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2019 McKnight Artist Fellowship Profile: Melvin R. Smith

Russ White – May 10, 2023



Courtesy of the author.

A few blocks from the State Capitol in Saint Paul, a black giant stands quietly in a park. Over thirty feet tall, the steel figure is frozen mid-stride, one solid I-beam leg planted slightly forward of the other. As you move around the sculpture, looking up at its Modernist, geometric torso, it's hard to tell which direction it is headed. Atop its long neck are not one but two faces — identical and symmetrical, each one an elongated circle that has been creased up the center and squared off on top. They look like Zulu shields by way of Brancusi.

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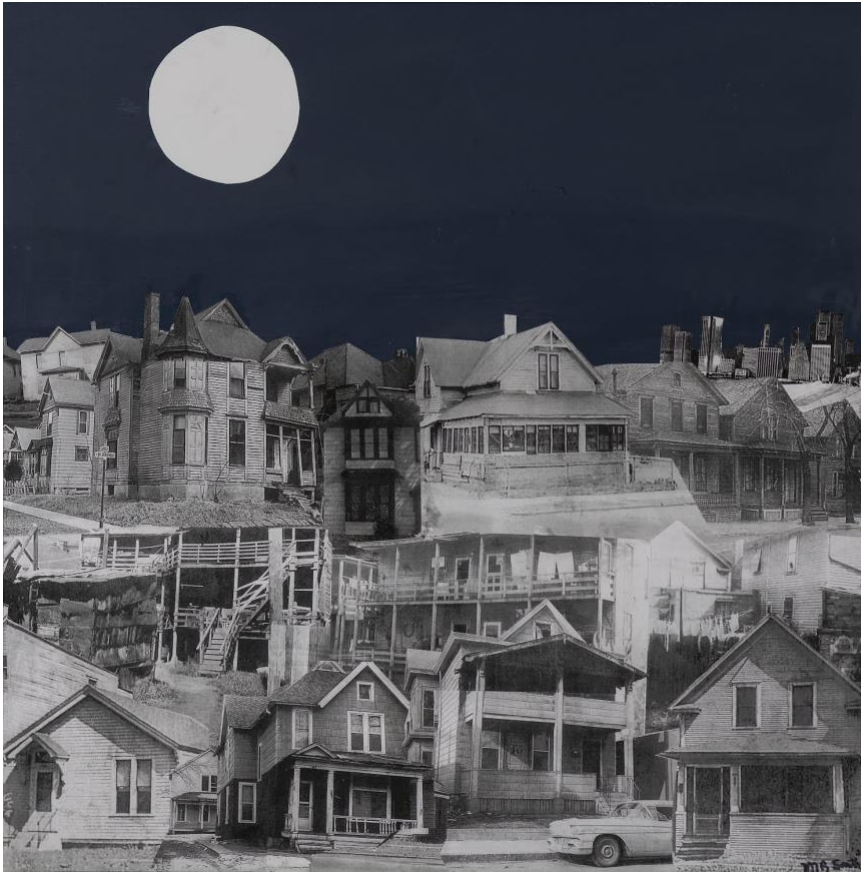
One of many pieces of public art in Western Sculpture Park — including works by Mark di Suvero and Amy Toscani — this giant was created by Melvin R. Smith. Though listed on publicartstpaul.org as *Walking Warrior*, Smith refers to it as “The Spirit of Rondo.”

Fitting then, that the sculpture stands just one block from Interstate 94, the public works project that plowed through the thriving Black neighborhood of Rondo in the 1950s and ‘60s. Over the course of those years, according to Saint Paul Historical, over 600 African-American families were pushed out of their homes and hundreds of businesses shuttered to make way for I-94, despite another, less destructive route proposed to the north. A successful community was successfully destroyed.

Though born and raised in Oklahoma and now based in Eagan, Melvin Smith spent formative years living in Rondo along with his wife Rose J. Smith — herself an artist, as well — and the pair have dedicated much of their artistic output to capturing and reconstructing the essence of the community they knew there. A 2019 exhibition, *Remembering Rondo* at the Weisman Art Museum, showcased both artists’ works: Rose’s oil paintings and Melvin’s collages and sculptures.

