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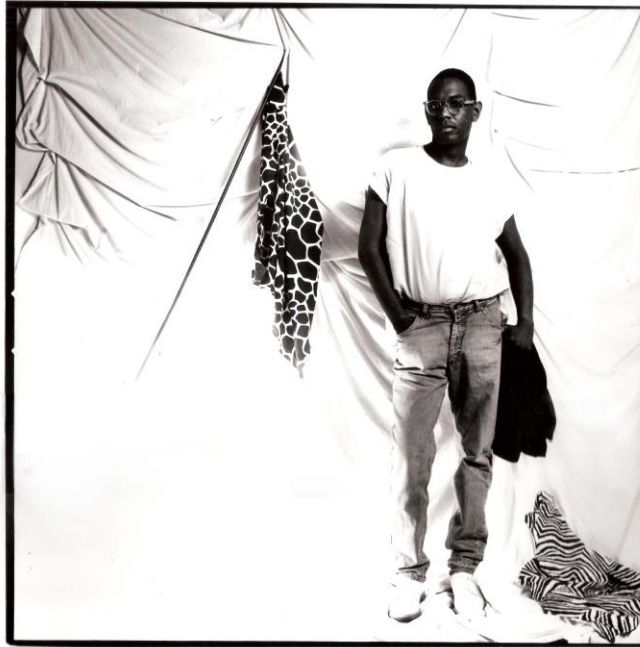
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#WILLIWEAR

SI-308-2019

COOPER HEWITT TO PRESENT “WILLI SMITH: STREET COUTURE”

FIRST MUSEUM EXHIBITION AND BOOK ON INFLUENTIAL AMERICAN
DESIGNER



JULY 24, 2019

In March 2020, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum will present the first museum exhibition of American designer Willi Smith (1948–1987). “Willi Smith: Street Couture” will feature key works by this pioneer of streetwear fashion who founded the iconic brand WilliWear with partner Laurie Mallet in 1976 and leveraged innovative partnerships with artists, designers and performers to break down social, cultural and economic boundaries. On view March 13 through Oct. 25, 2020, the exhibition will include more than 200 works by Smith and collaborators such as Juan Downey, Dan Friedman, Keith Haring, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, Les Levine, Dianne McIntyre, Nam June Paik and SITE, many of which have not been seen in more than 30 years.

“Street Couture” takes its name from Smith’s most iconic collection, which was presented in 1983 as the first event in which he brought fashion, art and music together to present his work. The exhibition’s selection of photography, video, design drawings, garments, patterns and ephemera will position Smith as a groundbreaking designer and cultural producer who laid new roads for fashion before dying suddenly of AIDS-related complications at age 39.

“As America’s design museum, Cooper Hewitt is committed to communicating the power of design and championing the work of under-recognized designers whenever possible,” said Museum Director Caroline Baumann. “Through this scholarship, Cooper Hewitt introduces new lenses for understanding Willi Smith’s experience and how he designed high-quality yet affordable basics that were accessible to a wide audience, expanding the narrative of fashion history and the work of designers of color.”

“Willi Smith cared about ‘style over status,’” said Alexandra Cunningham Cameron, curator of contemporary design and Hintz Secretarial Scholar at Cooper Hewitt. “Clothing was simply a tool for him to disseminate ideas about personal freedoms beyond class, beyond gender, beyond race, while still having fun. He shows us that true collaboration, and the inclusivity it requires, is not a marketing gimmick or token gesture, but a way of thinking, of making and of life.”

“Willi Smith: Street Couture” is organized by Cunningham Cameron, along with curatorial assistants Darnell-Jamal Lisby and Julie Pastor.

The exhibition will be designed by James Wines, National Design Award winner and founder of SITE, architects of WilliWear’s 1982 New York showroom and subsequent boutiques, which brought the street indoors. Communication design studio Poly-mode has created the graphic identity for the exhibition and publication, continuing the spirit of collaboration that Smith proudly championed.

PUBLICATION

Co-published by Cooper Hewitt and Rizzoli, “Willi Smith: Street Couture” explores the emergence of street style in the United States, the history of collaborative practice, the downtown New York art scene of the 1970s–1980s, the relationship between fashion, marketing, race and the impact of black and black queer communities. Designed by Poly-mode, the book will feature more than 300 photographs, essays and transcribed interviews by notable figures in fashion, art and culture, including Oscar-winner Ruth Carter, editor Kim Hastreiter, choreographer Bill T. Jones and artist Lisa Yuskavage.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Cooper Hewitt’s educational and public programs will extend the impact of the exhibition to audiences of all ages through conversations and workshops that expound the themes of the exhibition. Programs will include moderated talks and lectures with Smith’s collaborators, educators and academics, and art/fashion industry professionals.

A symposium of design talks, organized in conjunction with the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, will examine topics such as race and fashion in America, the intersection of fashion, race and queer theory, the history of African Americans in fashion and the economics and sustainability of fashion.

ABOUT COOPER HEWITT, SMITHSONIAN DESIGN MUSEUM

Cooper Hewitt is America's design museum. Inclusive, innovative and experimental, the museum's dynamic exhibitions, education programs, master's program, publications and online resources inspire, educate and empower people through design. An integral part of the Smithsonian Institution—the world's largest museum and research complex—Cooper Hewitt is located on New York City's Museum Mile in the historic, landmark Carnegie Mansion. Steward of one of the world's most diverse and comprehensive design collections—over 210,000 objects that range from an ancient Egyptian faience cup dating to about 1100 BC to contemporary 3-D-printed objects and digital code—Cooper Hewitt welcomes everyone to discover the importance of design and its power to change the world. Cooper Hewitt knits digital into experiences to enhance ideas, extend reach beyond museum walls and enable greater access, personalization, experimentation and connection. The museum is fully accessible.

For more information, visit www.cooperhewitt.org or follow @cooperhewitt on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

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