

**MING SMITH**

American, born Detroit, MI

*Sun Ra Space I, New York City, NY, 1978*

Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 inches

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Ming Smith's work is familiar to those of us who were listening to music in the late 1970s and '80s. Shooting New York's jazz scene with great sensitivity, Smith produced images of the musicians at rest or in action. She was on the inside, an integral part of the scene she depicted. This photograph documents a performance by Sun Ra (1914–1993), an American jazz composer, bandleader, pianist, poet, and visionary thinker. Transforming his persona by means of what he called Myth-Science, Ra asserted his extraterrestriality, proclaiming himself a being from the planet Saturn. He was a pioneer of what is now called Afrofuturism, a philosophy and artistic genre mixing elements from ancient Egyptian and other non-Western mythologies, African diasporic culture, advanced technology, and science fiction.

One of the keys to Sun Ra's reinvention of himself was photography. For four decades, he crafted his identity in part by means of his image. In the 1960s, with the help of drummer and photographer Tommy "Bugs" Hunter, Ra sat for elaborate shoots in which he was decked out in a flowing costume, a burst of flame or a mysterious metal star suspended mid-air between his hands like a magician or sorcerer. Later he posed in towering Egyptian headwear borrowed from an Oakland Masonic temple, and as his public profile grew Ra eventually turned his entire public life into a photo opportunity. Each concert was a series of perfect setups; every time he stepped up to the microphone to give a recitation or waved his tiger-patterned cape to signal to the band in a conducted improvisation, Ra was also offering himself up for potential image capture.

Smith's *Sun Ra Space I, New York City, NY* is an action shot, slightly disorienting, in which Ra's physical presence is almost dematerialized. She converts his body from object into atmosphere. Ra's cape—this time one with a cosmic design—is caught in motion, the blackness of its fabric blending into the background of the club, the bandleader's arm disintegrating into star-scape. Ra's metallic cap blurs too, a flare in this Sun Ra solar system.

—John Corbett '94 PhD, Radio/Television/Film  
Writer and independent curator based in Chicago