Each artist’s approach to the canvas and the subject is similar but distinct. Both Melvin and Rose create narrative, figurative works, rich in colors and characters, simplifying shapes and compositions down to the bare necessities. They offer us snapshots of life in public spaces — street scenes, bus stations, family portraits — and in the exhibition, the very buildings themselves came to life as pedestal-mounted miniatures. The collection of work was cohesive, with a sense of care and clarity afforded to remembering and reconstructing Rondo. But when I ask if the two ever collaborate on artworks, Melvin volleys back a perfectly timed, “Oh my god, no,” punctuated by a burst of laughter.

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Works from the 2019 exhibition *Remembering Rondo*, courtesy of Weisman Art Museum.
Photos by Rik Sferra.

Based out of their home in Egan, the two artists may keep separate studio practices, but the boundaries blur when it comes to art storage. Bedroom after bedroom, along with Melvin's basement studio, are crammed full of canvases, framed works, flatfiles, and an endless array of sculptural maquettes — studies for larger works like the one in Western Sculpture Park. It's quite amazing, the volume of works that have come out of this house and been stored inside of it. "This is our life's work stuffed in this house," he says, as he guides me through. "You'll see downstairs how cramped we are. But we still get it done."

When I visit, there is a collection of large framed collages stacked in the living room from recent studio visits in preparation for a gallery show in New York. Melvin gamely starts flipping through them to show me. Many of these large compositions are narrative — brightly colored with abstracted figures and buildings created from cut and torn bits of paper. The source materials come from magazines, newspapers, historical photos, bits of wallpaper, junk mail. "I make art out of what I have in my hand," he explains. "I don't really look for stuff. Whatever I've got right there at my disposal, that's what I use to make art out of." With a wry chuckle he warns me: "You're gonna see a lot of mixed up crap."

The works not only represent Black American cultural history but are steeped in it as well. As *Kind of Blue* plays over the stereo, the conversation turns to Jacob Lawrence, whose approach to color and composition are a clear influence, and to Romare Bearden, who created similarly collaged portraits of Harlem street life using magazine scraps, but whose work Melvin says he discovered only after he had already begun his own collages.

For Smith, the artwork clearly happens fast, the pieces of paper ripped and rippled from the gel medium adhesive. "I make quick decisions," he says. "When I'm done I'm done, I just walk away." Old handwritten postcards and envelopes give some works the weight of untold stories, of clutter remixed.

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In others, the saturated gradients of more contemporary magazine ads affix his figures in the here and now. Faces emerge from different shades of black and brown paper, eyes cocked in our direction if they are there at all. Proportions are no matter; these works are all about the vibe. At his heart, he says, he is a surrealist.

As he shows me more, laughing and telling stories the whole time, the history of 20th century collage emerges as a throughline. We talk about Picasso and Braque using the medium in their earliest Cubist experiments. There are Matisse's botanical cut-outs, then the German Dadaists like Hannah Höch and Kurt Schwitters, a particular favorite of Melvin's. Other works — and he shows me dozens — touch on painters and sculptors as well: Albers's devotion to color, Malevich's experiments in geometry, and Calder's playfulness with wire all echo faintly inside this house. Going through one drawer of a flatfile, I remark on how his cityscapes use space almost theatrically, giving his scenes a flat kind of openness that comes from an exaggerated sense of deep perspective — very similar to Giorgio di Chirico. Melvin stands up straight, says "Oh my god," and starts laughing again. "Man, that's my favorite artist!"

The conversation feels like a walk through a museum, and there is enough work in the Smiths' house to fill one. "You ain't seen nothing yet," he says, as we move into the third room full of art, this one dominated by a stack of 4' x 5' canvases, all finished in the past two years of the fellowship. These are rougher, non-narrative, and seemingly more free-association, composed of ripped up pictures and text from ads, magazines, family photos, and art posters. Artists as wide-ranging as Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Tony Fitzpatrick, and Andy Goldsworthy peek through in sections, part of large kaleidoscopic compositions that are somewhere between stained glass windows and haggard city billboards. The process here is *décollage* — adding and then subtracting imagery and information.



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Different approaches to collage, from the figurative and narrative to more abstracted work with décollage. Bottom: Detail of a larger work, created during the Fellowship. Middle image courtesy of the artist.

“I like it because I’m a journalist,” Melvin says, referencing the degree he earned and his early career as a writer, and before that, a newspaper boy. “It’s a layer of information. You tear one thing off and you go deeper and deeper into history, man.”

