the label to access each audio stop or open the exhibition playlist from the audio screen and let the guide direct you through the galleries.



Early life section of the exhibition *Barbara T. Smith: The Way to Be* at the Getty Research Institute, 2023

Barbara T. Smith:

This display here covers my early life in Pasadena. I was the daughter of a very middle class family. My father was a mortician, my mother was a housewife and we lived a very conventional life. We had a house at the beach. We'd go there every summer and it was fantastic. It was really wonderful.

Some of the objects in this display are school assignments. I was an art major, that was my favorite thing. And some are, like, Christmas cards. When I was married, we would always--I'd always make our Christmas card and send it out.

Every summer, when we had more time, my friend Shirley who lived across the street and I would draw paper dolls and design clothes for them. We had narratives about them: In the glamorous world, this person would wear this gown to greet you when you came to the door, this kind of thing.



Xerox machine in the exhibition *Barbara T. Smith: The Way to Be* at the Getty Research Institute, 2023

Barbara T. Smith:

I thought, well I'm going to get one of those machines, you know? and they're just leased to the various places where they were used, and so I found out from the Xerox company that I could indeed lease one, so I did. I leased a 914 Xerox machine, which is quite large, and put it in my dining room.

It completely took over my life. I would spend all day making prints, thousands of them. Jerry McMillan had taken pictures of my children and of me and so then I made stacks of images of their faces. I had some of the paper that I was using, die-cut with different dies, so that when you turn the pages of what became a book, you'd see the same image over and over but these holes were in different places.

One of the most innovative and fun things to do, I mean you can't help thinking about it, you put your hand on the machine and you print it and you put your face on the machine and sooner or later, you think of well, the rest of my body, I can put on the machine. So, I did that and made books out of some of those images.

There's just any number of ways that I used the machine to make art, and it went on for months, months and months, and it was kind of daunting. I remember telling my husband, "I don't know how to stop this," and he says, "Just call them up and tell them to come and get it," which is so simple. It was just like, "Oh, oh yeah." So, that's what I did and I put together the stacks that I needed for these Xerox sculptures and that was it and they came one day and took it. (LAUGHS)



Recreation of *Ritual Meal* from the exhibition *Barbara T. Smith: The Way to Be* at the Getty Research Institute, 2023

Barbara T. Smith:

This work that you see here is a recreation of a piece that I did very early on. It's my first real performance event in which the performers were the guests at the table. They were invited to a dinner, and it was a ritual meal and all of the food was served in surgical equipment and the implication was that they were eating of a body. And there were projections on the walls of body systems like the circulatory system, the nervous system and so forth, and on the ceiling, there was slides of galaxy. It was very cosmic. It was a cosmic event, celebrating both birth and death.

It was right brain thinking ten times. I didn't know anything about that, but it happened. It's hard to describe it, but once it happened, it was an available avenue in my mind.

Field Piece



Field Piece, 1968–1972, installed in the exhibition *Barbara T. Smith: The Way to Be* at the Getty Research Institute, 2023

Barbara T. Smith:

What you see here is a fragment of a huge environmental sculpture that I built over four and a half years, partially in Pasadena, but mostly when I was down at UC Irvine getting my master's degree. Instead of 16 blades, the original has 184, and it was 20 by 24 square feet. It was huge.

And all of these had speakers and lights under them. The idea was that you could take off your shoes and walk through the installation through hundreds of these blades and find yourself in the middle, not knowing which way was out. It was beautiful, and the light going into the blades was very beautiful. Ideally, there they are, 184 of them and they have a cushy white ground that you walk on, and when you walk through it, underneath there, unbeknownst to you, there are these touch sensitive elements that transmit a signal to circuit boards under each blade. There was a little speaker and a light, so the light would come on and the speaker would start and emitting sound and in each case, it could be programmed to do anything you want, but it was programmed to emit a drone. Like, if you're walking through nature and there's kind of a feeling of a drone and then there was the light going up into the blade and so they looked really beautiful.

I never knew it at the start, but the light would go up and get captured. Who knew you could capture light, but it would get captured up there and gather. There would be more light at the top than on the way up. Rather, as you walked through it, you would light your own pathway. That's the way we programmed it. It was big enough so that when you got into the center, you couldn't see your way out, and so at that point, you had to trust your instincts. That's kind of the metaphor, a life metaphor.

The Way To Be



Installation of *The Way to Be* as presented at the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington, 1972, from the exhibition *Barbara T. Smith: The Way to Be* at the Getty Research Institute, 2023

Barbara T. Smith:

The photos that you see here are from a traveling performance that I did called *The Way To Be* and I was traveling with two guys from San Francisco to Washington University. I was invited to do a piece there.

All these photos were printed as soon as we got there and then put on the wall as you see them. And, they replicate this journey that I took, wearing only white pants and jacket and a surgical cap on my head and then my face painted white on one side and red on the other and with a black and white line down the center of my face. So, I looked very strange and I would not speak to anybody on route, so it was a very, very demanding piece and these photos show you some of the trip that we took.

I wanted it to be completely puzzling to the public that I went through. I wouldn't speak, so this sort of non-being would be going through wherever we were. I couldn't imagine what would happen, and what happened was they didn't know how to deal with me. My feeling was to feel invisible almost, and to feel alienated. This was a very big teacher for me, this whole piece, and what it's like to be outside the norm.

Nude Frieze



Documentation of *Nude Frieze*, 1972, Barbara T. Smith. Getty Research Institute, 2014.M.14

Barbara T. Smith:

In this piece, I was making a comment on the fact that art itself is a form of sanctuary, that you can engage in ideas that otherwise might get you in trouble politically or legally, but as art, you can raise questions that you otherwise couldn't.

And here, I was putting my friends on the wall, creating a frieze of their bodies. While they were up on the wall, we were drawing lines between them to make a field. When we took them down, there would be this shape left of their bodies on the wall. And I acted in the center of the space as the architect and I had my fellow students as my construction team. And we played sacred music to this construction site and the idea of sanctuary was obviously both real, because we had F-Space as the sanctuary and it's about --how art functions in our culture.



Still from *Birthdaze*, 1981, Barbara T. Smith.
Getty Research Institute, 2014.M.14

Barbara T. Smith:

Here you see documentary images from a performance I did in 1981 called *Birthdaze*. This performance opportunity came when I was just turning 50. As most women do at that time, I was going through the menopause, which was an unknown transformation that happens with women. Unknown because we don't know what's going to happen and it's not always the same with each woman.

So, I had to think, what would I do as a performance to celebrate my 50th birthday? I was trying to show by performance these three stages, one of them being the early part of my life, where I was trying to be very conventional and then a second part, where I was divorced and I fell right into the way that unprotected life functions in western culture, the to and fro of sexuality and power structures and war and all those things happen in this middle part of one's life and then there's a third part, which is not necessarily at the end of life, but there's a part of a life that gradually shows itself as a spiritual dimension.



Photograph of *Untitled (red triangle)*, from the *Black Glass Paintings* series, 1965–66, Barbara T. Smith. Getty Research Institute, 2014.M.14

Barbara T. Smith:

Here you see, at the end of the show, one of my earliest paintings from 1965, the *Black Glass* painting that you see there and a pair of prints that I just most recently did at Serus. The glass is a conceptual painting. It makes you think it's a painting because it's framed and it's got this little bit of color something here or there, but basically it's not a painting at all. They're just tricks almost to trick you into thinking you're seeing a painting and realizing you're not seeing anything, and you're only seeing what's out here. That was another part of that insight about art being not necessarily recorded in things, but the embodiment of people out in their lives and life itself. It got very broad.