

# MARCHING ON

As the Kohler Arts Center celebrates the work of Dr Charles Smith – Vietnam veteran, activist and minister – his political messages and untold African-American histories spread his faith

JEFFREY WOLF



*Stokely Carmichael*, 1985–99; concrete, paint and mixed media; 20 x 46 x 7.5 in. / 51 x 117 x 19 cm, Dr Charles Smith: Aurora installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2019, photo: Jeffrey Wolf

Tall, thin and muscular, Dr Charles Smith (b. 1940) wears dark aviator sunglasses and a pith helmet bearing the United States Marines insignia. His stature and voice are strong. One cannot write about Dr Smith – visual artist, historian, activist and minister – without reflecting on his time in Vietnam. At the age of 24 – married, and active in the Civil Rights movement for the previous six years – he was drafted into the Marines; not through his own choice but on an order meted out while he was in the induction office.

He went to Vietnam feeling like a “second-class citizen”. Four years later, in 1968, he was discharged

from service with a Purple Heart. He says that Vietnam coverage rarely addresses the black experience, and that it was “on their backs” that the war was fought. Almost 7,500 African-American soldiers lost their lives, a fact rarely mentioned publicly.

Much like former Vietnam veteran artist Gregory Van Maanan, Smith’s initiation to the battlefield came quickly, a harsh awakening to the danger. As fate would have it, both men left their foxholes just before bombs hit, killing everyone in them.

Smith says that in response to the order to “kill everything that moved, and burn down everything



Overview and entry area, Dr Charles Smith's African American Heritage Museum and Black Veteran's Archive, Aurora, Illinois, c. 1995, photo: Lisa Stone

else... the only way to survive was to do exactly as you were told." In battle, race didn't matter – it was a "Field of Blood," he says – and memories of fellow veterans, brothers, black and white, will live with him forever. He needs to justify his wartime behaviour to himself every day. He quotes The Bible, James 2:18: "Show me your works apart from your faith and I will show you my faith by my works".

In its discussion of the life-changing experiences of

veterans, the book *Vietnam: Reflexes and Reflections* (The National [Vietnam] Veterans Art Museum, 1998) says that some "develop a fire in their mind that consumes them... that, if they live, they will fulfill a destiny". That destiny of fulfillment is evident in the work that Dr Smith has done and continues to do to this day.

In 1968, out of the service and on the heels of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, Smith worked



*Security*, 1985–99, concrete, paint and mixed media, 13 x 33 x 11 in. / 33 x 84 x 28 cm, Dr Charles Smith: Aurora installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2019, photo: Jeffrey Wolf



*Karate Kid*, 1985–99, concrete, paint and mixed media, 34 x 43 x 9.5 in. / 86 x 109 x 24 cm, Dr Charles Smith: Aurora installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2019, photo: Jeffrey Wolf

as a veterans advisor for Operation Push (People United to Save Humanity) with Jesse Jackson. He served until recently as the national executive director of the African American Association, a liaison position between Illinois Congress members and the Congressional Black Caucus. He also became a veterans employment counsellor for the state of Illinois. And, in response to “a religious calling”, he was ordained at the Virgil Black Training Academy in around 1985, going on to preach in churches in Memphis, Tennessee and Illinois.

When Jesse Jackson left Operation Push to run for US president in the mid-eighties, Smith was at a crossroads. The bureaucracy of his work was starting to stifle him, and his health and finances were getting him down, but he ploughed on, not allowing his frustration to rule him. “March on,” he would say. However, over the previous 18 years, ideas had gradually been coming together in his head, and then a visit to the Chicago Pier [Art] Show in around 1986 started him thinking about how art could change things. He saw it as a message from God. Having felt “tired of being tired,” he now considered himself to be divinely inspired and, although he had no art training, he was sure that

the hand of God would guide him through.

