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Remembering Rondo: Rose and Melvin Smith Reflect on a 50 Year Artistic Romance

The artists Rose and Melvin Smith have been married and creating together for over half a century. A new exhibit at the Weisman Art Museum honors their legacy by going back to where their story began.

Peter Diamond – June 28, 2019



Photograph by Bergen Flom

At the beginning of the 1900s, the Rondo neighborhood was the center of black life in St. Paul.

Named for the settler John Rondeau, people played pick-up games of basketball, jumped rope at parks, sang and played music at bars, just like any other neighborhood. History-making black baseball pioneers Toni Stone and Roy Campanella came from Rondo. Newspapers by and for black people,

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like *Appeal*, originated here. It's where the civil rights activist Roy Wilkins grew up, and where the NAACP's St. Paul chapter was located.

To hear the couple Melvin and Rose Smith tell it, everybody in Rondo, no matter the color of their skin, got along. The artists say that Rondo stood out as one of the country's only stories of integration without violence, that is, until it was demolished between 1958 and 1968 for the construction of I-94.

A new exhibit at the Weisman Art Museum, *Rose and Melvin Smith: Remembering Rondo*, captures the soul of the neighborhood's once vibrant black community through dozens of the Smiths' paintings, collages, and sculptures. After getting married, the Smiths moved out of Rondo the same year the highway was completed, along with over 500 families who were displaced.

"The houses were in shambles, but inside there were warm, friendly, real intelligent people," Melvin says. "But you would never believe it looking from the outside."

Historically, it's not the only minority neighborhood in the history of the Twin Cities to have been bulldozed for a highway. It's what James Baldwin called "Negro Removal," the deliberate act of city planners to route developments through African-American communities in order to push people out.

The exhibit is a poignant reminder that what Rondo represented, and the lessons to learn from it, don't have to live in the past. Through the Smiths' re-imagining of what Rondo was, they envision a future that can still someday be.

"We want this exhibition to express to America that this is the first place where peaceful integration happened, at Rondo," Melvin says. "Roy Wilkins talks about it in his book, *Standing Fast*, that he lived this way all his life. He was the only person that was one of the Civil Rights leaders that had lived in an integrated society."

"I suppose the faith I have in integration comes from the days I spent in a schoolboy's cap and knickers chasing around the quiet tree-shaded lanes that stretched off and away from our little cottage," Roy Wilkins writes in his autobiography about growing up in Rondo. "The men who owned the tidy frame houses in my neighborhood were white: Swedes and Norwegians, Poles, Germans, and Irish."

"Perhaps I'm a sentimentalist, but no one can tell me that it is impossible for white people and black people to live next door to one another," Wilkins continues. "For me integration is not an abstraction constructed on dusty eighteen-century notions of democracy, I believe in it not only because it is right but because I have lived it all my life."

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Rose Smith, *Journey to Minnesota*, 2006, oil on canvas. Courtesy of Weisman Art Museum

I met with Melvin and Rose at the Weisman to get a history lesson on the people and places that inspired the artwork. As we move through the exhibit, they wander around the space and come back and forth to me, taking turns answering my questions and picking up where the other left off, finishing each other's sentences.

Melvin is a sculptor and a collagist, using found objects to bring his collages to life. Rose's paintings, or her *drawings* as she prefers to call them, are made with watercolor, oils, and acrylics.

The two embody the adage that opposites attract. They have a sort of yin-yang relationship that balances out their personalities: Rose is reserved and quiet about her work, letting her art speak for itself, while Melvin can talk a mile a minute, running off in different tangents while explaining the stories behind each piece that makes-up his collages. Both of their work is inspired by jazz, his in a cacophony of textures and styles that mimic the controlled chaos of a Miles Davis arrangement, hers dripping with the mood and class of a Billie Holiday song—medicine for her soul.

"In essence, my art is a confession made to clarify what I have witnessed in life," Rose elegantly states about her work. "To me, art seems to cleanse the dust from the soul of everyday life."

"She touches you in places that most people have forgotten," Melvin says. "She can get into your innermost feelings. I noticed that about her work."

Of the several works depicting community in the gallery, Melvin ushers me toward one of his collages of a group of kids gathered at a tennis court. Melvin has been coaching the sport for 40 years, beginning in Rondo, and he tells me he uses the bayonet training skills he acquired in the Marine Corps to teach his students proper footwork. At one point he even taught an elementary-school-aged Melvin Carter, the future mayor of St. Paul.

