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AT 92, PITTSBURGH'S THADDEUS MOSLEY HAS WORK IN THE CARNEGIE INTERNATIONAL

by Bill O'Driscoll



Thaddeus Mosley in his *North Side* studio. Photo: Bill O'Driscoll

The 2018 Carnegie International, which opens Saturday, at the Carnegie Museum of Art, will spotlight work by dozens of artists and artist teams from around the world. But only one of those artists, it's safe to say, traces his relationship with the museum back to 1968.

Thaddeus Mosley was in his early 40s at the time, just a decade into his career as a sculptor, when he got his first solo show at the Carnegie. Half a century later, Mosley is one of Pittsburgh's best-loved artists, known for his large-scale wood carvings whose sensual, cantilevered shapes seem to defy gravity. And at 92, he's still going strong, driving daily from his home on the North Side to a nearby industrial park where he rents a basement studio.

Standing amidst benches and shelves with his array of mallets, gouges, chisels, and cans of finishes, Mosley quips, "To me, a day is a day. They just have different names for them."

Mosley, compact and barrel-chested, is a familiar presence at local arts events, where he'll hold court with a relaxed cheerfulness. In an era when many contemporary sculptors assemble their works from fabricated materials – consumer products, junkyard finds or even 3-D printed forms – he's something of a throwback, still working by hand, mostly with hardwoods like cherry and walnut sourced from a lumber mill near Uniontown.

He also still embraces the physical labor of his craft, personally lifting hunks of hardwood up to 125 pounds into his homemade "carving cradle" and shaping them with hand tools, like a rubber mallet and metal wood gouge. (For bigger pieces of wood he uses a wheeled floor crane, and he sometimes expedites his rough carves with a small chainsaw.)

Mosley's work has been exhibited all over Pittsburgh; in 2009, for instance, a virtual forest of his sculptures took over a floor of the Mattress Factory museum, alongside a recreation of his studio. He's been exhibited across the country, too, including a recent group show for work by African-American artists at Featherstone Center for the Arts, in Martha's Vineyard, Mass.

Sandra Grymes, who curated that show, says Mosley's sculptures are singular.

"You could put his work with a group of other people who are sculptors, who work in wood, and you would know instantly which were his as opposed to the others," Grymes says.

Mosley was born in Newcastle, Pa., in 1926. During World War II he served in the military, then studied journalism at the University of Pittsburgh and reported on sports for the Pittsburgh Courier newspaper. He later began a long career at the U.S. Postal Service (from which he retired in 1992).

He started sculpting in the 1950s – at first by hand-carving two-by-fours to copy decorative sculptures of animals he saw on coffee tables at the old Kaufmann's department store Downtown. "I could do that," he remembers thinking. Eventually he moved into more abstract forms, with influences including African tribal art (he cites tribes including the Dogon people, who live in what's now Mali) and the pioneering Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi.

"My main idea of course is the idea of weight in space, and that idea is that the piece, the sculpture should look like is levitating, it should look like there is movement," Mosley says.

"Some of his work looks as if it's going to fall, or it's teetering on the verge of falling, but yet it is deeply rooted and weighted, and it's not going to," says Kilolo Luckett. The local writer and curator has known Mosley since the '90s and considers him a mentor. She sees his sculptures as a form of storytelling.

"I do think that tension, [and] there's that science and math behind it as well, and so that creates its own complex, beautiful storytelling through the shaping of material through wood, that Thad is so brilliantly a master at," says Luckett.

"There's a compositional element to it that seems just right," says Sam Berkovitz, co-director of Concept Art Gallery, in Edgewood, who owns several Mosley sculptures. "Thad seems to be able to model the different elements of the sculpture in a way that there's a poetry to it, and that's a very difficult thing to do."

Along with their scale, another thing that distinguishes Mosley's sculptures are the chisel marks he leaves in the wood, like thumbprints.

"The chisel marks mean a lot of different things," Mosley says. "So they're for contrast. They're there also for eye direction and of course there also for making the piece look unified. You'll see where some of that pieces where the marks sort of all come to one particular point. Then you'll see some also different sizes of gouge marks, different rhythms, and so [it should] hopefully direct your eye to the spots that I would like."

Mosley is a noted jazz aficionado: Pictures of Miles Davis and Sarah Vaughn are among the exhibit posters and other images that paper the cinder-block walls of his studio. But he says the only real overlap between the music and his own artwork is that both have some element of improvisation.

Mosley does, however, riff on how he remains inspired by the work ethic of one jazz great.

"What I remember most about John Coltrane, and I must have heard him about 20 times or more, is whenever the band was taking a break, he didn't take a break," Mosley says. "He'd go to the side and keep playing and playing, I guess thinking about things he played, coulda done it this way, coulda done it that way."

“For me it’s pretty much a life,” he adds. “I enjoy looking at the sculptures ... It’s just for me what makes life interesting – at least mine, anyhow!”

The Carnegie International dates to 1896, and in recent decades the museum has put on one every three or four years. While recent Internationals have rarely featured Pittsburgh-based artists, for the 57th edition, curator Ingrid Schaffner has included a few, Mosley among them.

Mosley’s work, in fact, will be among the most prominently displayed: It’ll be the first thing visitors entering the museum’s lobby will see, with 13 Mosley sculptures indoors and, just outside the lobby’s two-story plate-glass wall, seven more in the sculpture garden.

His role in the international, in fact, extends beyond the museum. At Pittsburgh International Airport, Mosley’s will be the voice on the PA informing travelers about the Carnegie International. Two of his works will be at the airport to promote the exhibit as well.

But Mosley is philosophical about that exposure, too.

“I sometimes I feel badly that people are more interested in people as personalities because they have a reputation rather than what they do,” he says. “‘Oh, he’s a celebrity.’ That doesn’t mean anything. What is important is the work. If they get enthusiastic about the work, then I’m far more satisfied.”