A Self-Taught Artist Takes His Roadside Acropolis North

Outside the art establishment for decades, Charles Smith has sculpted his Black heroes in Aurora, Ill., and now in Hammond, La. At 81, he's getting his first show in New York.

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Dr. Charles Smith, visionary artist and creator of the African-American Heritage Museum and Black Veterans Archive, at his trailer-house studio in Hammond, La. Credit: Annie Flanagan for The New York Times

HAMMOND, La. — Along Interstate 55 heading to this small town north of New Orleans, you pass several signs telling you what's ahead, literally and maybe also metaphorically: Ponchatoula Antique City, Tickfaw State Park, Don's Seafood, Apocalypse Sports ("Guns, Ammo, Tactical.")

The sign for the African-American Heritage Museum might direct you to a local historical institution. Or, depending on whom you ask, it could lead to another, stop-in-your-tracks site at the corner of Walnut Street and East Louisiana Avenue bearing nearly the same name but operating unquestionably on its own terms: Dr. Charles Smith's African-American Heritage Museum and Black Veterans Archive.

Over the last several years, the residential property, a rectangular yard and a shotgun-style house, has teemed with sculpture to the point of bursting — waist-high figures and heads representing personages from Black history like Sally Hemings, Ruby Bridges and Malcolm X, along with swamp animals, fantastical creatures, Egyptian motifs and piles of unadorned stones, more than 7,000 of them, signifying the number of African-American soldiers who died in Vietnam.

One of the largest sculptures on the site depicts an impassioned-looking young Black man in a Pan-African sash and Marine-insignia pith hat, holding up a right hand that once waved a United States flag. On a recent afternoon, the subject of this imposing self-portrait, the sculptor Charles Smith, 81, pointed to the piece and said: “That’s Charles Smith back when he was in Vietnam. But a while ago, I decided to take the flag out of his hand until things start to look a little better in this country. It’s been a pretty bad road for quite a while now.”

On July 8 the nonprofit gallery White Columns, at 91 Horatio Street, will open the first-ever solo exhibition in New York dedicated to Smith, featuring new sculptures he has been shaping at a headlong pace inside a trailer-house studio on the outskirts of town. The pieces will introduce his socially penetrating, racially acute, wildly idiosyncratic work — a tiny glimpse into a mission underway for more than three decades now — to a broad audience at what might be the most pertinent time for it in recent American political history.

Smith uses the self-bestowed honorific of Dr. to emphasize “the depths of knowledge I have accumulated in this life.” And when he began making sculpture, with no formal training, several years after returning from Vietnam with a Purple Heart and the debilitating effects of post-traumatic stress disorder, he was intent on pouring all of that knowledge into the work.

Born in New Orleans and raised there and in Chicago, he had absorbed more than his share of trauma long before serving as an infantryman. When Smith was 14, his father was drowned in New Orleans in what his family believed to be a racially motivated attack. A year later, after his mother moved the family to Chicago, she took him to a viewing of the open casket of Emmett Till, the Black teenager who was abducted, tortured and lynched in Mississippi in 1955 by two white men, an experience that affected Smith profoundly.

A grouping of new sculptures bound for New York. Smith’s pieces often depict famous figures from African-American history, as well as friends, family members and allegorical representations. Credit: Annie Flanagan for The New York Times

After his discharge from the Marines, he settled in Chicago and held jobs as a postal carrier and an airplane service worker for Trans World Airlines. But he struggled with drug addiction and depression and a marriage foundered.

“I could just never quite get back to civilian life with all that killing in my head, all that dying daily,” he told me during a recent interview in his trailer. “There were times when I was just trying every day not to put a gun in my pocket.” But after relocating to the suburb of Aurora, Ill., he experienced a kind of religious epiphany, inspired by having seen an exhibition of African art at Navy Pier in Chicago.

“It hit me that the line of communication I needed, was looking for, to say what I wanted to say about all my thoughts and all my anger, was art. It was a calling. God gave it to me to say, ‘This is what you can do to help save the community, to teach.’ ”

Over the next 14 years his modest home and yard in Aurora metamorphosed into an open-air exhibition, part didactic history museum, part roadside Acropolis, populated at one point by more than 600 individual sculptures and several fixed monuments representing subjects like the Middle Passage and the civil rights movement.

“The city didn’t appreciate it,” Smith said. “They said the neighborhood wasn’t zoned for it. And I told them, ‘Listen, you have museums around here without a shred of African-American history, in a city that the Underground Railroad passed through. So I’m going to make a museum myself. I’ll do it for you.”

Smith’s home and open-air exhibition in Aurora, Ill., in April 2000. It was a veritable Black history museum populated by more than 600 individual sculptures and monuments representing subjects like the Middle Passage and the civil rights movement. Credit: Susan Moran

The site took up residence within an enormous, partially mapped realm of handmade vernacular art environments that have been scattered around the United States for decades, what Seymour Rosen, an influential preservationist of such sites, called “jewels on the landscape,” born of obsession, sometimes mystical or holy, and years of tireless, generally self-taught work.

Assuming the form of gardens, villages, grottoes, temples, towers (Rosen helped protect Los Angeles’s now-landmarked Watts Towers), self-styled kingdoms and castles, many such installations disappear after their maker’s death or relocation because of sporadic local resources or interest in saving them.

