

<https://www.jsonline.com/story/entertainment/arts/2022/02/14/charles-smith-finds-home-black-figures-sheboygans-art-preserve-kohler-foundation/8914650002/>

## Dr. Charles Smith finds a home for arc of Black experience at Sheboygan's Art Preserve



When Dr. Charles Smith sold hundreds of his works to the Kohler Foundation, the outspoken artist made one thing clear:

"You're buying art, not me," he said. "That way, you can't tell me to stop saying what I'm saying."

Far from stopping Smith, the Sheboygan-based [John Michael Kohler Arts Center](#) may be giving the 81-year-old artist a wider forum for preaching his message. Smith is one of the few living artists represented in Kohler's [Art Preserve](#), which opened in 2021, a combination of museum, study center and working conservation space. The Kohler

Foundation gifted more than 200 of Smith's sculptures to the JMKAC, giving it the largest institutional collection of his art.

The Art Preserve houses large collections from artist-built environments, like those of Mary Nohl, the late Fox Point creator, and Nek Chand, who made hundreds of human figures from rocks and stones in India.

**MORE:** [From Mary Nohl's tools to chicken-bone thrones, Kohler's new Art Preserve houses works from 'artist-built environments'](#)

Kohler has forged a relationship with Smith, who now lives in Hammond, Louisiana, but fashioned many of the works in the Art Preserve at his former home in Aurora, Illinois. In October, he visited the Art Preserve to help curators arrange his work there, and to meet and talk with groups and visitors, including members of the African American Art Alliance, a Milwaukee Art Museum support group.

Like many of the creators included in the Art Preserve, Smith's work gains in power from seeing it en masse. During his recent visit, Smith worked with curators on a plan that eventually will lead to the installation of his concrete and mixed-media figures in the historical arc of Black experience, from Africa through the Middle Passage, slavery, plantation life, the early 20th century, the civil rights movement to the present.

"Art is designed to leave a message of education, to inspire," Smith said, repeating what he told members of the visiting art alliance.

"I had no art skills ... but when God gets in your life and calls you, there's going to be some action."

## **Called to make art about Black history**

Born in New Orleans, Smith grew up in Chicago after the death of his father in what Smith believes was a racially motivated murder. His mother took him to view the body of the murdered Emmett Till in 1955.

He served as a Marine infantryman during the Vietnam War, an experience that left him injured, depressed and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. He said he began making art in 1986 after God told him to do so to counter his anger and depression. He also dubbed himself "Dr." to honor the wisdom he has acquired through life experience.

"My job as a minister, as an artist, as a person serving in the community, is tell them the truth. That's all God requires of me," said Smith, seated in the middle of a semi-circle of his sculptures.

His abiding preoccupation is the importance of knowing Black history. A male figure with his arm raised represents the Amistad, the Spanish schooner where slaves revolted in

1839, leading to a U.S. Supreme Court decision that affirmed the freedom of the former slaves.

Smith points out figures of house slaves and field slaves, noting the latter can be easily identified by scarring on their backs.

A group of prone figures represent graves in a Canadian cemetery. "That's why they're on the floor looking up, letting people know who pass through they didn't get a chance to do what you're doing." Smith said.

Another grouping honors Black intellectual leaders including Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois "that made a difference in our lives."

Pointing to a figure, Smith said it's Stokely Carmichael, the activist and Black Power leader of the 1960s. The artist identifies that time period as the point when the Black American community lost its way.

"My thesis is in April of 1968 when Dr. (Martin Luther) King died, that's when we died, because there's not been a movement forward since then," he said.

Immediately after King was shot, the movement's leaders should have gathered in that motel room in prayer, asking God "who should lead us now? ... But they didn't, and that's why they're scattered and confused all over the place," he said.

A strong proponent of Black self-empowerment, Smith isn't shy about criticizing institutions. "One hundred years NAACP has been in existence ... how is it that Black Lives Matter can come along and do more in less than two years than you have done in 50 years?" he asked rhetorically.

But he was happy to speak to a group from Milwaukee, he said, because Milwaukee has a Black-owned bank.

Smith's contemporary figures embody the stern symbolism of a prophet. A young female figure is 13 years old and pregnant. "Nowhere to go, just living with her mother. Look at the damage and trauma she's brought to that family," he said.

A boy depicted in chains has "been before the judge a number of times and told to change his life, change his ways, or else you're going to wind up in prison."

Smith believes the tradition of elders teaching young people about their culture and how to live has been broken. He sees his work as an effort to help fill that educational gap.

Smith has made more than 500 figures in his artistic lifetime. When he makes a new work, his process often includes "a lot of reading," he said.

A recent work began with the inspiration to take a five-gallon plastic jug of water, placing a child on one side, a baby in front and the mother behind — a reference to the water crisis in Flint, Michigan.

"I let the spirit guide me just like it told me (to get) that water bottle," Smith said. "All I do is let God lead me in what to do."

As stern as he can be, Smith calls himself optimistic about the future, because he has talked to so many people who are "sincere about change and looking for change, that just need direction." He exhorts young people to stay in school and stay focused.

One of his figures is dominated by a large clock. Everybody has a clock and when it runs out, you die, he said, underlining his memento mori.

As long as he can, he will keep following his calling. "I'm still the guy in the corner trying to figure out why this killing's going on, why the family's broken, " he said.

The Art Preserve is at 3636 Lower Falls Road, Sheboygan, about 3 miles from the John Michael Kohler Arts Center. Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays; 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursdays; 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Entries will be timed. The Kohler suggests making reservations at [jmkac.org/art-preserve](http://jmkac.org/art-preserve) or by calling 920-453-0346. Admission is free; donations will be accepted at the front desk. All visitors are required to wear a mask.

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