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Rose and Melvin Smith: Remembering Rondo

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By Adrienne Broaddus – July 19, 2019

EAGAN, Minn. — Big crowds turn out in Saint Paul for the annual "Rondo Days."

Rondo was once the heartbeat of the African-American community in Saint Paul.

It was torn apart in the late 1950's by the construction of I-94. About 600 homes, 300 businesses were leveled.

This weekend marks the annual Rondo Days celebration, which honors the rich history.

But, Rose and Melvin Smith will not focus on the tragic end of Rondo. Instead, the married couple will celebrate the stories and the people who lived in the community.

They created the exhibition, *Rose and Melvin Smith: Remembering Rondo*, at the University of Minnesota's Weisman Art Museum is personal. It runs until September 8. Rose created the portraits and paintings. Melvin is behind the 3-D sculptures and buildings at the exhibit. Together, Rose said they tried to capture the Rondo they remember.

Rose Smith was seven when her family moved to Rondo in 1950. "We want you to see Rondo. When you go there you will experience Rondo. That is the early rondo. The one Roy Wilkins came out of," Melvin Smith said.

"Artists are poets that are sworn to tell the truth. Each exhibition to us is a song for our soul. It is song composed in contemplation and expressed in silence."

The Smiths said they have shown their work nationally for the past thirty-five years. It focuses on Minnesota and its hidden role in the civil rights movement. But, this exhibition at the University of Minnesota's Weisman Art Museum is personal.

"We've had art shows in New York. Chicago. But yet nobody in Minnesota knew who we were," they said from their Eagan home.

The exhibition shows booming black businesses and houses where people lived.

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“Melvin lived in a couple of those houses he built. We tried to capture what it looked like when we were there,” Rose Smith said.

Rose creates art with oil and her husband produces sculptures and collages. The perfect pair.

Melvin Smith adding, “Yea, yea. The sweet sound of the music of the brush!”

The two, married for more than five decades, said they met on a blind date.

“When I met her, I asked her what she liked to do. She said ‘I like to do art. I said, ‘show me some of your art,’ she broke out her artwork and I went to thinking, ‘Oh my God a black woman that does art. I’ve never heard of such a thing. Never. We got married three months later.”

They have been married five decades, which started the beginning of everything.

The Rondo exhibition is a reflection of what they have seen and their love for the community.