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Remembering Rondo

Maya Beecham – May 29, 2019



Artists: Melvin R. Smith and Rose J. Smith

Melvin Smith met and married his purpose in 1968 within three months.

Her name then was Rose JoAnn Beecham. They had something in common. They are both from the historic Black Rondo Neighborhood of St. Paul, by way of other cities. In 1963, Smith, in his early twenties, moved to Rondo from Sandtown, Okla., the state's first Black settlement now known as Doffing Neighborhood.

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Beecham moved with her family to Rondo as a young girl in 1950 from Kansas City. They met on a blind date. However, it was what Smith learned about Beecham, after they became more acquainted, that captured his heart. Behind her quiet demeanor she possessed a mastery of art that spoke to his soul, and awakened the inner artist lying dormant in him.

“When I met my wife, she told me she did art. I was looking at her artwork and looking at her, and that gave my life purpose. When I saw her artwork and thought of me being an artist too that gave me purpose and that’s why I knew I wanted to marry her,” said Smith.

Their first encounter turned into a 52-year journey of life, love, marriage and art.

They invite the public to view a part of their journey through visual art. From June 7 – Sept. 8 Melvin and Rose Smith (Beecham) will display their memories of life in Rondo through the exhibit “Rose and Melvin Smith: Remembering Rondo” at Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum on the West Bank of the University of Minnesota, 333 E. River Pkwy.

“Rondo is a magical place,” said Melvin Smith, “all Minnesotans know that. It’s a place where Gordon Parks, Rose J. Smith, Melvin R. Smith were inspired to do art. It’s where Dave Winfield learned how to hit the long ball. It’s the place where Roy Wilkins fashioned his ideas about race. It’s a magical place. We’re Rondo artists.”

Both Melvin and Rose Smith became deeply engaged in art in different ways. Melvin Smith, who is known for his work in sculpture and collage, received his first major recognition as an artist by being the first African American in the history of his high school to become a Scholastic Art Award Gold Key recipient. After high school he pursued other careers including journalism, security, model agency photography and serving as a tennis coach at St. Paul Academy and Summit School, and, according to Melvin Smith, personally teaching St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter, III how to play tennis.

Rose Smith became engaged in art during her primary years. She began drawing in a 2nd grade class when a teacher took notice of her rendering of a sheep and declared it the best drawing of a sheep she had seen. After that she took off with art. Later she won art awards at Marshall Junior High in 9th grade, and at Mechanics Arts High School in 12th grade.

“(Creating art) relaxes me and takes me to a different world while I am doing it,” said Rose Smith. “The ‘Remembering Rondo’ exhibit took me back to the time we lived on those streets and went to the different stores and how it’s changed now. We wanted to let people know what it was like when we were there.”

Together the Smiths have traveled the country displaying their art.

“When we got married, we decided life is what you do every day and not what you plan to do later. So, we acted out our life right there. The first thing we decided was that we were going to follow the journey of a lost tribe of African Americans in art. That’s what all of this is about following their journey,” said Melvin.

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They began by doing local traveling exhibitions, exhibits in corporate headquarter offices, an exhibit at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities and an exhibit in New Ulm, Minn. to name a few. Some of their art pieces have become a part of permanent collections at the Weisman Art Museum, Minnesota Historical Society, Oklahoma State Collection, Roxane and Steve Gudeman Collection, the Travelers Insurance Collection and Fred Jones Jr. Museum Collection. Additionally, Melvin Smith created a 40-foot “Walking Warrior” sculpture – one side representing a female and the other side representing a male – that has been installed for 25 years in the Western Sculpture Park where Smith said the African American community started in St. Paul on Marion Street. Nationally they’ve exhibited at the historic Southside Community Art Center (Chicago), The Studio Museum in Harlem (New York), Chicago State University, the Fred Jones, Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma, and their own project, the now defunct Oklahoma Museum of African American Art.

“One of the things that characterized our artwork and who we are is we first did artwork about other places and then we thought about where we are from and the historic significance ... so we wanted to do (artwork about) Rondo,” said Melvin Smith.

The Smiths also want to recognize Rondo for what they consider the neighborhoods significant standing in American history. Melvin said, “Rondo is bigger than one city. The reason America should remember Rondo is integration happened; true integration. Even before it was deemed by law to be integrated. Rondo was integrated before the Civil war, so that made it a special place that America should remember. We want (Rondo) to get recognition for what it gave to America, integration as Roy Wilkins talked about in his book ‘Standing Fast.’”

While the Smiths’ art speaks of critical moments in history, and significant memories of family, community and society as a whole, it also speaks for them as individuals.

“We are intuitive artists,” said Melvin Smith. “We do stuff from our subconscious ... our joint art statement is we contend that visual artists are poets that have been sworn to tell the truth. Therefore, each exhibition that we do or each piece of artwork that we create is like a song for our souls. It is a song composed by contemplation, expressed through silence, folded in truth, repeated in dreams, understood in love, hid and awakened and sung in our hearts. That’s what art is to us. It’s never been about money for us. This is very important to us.”

For more information on “Rose and Melvin Smith: Remembering Rondo” at Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum visit www.wam.umn.edu/calendar/rose-and-melvin-smith-remembering-rondo.

Maya Beecham is the niece of Rose Smith (Beecham)