Journalists, it is said, write the first draft of history, and as Nina Simone declared, artists share that responsibility as well: “An artist’s duty, as far as I’m concerned, is to reflect the times,” she said. Without the past, we are lost in the present, and without an awareness of where we are, there’s no telling where we’ll end up.

On either side of the hearth in their living room are two large pieces, each six by five feet: on the left, by Rose, is a painting of an enslaved Black man, head in his hands, shackled by the wrist to a wooden floor. On the right, by Melvin, is a collaged portrait of a Black man in a white, brimmed hat set against a flat wall of old, 19th century newspapers. Both pieces include a yellowed advertisement for a “Great Sale of Slaves.” It’s an obscene relic of a legacy that so many people try to deny, diminish, or whitewash over. “Everyday we look at those pictures,” he says, “so we know where we’ve come from and who we are.”

The face on Melvin’s portrait is sectioned off into planes of white, red, blue, and green. He has a jet black nose and thick black eyes and lips. Melvin points at the face. “That’s who we are. African-American men are masked men.” Spontaneously he recites the opening stanza of “We Wear The Mask,” a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar:

“ We wear the mask that grins and lies,

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It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—

This debt we pay to human guile;

With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,

And mouth with myriad subtleties.”

Masks are everywhere in his work — and in their home. The hallway is lined with sculptures, assemblages, collages, and prints, all featuring a different style of mask. Downstairs the tabletops are thick with mask maquettes for larger sculptures made out of wood, steel, and cardboard. Even down in the woods behind their house, a monumental mask stares back from between the trees, bright and colorful, constructed out of old car parts. “I think everyone is touched by the mask,” he says. “It connects us all to Africa.”

When I ask why he keeps making them year after year, mask after mask, he says, “It’s a continuum. Every time you do a mask, you create. I like the creativity part of it. The whole idea of mask-making, or doing art period, is that surprise you get when it’s done.” He pauses for half a second. “You know what I’m talking about — you’re an artist, I’m not talking to the wall here!” And he busts out laughing again.



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Top: The piece hanging in the Smiths' living room, courtesy of the artist. Bottom: Mask sculptures both downstairs and upstairs at their home.

Here again, Picasso looms large. So much of modern European and North American art history has grown out of his use of the mask motif. And, of course, as with so much that has been taken by so many, he got it from Africa. Scholars point to his earliest introduction to African aesthetics as a Congolese figurine that Matisse brought to a dinner party at Gertrude Stein's house. As the story goes, Picasso was so engrossed with the object that he held it in his hands the whole night; a visitor to his studio the next day, a French writer, described brand new drawings strewn across the floor featuring an abstracted, one-eyed face over and over again. "Cubism was born," the writer reported.

Soon thereafter, on a trip to the Musee d' Ethnographie du Trocadero in Paris, he encountered masks and figures from Gabon and the Ivory Coast, which soon showed up as the faces of *Les Femmes d'Alger*. "The masks were not like any other pieces of sculpture. Not at all. They were magic things," Picasso told another writer years later. They made him understand, he said, "why I was a painter."

Back in the park off of I-94, the Spirit of Rondo wears two masks — one looking forward, the other looking back. Melvin says this piece was inspired by James Thompson, one of Saint Paul's founding fathers and a freed Black man. For the Smiths, Rondo represents the realized potential of peaceful racial integration. "Here is a place in America, that nobody knew about, that had a Black founding father. I'm proud of that fact. I had relatives who came here in 1919. They were going to school with whites. I had an uncle who graduated from St. Thomas."

Rondo's razing, however — the forced evictions, the splintered community — tells a different side of the same story: the vindictive potential of white supremacy. If you doubt it, try to imagine a proposal to demolish all of the homes on Summit Avenue even getting a hearing. Even now, as some are proposing another massive public works project — a land-bridge over 94 to try to reconnect Rondo — many activists and residents of Rondo are unimpressed.

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Like the giant in the park, the Smiths find a balance between looking forward and looking back. On the easel in Rose's studio is a canvas probably seven feet long, a painting in progress of ladies in mid-century dresses and hats. Upstairs, Melvin pulls out a portfolio packed full with even more of his collages, spanning years. This is someone for whom artwork is a means to both find and make meaning in this life. "A song in our souls" is how he describes his and his wife's incessant artistic output in writing. In person, he's more direct. "It's a disease," he says, with a twinkle in his eye. "It don't go away."



"The Spirit of Rondo" in Western Sculpture Park. Photo by the author.

All photos are by the author unless otherwise noted.