Today, Dr Smith has three art environments filled with his work, the gardens strewn with sculptures in various stages of completion. His creations of mostly found materials often depict neighbours, historical figures, celebrities, athletes – Velma Smith, Serena Williams, Flo-Jo – and there is autobiography in there and themes from the Diaspora to the news of the day. A statue of the late politician John McCain, holding a desecrated flag, represents how people are treated in the artist’s opinion. For him, it’s not the United States of America but “The State of America”. Referring to a sculpture of a Vietnam veteran in chains, he explains, “He went off to fight Communism and came back to racism. The depth of our ignorance as a people is so deep that it needs to be sent to the Center for Disease Control!”

Dr Smith’s latest site is in Roseland, Louisiana. The second is in Hammond, Louisiana (as featured in *Raw Vision* 92). The first – on Kendall Street in Aurora, Illinois – was a derelict property that he purchased in 1986. The first piece of work that he constructed there was a monument, a concrete arch stating, “We shall overcome”. From 1986 to 1999, he transformed the



Tableau of enslaved people along North Avenue, Dr Charles Smith's African American Heritage Museum and Black Veteran's Archive, Aurora, Illinois, c. 1995, photo: Lisa Stone

Aurora property into an outdoor museum filling it with 600 to 800 of his sculptures. He named the site the "African American Heritage Museum and Black Veteran's Archive," dedicating it to the telling of African-American histories. With the help of teachers and preachers championing his cause and bringing their pupils and parishioners to the site, Aurora became a place to start a dialogue and to find a sense of healing.

When creating his sculptures, Dr Smith uses found materials which he reinforces with a steel bar framework and coats in plaster, concrete and a wood-pulp substance. Then, using discarded objects like old clocks, globes, cameras and horns, he adorns the sculptures. By leaving the works outside, he allows them to decay, in the cold and heat, in a process that he calls "weatherising." He then adds a final layer of a recipe of his own which he calls "epoxy-rubberised paint." Over time, the sculptures crack but do not break, and need a "renewal" or touch up every ten years or so, he says.

It is hard to judge Dr Smith's work on individual pieces – though many are confrontative and strong in form and process, it is the accumulation of stories linking them together that creates a whole that is