But when Smith decided to shift his focus from Aurora to Hammond 22 years ago, during trips back to Louisiana to care for his mother, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisc., a pioneer in preserving American artist-made environments, stepped in and helped save much of the Illinois work, acquiring more than 200 sculptures.

In the summer of 2019, I saw some of those pieces for the first time in an exhibition at the Kohler. The show felt somehow more like an enthralling theatrical production, with an enormous, motley cast, than a sculptural grouping. And I quickly understood why a review I had read online about the exhibition, in The Magazine Antiques, said that Smith's work, in the specificity of its gaze, lands "like a gut punch to comfy concepts of folk art."

Matthew Higgs, the director and chief curator of White Columns, who has for years made the venerable nonprofit into a destination for work by self-taught artists, artists with disabilities and others who defy conventional classification, saw Smith's work for the first time at the Kohler in 2017.

Several of his pieces were woven thoughtfully into a sprawling installation by the Brooklyn-based artist Heather Hart, who wrote at the time of Smith: "His subjects exude pride, celebrate talent, acknowledge despair and reflect endurance: They are African-American heroes and heroines, spiritual leaders, artists, musicians, athletes and friends."

Higgs said: "I was just blown away. It seemed to me unfathomable that I didn't already know his art existed."

"I wanted to do a show," he added. "But I wasn't quite sure how. The integrity of his sites is incredibly important, and that seemed to me practically impossible to reanimate in a gallery in a way that made sense. So I started thinking about the importance of presenting Dr. Smith in the present tense and asked him to make new work."

At his trailer the other day, the new work was nearly edging Smith out the door. A half-finished Paul Robeson balanced upside down on the porch. Inside, Iceberg Slim and Phillis Wheatley, writers separated by two centuries and vastly different sensibilities, sat side by side on a table. Work in some form of becoming, along with boxes of thrift-store finds and bags of Quikrete, a fast-setting concrete mix, covered every surface. (The precise formula of the material he uses to mold his durable figures, on armatures of steel rebar and wood, is a studio secret, he says.)

Smith, a lean, intense, gregarious man, given to referring to himself in the third person, cleared off two chairs and made a pot of coffee. Then he held forth for a few hours in the stentorian baritone of a country preacher, which he once briefly was, about the pieces we sat among.

I asked whether his thought process differed in making work for a gallery in New York rather than for his own community, members of which, friends and local children, sometimes become the subjects of his sculptures.

A sculpture in progress, tentatively titled "Gone With the Wind House Slave," being made for an exhibition at White Columns art space in New York. Credit: Annie Flanagan for The New York Times

A sculpture that, like many of Smith's, is also functional. In this case, a working lamp figure refers to the use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, in which Smith served as a Marine infantryman. Credit: Annie Flanagan for The New York Times

“No, sir, I want to do the same thing for the people in New York as I do anywhere else,” he said. “I want them to consider themselves as sequestered jurors, because when you hear my story, you cannot leave the room, the building, the gallery, without rendering a verdict, because I’m bringing charges. I’m filing a complaint, and it’s up to you to decide.”

Dr. Charles Smith at work in his trailer-house studio in Hammond, La. Credit: Annie Flanagan for The New York Times

He mentioned The New York Times’s “1619 Project,” about the centrality of slavery to the history of the United States, and said: “I love that, but sometimes you have to speak to people, get through to them, in ways other than words.” Pointing to the sculptures crowding the trailer’s living room, he said: “That’s critical race theory right over there!”

He added: “I’ve been working on all of it pretty much nonstop since March. Seven days a week, 24 hours a day, because even when I’m asleep I’m dreaming about what I’m going to make.”

Lionel Rabb, a Chicago businessman who has spearheaded the formation of a nonprofit organization to protect and promote Smith’s work, said that last year, after Smith’s wife of 43 years, Mary, died and Hurricane Ida damaged his house, he was brought to live briefly in and around Chicago and near the Kohler.

“And everywhere he stayed for more than two or three days, a hotel or a home, he started making sculptures,” Rabb said. “Someone would call me and say, ‘Did you see what Doc made?’ He’d stop at a Dollar Store and find some objects and buy other materials and just start making things.”

Lisa Stone, a scholar of artist-built environments who has known Smith for more than 20 years, said: “If he stopped making work, he would die, I’m convinced of it. The newest work he’s doing, I think, reflects his incredible adaptability to conditions — his age, his abilities, the traumas he’s been through recently with the hurricane and the loss of Mary. He’s reading the newspaper and he’s making pieces about what’s happening right up to the present moment.”

Smith told me that he planned to travel by train from New Orleans to New York for the White Columns show, his first visit to the city since the early 1960s, when he came with friends to hear Malcolm X. If even a few hours of spare time present themselves, he said, and a hardware store comes along, new work will most certainly be in the offing.

“Man, it’s as bad as crack or heroin,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s an addiction, you know? But for me it’s the spirit moving in me, making me say what I’ve got to say.”

- Randy Kennedy

Correction: July 8, 2022
An earlier version of this story misstated the location of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center. It is in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, not Michigan.