

FORT GANSEVOORT



Melvin Smith & Rose Smith

Recollections of Rondo

Fort Gansevoort, 5 Ninth Avenue, New York, NY

Opening: Thursday, November 16, 2023, 6-8 PM

On View: November 17, 2023 – January 20, 2024

New York...Beginning November 16, 2023, Fort Gansevoort will present *Recollections of Rondo*, its first exhibition with the visionary Minnesota-based artist couple Melvin Smith and Rose Smith. This presentation features a selection of key works from the vast, ongoing, collaborative project the Smiths refer to as *Rondo*, which consists of painted portraits made by Rose, and collages of urban scenes along with architectural sculptures made by Melvin. Initiated in the 1990s, *Rondo* documents the artists' memories of civic life in their vibrant Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul, Minnesota as it existed prior to being bulldozed in the 1960s for construction of the Interstate 94 highway. Now both in their 80s, Rose and Melvin have focused for three decades on a unique shared artistic mission to recall that lost enclave, which was the center of Black life in St. Paul and home to a number of individuals, among them Major League baseball great Dave Winfield and artist Gordon Parks, who would achieve national and international renown in their fields. Rose spent most of her youth in Rondo, while Melvin was a resident between 1963 and 1968—the neighborhood's final years. With the construction of Interstate 94 between 1956 and 1968, the Smiths witnessed first-hand the systematic leveling of their community and its culture—the process of so-called “urban renewal” that James Baldwin dubbed “Negro Removal.”

Working at the intersections of art, social criticism, and community activism, the Smiths continue to preserve a slice of American history.

About the exhibition

The Smiths' ongoing grand opus currently comprises over 150 individual artworks, a small fragment of which will be presented at Fort Gansevoort. The paintings, sculptures, and collages on view in *Recollections of Rondo* memorialize and celebrate a lost American place while raising urgent questions about the human toll extracted by the impact of eminent domain—a story echoed in cities across the United States. Rather than relying solely upon photographs and archival source materials, the Smiths create their work by drawing largely upon their own memories of place and personage to document and examine their recollections of the Rondo community.

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In her recent painting *Cameo Club* (2022), Rose Smith presents a colorful group portrait featuring female members of one of Rondo's storied social clubs. Founded in September 1925 by five young Black women, the Cameo Social Club provided a space for informal gatherings, entertainment, and cultural events at a time when segregation prevented such opportunities elsewhere. In Rose Smith's composition, five women wearing hats commune on a green couch. They all politely rest their hands on their laps, exemplifying the club's reputation for decorum. An isolated female figure, rendered with semi-abstract facial features, sits on her own settee apart from the group. She appears physically and psychologically disconnected from her peers—a motif that frequently appears in Rose's paintings. The contrast between the subjects' varying comportments and their vibrant surroundings reflects the range of nuanced social dynamics within an environment typically characterized by conviviality.

Melvin Smith's wood sculpture *Hallie Q. Brown* (2006) memorializes the original architectural structure of an important community center. Though its location has changed, the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center endures today and continues to preserve the legacy of former Rondo inhabitants. Through Melvin's physical act of construction, his sculptures give form to memory. The specificity of his structures, articulated with window frames, doors, siding, and at times signage, resonate with the artist's deeply personal impulse to preserve his impressions of the place he called home. The solidity of the sculptures suggests the resilience of their maker: Melvin is dedicated to commemorating, sharing, and rebuilding history. Yet the emptiness of his model buildings—they are devoid of human inhabitants—signals the displacement of people and the destruction of existing social fabric in the wake of a controversial infrastructure project.

In the work *Rondo in Pale Moonlight* (2013), which Melvin describes as a "collage painting," the artist has pieced together fragmented black-and-white photocopied images of domestic dwellings that populated the Rondo neighborhood. As with his three-dimensional artworks, Melvin here uses reconstruction as a means to convey in physical form his impressions of the place and its specific atmosphere. The overlapping buildings seen in this work form a glitched total image which in its fragmentation echoes the inherent imperfection of memory. Melvin's composition reflects his recollections of Rondo's topography while the full moon, shining above the rooftops, imbues the image with a poetic tone.

