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 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

ArtSeen

Melvin Smith & Rose Smith: *Recollections of Rondo*

By Annabel Keenan – December 14, 2023



Melvin Smith, *Jitterbug #10*, 2009. Paper collage on matboard, 14 x 11 inches. © Melvin Smith. Courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

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It's a story heard all too often: the government declares eminent domain and razes minority communities in the name of urban renewal. With this, families are displaced or cut off from resources and each other as roads, parks, and railways promote growth for wealthier or more powerful stakeholders. In destroying communities, culture is also lost as buildings that brought people together for generations disappear, taking with them the activities they used to house. This loss of community and culture is at the heart of husband-and-wife duo Melvin Smith and Rose Smith's practices. Since the 1990s, the artists have made works that recreate memories of the vibrant Black community of Rondo, a neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota, that was destroyed in the 1950s and 60s to construct Interstate 94. Using photographs, archival materials, and their own experiences, the Smiths memorialize Rondo to preserve its culture for their community and for the larger story of American history. Figural paintings by Rose and architectural sculptures and mixed-media collages by Melvin comprise *Recollections of Rondo*, a new show at Fort Gansevoort that spans more than twenty years of their work.

Before Rondo was razed, it was home to many renowned figures in the Black community, including NAACP leader Roy Wilkins, artist Gordon Parks, and baseball player Dave Winfield. "Rondo was one of the most important places for the Civil Rights movements," Melvin explained at the opening of the exhibition. "Rondo hosted the second ever Niagara Movement Conference, laying the groundwork for the NAACP. The community was economically diverse and had vibrant social clubs, and the schools were integrated." When the neighborhood was destroyed, hundreds of families and businesses were displaced. An aerial photo of Rondo taken in 1961 greets visitors to the exhibition. Showing the community mid-destruction with blocks of structures razed as rows of neighboring houses remain standing, the image is a powerful representation of the separation and trauma that eminent domain can bring. As residents of Rondo at the time, Rose and Melvin witnessed this firsthand.

Since the 1990s, the Smiths have devoted their practice to recreating memories of Rondo. The Smiths home in on the details of the everyday lived experiences of Rondo. In Rose's large-scale oil paintings, she depicts people, some she knew personally, in particular her family, and others representing groups more broadly to capture the various personalities of the community. In her painting *Cameo Club* (2022), she portrays well-dressed women at one of Rondo's historic social clubs, their dress and polite demeanor reflecting the venue's status as a place of decorum.

For Rondo and other Black communities, social clubs were important spaces to host gatherings and cultural events during segregation. Another was the Black church. The exhibition contains Melvin's architectural sculpture entitled *African American Whitehouse* (1999), a representation of "all Black churches," he explained, rather than a specific church. Giving his memory of the Black church a physical form, Melvin rebuilds the lost communities and experiences this significant space would have held. Importantly, his buildings are all empty, a nod to the displacement of people and deterioration of social networks. Blending architectural archetypes is common in Melvin's practice, leaving his work open to broader interpretations and connections. This also parallels the process of forming a memory in which different images and events intermingle.

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Rose Smith, *Arundel Hill*, 2018. Oil and paper collage on canvas, 39.5 x 48 inches. © Rose Smith. Courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

This blending of memories is apparent throughout the show. While the Smiths do often use photographs, historic records, and archival materials to ground their imagery, they both imbue their own recollections in their subjects. In *Journey to Minnesota* (2008), Rose painted her memory of arriving in the state in 1951 after her family relocated from Missouri. Though her siblings were part of the trip, Rose chose not to depict them to highlight her memory of the intensity of the situation and feeling of isolation. Melvin also takes artistic liberties in his work, seen best in *Rondo in Pale Moonlight* (2013), a collage painting he created by combining black-and-white photocopies of images of Rondo houses. Piled on top of one another, the work represents how Melvin remembered the bustling community when he first arrived in 1963.

While he typically keeps his references broad, Melvin does at times depict specific places. In *Tiger Jack* (2018), for example, he honors the business that was the last in Rondo to close. Located just outside of the interstate's footprint, Tiger Jack's general store finally closed in 2002 and became an emblem of the fight remaining residents and businesses endured to keep their community connected after the construction of the highway.

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Rose Smith, *Jerrie and Mark*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches. © Rose Smith. Courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

This sense of loss is also evoked in *Jerrie and Mark* (2013), a painting of Rose's younger sister and brother shown as children growing up in Rondo. While the pair are rendered in vibrant colors and crisp details, the background of the work is predominantly yellow with indistinct features and a row of ghostly houses that fade into the horizon. Rose's siblings look out into the distance, as if gazing to the future and the imminent destruction of their community. In another personal work, *Arundel Hill* (2018), Rose painted an intersection of Rondo looking up a hill where she used to live. The image is based on a photograph the artist saw in the Minnesota Historical Society, but she has added legible signage to identify the streets and businesses she used to visit, taking care to preserve their names.

Rose's addition of clear signage underscores the artists' goal of remembering Rondo as a vibrant community where residents built personal and emotional connections to its people and places. They imbue memories into their work, preserving the human experience lost through the destruction of Rondo. *Recollections of Rondo* is a reminder of both the physical and invisible toll that eminent domain can have on entire communities.