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CARNEGIE INTERNATIONAL VISITORS SOMETIMES GET TO CHAT WITH SCULPTOR THADDEUS MOSLEY

by Kevin Kirkland



Some of the 20 sculptures by Thaddeus Mosley in the 57th Carnegie International at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Oakland.

Visitors to the 57th Carnegie International sometimes wonder about the artworks on display at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Oakland. They wish they could ask questions of the 32 contributing artists and art collectives from around the world.

With Thaddeus Mosley, they sometimes get their wish.

Since the show opened in October, the North Side sculptor has stopped by a half-dozen times to meet friends and family. That gives passers-by a chance to ask questions, offer feedback and thank him for his monumental works made from carved logs.

“How do you balance it?” a Deer Lakes High School art student asked the artist on a recent afternoon.

“You need to find the center of gravity,” Mr. Mosley said. “If you do it enough times, you learn. If it falls on your foot, you learn. Pain is a great teacher.”

The dozen students and their teacher laughed. So did the artist’s guest, the reason he was there.

A week earlier, Maxine Gordon had been walking up Sampsonia Way on the North Side toward Alphabet City to give a talk about “Sophisticated Giant,” her new biography of her late husband, legendary jazz saxophonist Dexter Gordon. She suddenly noticed “Spiritual Wings,” a wood sculpture that stretched across the facade of a house owned by City of Asylum.

“I saw the piece on the house and said, ‘Oh my God! Who did that?’ ”

Ms. Gordon, a jazz scholar, got her answer hours later when Mr. Mosley came to hear her speak. He often listens to jazz while working in his Manchester studio.

“She’s the widow of one of the greatest jazz musicians who ever lived,” Mr. Mosley said as he introduced Ms. Gordon to the high school students.

The 92-year-old artist recalled Mr. Gordon performing at the Syria Mosque as part of Jazz at the Philharmonic in the 1940s, when Mr. Mosley was a student at the University of Pittsburgh. After graduating in 1950, he worked several years for the Pittsburgh Courier newspaper, then found a more stable job at the North Side post office. He began to create art on the side.

In 1959, Mr. Mosley entered his first juried show, at the Three Rivers Arts Festival. He drew attention with “Returning Hero,” a wooden figure of a man with what looked like a bullet hole in his head. The hole was a knot that the artist left intact, a comment on the Korean War.

In 1966, then-Carnegie Museum of Art director Leon Arkus offered him a one-man show at the museum. In a June 1968 Pittsburgh Press article, Mr. Mosley described his sculpture as a type of self discovery “in the sense that I am a black person. I am trying to discover who I am through my art.”

The show’s success led to more accolades. In 1979, he was named Artist of the Year by the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts while still working full time at the post office.

Mr. Mosley retired in 1992 and had another solo show at the Carnegie in 1997. He was also the subject of a 1997 book and a 2012 documentary. His sculptures are in the permanent collections of the Carnegie, the Mattress Factory on the North Side and many other museums.

Carnegie International curator Ingrid Schaffner said the artist’s long connection to the museum was one reason she chose him for the 2018-19 exhibition, which closes March 25. Mr. Mosley has been attending internationals since he was a young man and has pinned to his studio walls photos of work by past contributing artists Isamu Noguchi, Mark Bradford, Kara Walker and David Hammons. But that’s not the main reason that 20 Mosley sculptures are installed inside and outside a bright gallery at the show’s entrance.

“It’s the work itself, which one need only look at to see its importance and beauty,” Ms. Schaffner said in an email. “Thaddeus’ studio is in a dark, industrial space. To see these beautiful works bathed in natural light was a tremendous opportunity.”

While admiring Mr. Mosley’s work, Ms. Gordon was excited to see the name of one 2015 sculpture: “Opposing Parallels — Blues Up and Down for G. Ammons and S. Stitt.” Gene Ammons and Sonny Stitt were two of her husband’s favorite tenor sax players.

“Most people don’t know them,” Mr. Mosley said.

“But we know,” Ms. Gordon replied, smiling.