About the Rondo neighborhood

Rondo refers to the historic St. Paul, Minnesota neighborhood that ran roughly between University Avenue to the north, Selby Avenue to the south, Rice Street to the east, and Lexington Avenue to the west. The district was named for Joseph Rondeau, who moved there in the late 1850s to escape the discrimination he faced due to his wife's mixed white and indigenous racial background. In the late 19th century, German, Russian, Irish, and Jewish immigrants populated the neighborhood. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Black businesses, churches, and community centers were established there. By the 1930s, half of St. Paul's Black population lived in Rondo as affordable housing became more available within its borders. The community was defined by an economic mix of upper-middle class, middle-class, and working-class families living side-by-side. With integrated schools, including Central High School, Maxfield Elementary School, and several parochial schools, Rondo also boasted relatively high levels of education and literacy among its community members.

In the 1930s, city planners began to conceive of a new highway that would connect the business districts of downtown St. Paul and Minneapolis. In 1956, the Federal Aid Highway Act promised funding for the initiative, which accelerated plans to construct that highway through the center of Rondo. The proposed project was met with immediate and fierce—but ultimately unsuccessful—resistance by Rondo residents. Construction of Interstate-94 (I-94) proceeded between 1956 and 1968. Creation of the new highway displaced more than five hundred families and numerous businesses, fracturing the cultural identity of the community. Today, the name Rondo is used as shorthand for St. Paul's extant Black community at large and for those whose lives were forever changed by the neighborhood's razing.

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Many influential political leaders and cultural voices have emerged out of the Rondo neighborhood. Melvin Carter, the current and first Black mayor of St. Paul grew up in Rondo. In 1905, Frederick McGee, the first Black attorney in Minnesota, helped found the anti-segregation Niagara Movement. As a contemporary of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, McGee's involvement in the Niagara Movement laid the foundations for the NAACP. As a community at the forefront of integration and civil rights, Rondo hosted the second Niagara Movement Conference. Other famous former Rondo residents include civil rights activist and NAACP leader Roy Wilkins, artist Gordon Parks, and former Major League Baseball player Dave Winfield.

About the artists

Melvin R. Smith (b. 1941) and **Rose J. Smith** (b. 1943) currently live and work together in Eagan, Minnesota. As a couple, the Smiths have cultivated their artistic careers side-by-side, working in dramatically different styles and mediums. In 2019, the Smiths were the subject of *Rose and Melvin Smith: Remembering Rondo*, a survey exhibition at the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN consisting of over ninety works from their Rondo project. In 2000, they founded the Oklahoma Museum of African American Art in Oklahoma City.

Melvin Smith was born in 1941 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. His work has been exhibited at United Theological Seminary, St. Paul, MN; Gaylord-Pickens Museum, Oklahoma City, OK; Eleanor Kirkpatrick Gallery, Oklahoma City, OK; Oklahoma Museum of African American Art, Oklahoma City, OK; State Capitol, Oklahoma City, OK; Omniplex, Oklahoma City, OK; and Peg Alston Fine Arts Gallery, New York, NY. His work is included in the permanent collections of Chicago State University, Chicago, IL; Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO; Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK; Eagan Art House, Eagan, MN; Minnesota State Art Collection, St. Paul, MN; Oklahoma State Art Collection, Oklahoma City, OK; Oklahoma City Museum of Art, Oklahoma City, OK; St. Paul Insurance Companies of St. Paul, St. Paul, MN and Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN. In 2019, Smith was awarded the McKnight Visual Artist Fellowship and the Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative Grant. In 2000, PBS made the documentary *The Long Way Home*, chronicling Smith's life as an artist.

Rose Smith was born in 1943 Kansas City, Missouri. In 1951, she moved with her family to the former Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her work has been exhibited at United Theological Seminary, St. Paul, MN; Gaylord-Pickens Museum, Oklahoma City, OK; Eleanor Kirkpatrick Gallery, Oklahoma City, OK; Omniplex, Oklahoma City, OK; Bill Hodges Gallery, New York, NY; and Markel/Sears galleries, New York, NY. Her work is included in the permanent collections of Chicago State University, Chicago, IL; Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO; Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK; Minnesota Historical Society Collection, St. Paul, MN; Oklahoma State Art Collection, Oklahoma City, OK; Oklahoma City Museum of Art, Oklahoma City, OK; St. Paul Insurance Companies of St. Paul, St. Paul, MN; University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN; Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN. In 2019, Smith was awarded the Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative Grant.

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Caption and courtesy information (left to right):

Melvin Smith
Rondo in Pale Moonlight
2013
Paper collage and paint on wood
42.25 x 42.5 inches
©Melvin Smith. Courtesy of the artist
and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

Rose Smith
Journey to Minnesota
2008
Oil on canvas
48 x 96 inches
©Rose Smith. Courtesy of the artist
and Fort Gansevoort, New York.