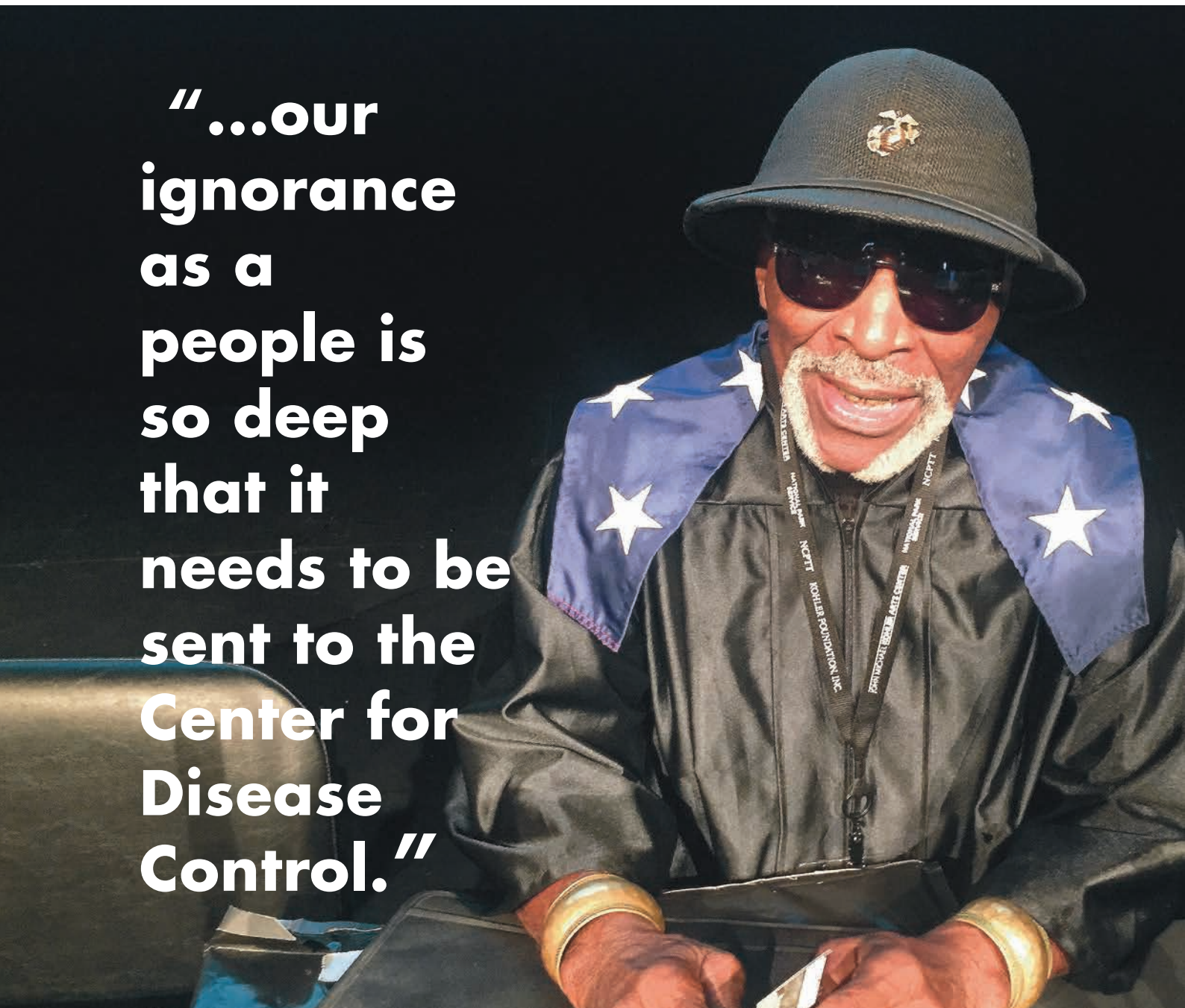
stronger than its parts and that truly reverberates. He often depicts the people and issues that are freshest in his mind, reflecting his study of The Bible, art history, historical events, news articles and current events. He uses his study to confirm his beliefs and to inform his action, and he continues to develop and expound upon his themes personalising them with a strong visual narrative to make his message easier to understand.

His primary purpose as an artist is driven by his desire to educate people. It is important to him that his work be outdoors and easy for passersby to see. He draws many children to the sites to regale them with the untold tales and African-American histories that they have never been taught. He wants his artwork to both entertain and educate.

He has used the self-appointed title "Dr" since 1981 to connote the status he feels he has earned from his studies, and his life experiences. Now, at 80, he is concerned with passing on his purpose after he is gone. The pages of his bible are scrawled with his notes. He has a wall of archival photographs and letters, and a room of documents that he is cataloguing. One letter is from the mother of lynched teenager Emmett Till,



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Dr Charles Smith at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in 2017, photo: *Raw Vision*

thanking him for the sculpture he made as a tribute.

Although parts of his Aurora art environment still stand, the site is embroiled in a stand-off between Dr Smith and the City of Aurora concerning how best to support the artist and utilise the site. However, Dr Smith can rest assured that much of his work will soon have a permanent home. In 2001, 450 of his sculptures were bought by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center (JMKAC); 150 of those are on display at the JMKAC in Wisconsin until May 2020 but their eventual home will be at The Art Preserve, JMKAC's new project for art

environments which will open later this year. Dr Smith will work as a consultant and active participant in the presentation of his work at The Art Preserve but, in the meantime, he continues to work on his sculptures and to continue his purpose. As the message on the side of a truck in his Roseland driveway says, for the benefit of returning veterans: WELCOME HOME: "START LIVING!"

Jeffrey Wolf is a writer and filmmaker. He has made two acclaimed documentaries: *Bill Traylor: Chasing Ghosts* and *James Castle: Portrait of an Artist*.