

FORT GANSEVOORT



Celebrating Storytellers Melvin and Rose Smith

By Dr. Cindi Beth Johnson – September 3, 2019



I met Melvin Smith in the late 90's while attending a multi-week workshop. As we talked, Melvin described the work that he and his wife Rose were creating and their desire to share it with the broader community. I had recently taken on the role of director of United's religion and the arts program and I was eager to know more.

Melvin invited me to see their work in person. We drove to the corporate headquarters of Northwest Airlines. There, in an otherwise antiseptic corporate office, I saw worlds and places that stretched far beyond the walls. The images were powerful and invitational, they demanded my attention. I knew that I was standing on holy ground.

Melvin and Rose met on a blind date when they were students at the University of Minnesota. Rose was an art major and Melvin was studying journalism. Melvin said that he fell in love with Rose's art first, but soon after he fell for Rose.

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Prolific artists, they create from the depth of their own creativity and breadth of experiences. Their works are often deeply personal depictions of people they have known, family members, acquaintances, communities, neighbors and places they have visited. They are master storytellers.

Their most recent body of work, Rose and Melvin Smith: Remembering Rondo, is on exhibit at The Weisman Art Museum. The Smiths are proud Minnesota artists who lived in Rondo for many years. The documentation of this neighborhood is a story not only of Rondo but also the national experience of the African American story and the broader history of civil rights.

United has had the privilege of hosting several exhibitions by the Smiths. The first, *In Search of Validation: Harlem Revisited*, in 1997. The Smiths traveled to Harlem knowing that it was a touchstone for many African-American artists. Traveling on foot, in taxis and on buses, they explored the ways in which their story was connected and nurtured by the home of artists like Romare Bearden and William H Johnson..

Messengers of Jazz

WORKS BY AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS
Rose J. Smith and Melvin R. Smith



**Collage
Sculpture
Paintings**

February 27-May 28

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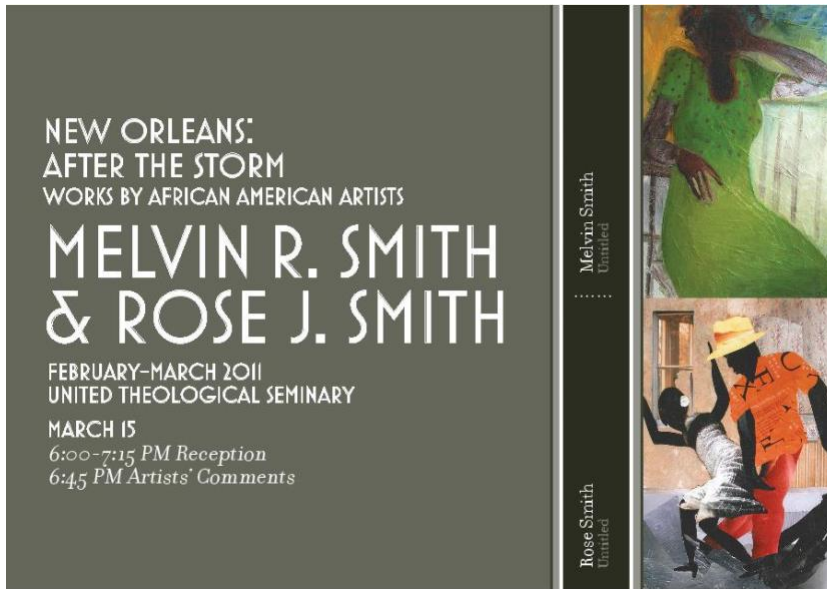
Opening Reception
March 3, 2006
5:30-8:30 PM
Music and Refreshments
Artists Talk 7:00 PM

For directions and
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While Melvin and Rose often share subject matter they have distinct styles. Melvin's next exhibit at United, *Messengers of Jazz*, featured three-dimensional works including masks, sculpture and houses. *The Uncertainty of Tomorrow* featured Rose's two-dimensional figures and silhouettes that were strong and evocative and filled with a deep sense of longing.

New Orleans After the Storm, mounted at United in 2011, conveyed the complexity and beauty of this well known but often troubled city. Viewers were invited to see distinct but related interpretations through the eyes of two exceptional artists. Rose's work portrayed the people of New Orleans from a close range, showing not only their faces but also the emotional landscapes that lie beneath the surface. Melvin's work offered urban settings that included street scenes dominated by architecture, natural elements, and gatherings.

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The show began with the scenes that a tourist might see but quickly shifted, documenting not only the glamour but also the experiences of suffering and tragedy. Much like a New Orleans funeral, the show ended with a sense of hope. The final section included an extended section of works dedicated to the jitterbug. The Smiths offered us the complexity of this city but also invited us to see it through a liturgical arc, ending with hope.

For more than three decades Rose and Melvin have been blending their lives as partners and as artists, telling stories that we dare not miss. Revealing those stories in color, shapes, textures and dimensions. Their works challenge and educate the viewer. *Remembering Rondo* is one more opportunity to see an extraordinary coming together of history, social observation, artistic commentary, and beauty.



For more details about "Remembering Rondo:"

<https://www.kare11.com/article/news/local/breaking-the-news/rose-and-melvin-smith-remembering-rondo/89-33fef216-f1b7-4e60-8e0a-7dff130011c4>