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"At this show, 90 percent of the people coming in are going to be tennis people," Melvin jokes. "These people have kids now!"

Rondo is sandwiched between University and Selby from the north and south, and Rice Street and Lexington east to west. Who's to say, if I-94 ended up circumventing Rondo instead of cutting through it, that some other initiative would have demolished the neighborhood down the line? At once, Rondo is a reminder of what peaceful coexistence can look like, and what a city stands to lose when its people get pushed out.

"They lived next to Summit, the aristocracy of Minnesota really," Melvin tells me, gesturing toward one of Rose's oil paintings in the gallery of working African-American women that's one of his favorites. "They went into the homes and they brought that culture by working in the houses, and brought it home. That's why education was a big thing in the community—because of living next door to the aristocracy and working in their homes."

Rose spent most of her childhood growing up in Rondo, arriving from Missouri with her mother on train, moving into their house with five brothers and four sisters so her father could find work. Melvin is an Oklahoma native, and the pair eventually returned to his roots to open the Oklahoma Museum of African-American Art in 1997. Melvin ran a solo show at the Peg Alston Fine Arts Gallery in New York City in 1996, and was featured in a PBS documentary, *The Long Way Home*, in 2000.

"When I arrived, the first thing I saw was these houses," Melvin said. "They were real close together—huge, three-stories. I arrived late, 8:30-9 p.m. in the latter part of October. I looked up, and I could see the moon, and so I did the piece *Rondo in Pale Moonlight*."

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Melvin Smith, "Rondo in Pale Moonlight," 2013, collage painting.

In 1968, Melvin met Rose on the campus of the University of Minnesota.

"She didn't see me, but I saw her," he recalls. "And I said to myself, 'What's a black woman doing in the studio art department?' That just blew me away." At the time, Melvin was enrolled as a journalism student, and Rose was just taking art classes to further her skills. "When she met me, I destroyed her education," Melvin jokes.

Before he fell in love with her, Melvin fell in love with Rose's artwork. He had won an art award while he was in high school, which gave him confidence in his work, but he came to the university and worked at the Minnesota Daily to follow in Roy Wilkins's footsteps.

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Courtesy of the artists

Three months after he saw her paintings they ended up on a blind date, and were married almost immediately afterward. After that, they embarked on the journey of a lost tribe, inspired by the work of Jacob Lawrence and his Migration Series. They were drawn artistically to Harlem and the south side of Chicago, epicenters of major African-American art movements in the 70s, seeking validation from their peers.

"We've kind of been inseparable to tell you the truth," Melvin says. "I think we lost our kids."

When I arrived at their house in Eagan, on an unassuming suburban street near a Walmart, I knew I was at the right place from a tall, abstract red sculpture and a giant African mask propped up next to the entryway. The house was built by Melvin himself, the second on its street, and has a patio unlike all the rest that overlooks a mini sculpture garden in their backyard. I can hear the sounds of cockatiels perched

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somewhere in their living room, but the house is so overflowing with sculptures and artwork that I can't actually see the birds.

I ask the two if they've ever collaborated on a single piece together. "Oh God no, I can't go in her space," Melvin teases. They keep two separate studios on opposite ends of their basement, but Melvin will still let Rose into his workshop.

The exhibit captures the zeitgeist in how it portrays slices of daily life, depicting the ordinary, lived-in experiences of black people that historically have been underrepresented in the art world. Right after the opening of the exhibit, Melvin was awarded a McKnight Fellowship, a \$25,000 grant that he can use to further his practice in whatever way he pleases.

"Being an African-American, we really don't have positive family histories because of slavery," Melvin said. "Anything that can make us feel good about ourselves as a people? It's good for the family."

"You're not really used to seeing a black person sit back and relax," Rose adds.

This is what 50 years of an artistic marriage looks like: Completing each other's sentences. Revealing the depths of each other's stories. Pushing each other to create their finest pieces yet by distilling love, nostalgia, and truth into works of art that not only tell a story, but preserve history.

It also leaves you with 50 years worth of work to get to that point. The next great treasure trove of art might just be sitting in a basement in Eagan, waiting to be discovered. And the Rondo community lives on.

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This is just one room.