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MATTRESS FACTORY DISPLAYS THE FLUID SHAPES OF SCULPTOR THADDEUS MOSLEY

by Mary Thomas



Thaddeus Mosley stands among some of the big sculptures from his studio/home that are on display at the Mattress Factory.

Several years ago, upscale fashion designer Bill Blass dropped by the Carnegie Museum of Art while on a business trip to Pittsburgh. Looking at the collection, he said “Georgia Gate” by Thaddeus Mosley was “the finest thing in your museum,” then-museum director Leon Arkus told Mosley later on the phone.

“You should have told Mr. Blass I have one of his jackets,” the North Side artist recalled with a characteristic warm smile and laid-back humor.

Mosley, who enters his 83rd year in July, is accustomed to accolades, accepting them graciously, almost bemusedly.

The most recent is a two-floor solo exhibition, “Thaddeus Mosley: Sculpture (Studio/Home),” that opens Friday night at the Mattress Factory.

A New Castle native, Mosley entered the Navy after high school and served in the South Pacific during World War II.

“It was segregated. We called it the Black Navy. This is the way America was then,” he says.

After graduating from the University of Pittsburgh, where he majored in English and

journalism, Mosley supported his family by working for the U.S. Postal Service. But the muse visited him during his free time.

A jazz aficionado, Mosley was reading Marshall Stearn's book, "The Story of Jazz," in the early 1950s when he came across a photograph of grave markers in a Georgia cemetery where slaves had been buried.

"The moment I saw that picture I thought of [celebrated Romanian sculptor Constantin] Brancusi's 'Bird in Space' sculptures," Mosley said during an interview for "Thaddeus Mosley: African-American Sculptor," a 1997 book about his work written by David Lewis and co-published by the Carnegie and University of Pittsburgh Press.

"Straight away I thought how the slaves who made those staves and Brancusi had never known each other existed, had never seen what each other did. Yet in each of them I saw a similar spirit, a similar approach to clean, fluid shapes coming from people working close to the earth and trying to fuse the earth and human spirituality into a single form."

Those forms "heavily influenced" the Carnegie sculpture, and four other "Gate" works, two of which are in the show.

They don't all look alike, Mosley says. The connection is "a feeling, rhythm and textures, that sort of thing. Repetition. Concentric effects. Mostly it's a weight and space concept. You should get a sense of levitation, a feeling of movement as you walk around them, because of their weight and space."

As he talks, Mosley moves through a forest of sculpture, some of it nearly twice his height, each piece unique. He typically creates abstract wood sculpture (but employs other materials), given texture by varying patterns gouged into the surfaces.

But a sinewy elongated form of a woman twines among vines gathered along the nearby Allegheny River in one sculpture, and a suggested truncated figure rises from a component inspired by a Dogon stepladder in another.

Three are anti-war pieces made in response to Iraq, including the thorny "Weapons for Mass Protection," and bone-accentuated "Tooth for Tooth" that was exhibited by the CUE Art Foundation in Chelsea, New York City, in 2004.

Of the approximately 80 sculptures displayed, about 30 have never been exhibited and 40 have not been shown in Pittsburgh. Most were made between the late 1990s and last month, and "represent 70 percent of what I've done in the last 10 years," Mosley says.

Museum co-directors Barbara Luderowski and Michael Olijnyk were inspired to do the exhibition by a visit to Mosley's art- and memento-filled Mexican War Streets

home, a few blocks away.

“In a city like Pittsburgh that is steeped with tradition, oral histories become a unique view into the past. Stories told over generations are met with curiosity about places and people forever changed by time. With this exhibition, we’re showcasing Thad’s sculpture, of course,” Olijnyk says, “but also Pittsburgh’s rich history told through his incredible voice.”

Part of Mosley’s colorfully appointed studio has been reconstructed at the museum, and a GigaPan of his home that visitors may navigate is being projected in one gallery near a video of an interview with the artist conducted by Sam Black, African-American collection curator for the Sen. John Heinz History Center.

On one wall, a collage of invitations forms a visual history of local exhibitions, and Mosley notes, “When you start looking at this, you realize how many fine artists there are in the area.”

Mosley had his own solo exhibition at the Carnegie in 1997. He has met most of the local and international visual artists represented in the collage, but he also knows the jazz and literary communities (some of his pieces are named for musicians or poets). He met notable photojournalist Charles “Teenie” Harris when writing a weekly sports column for the Pittsburgh Courier (Mosley coached the basketball team in the Navy and was an amateur boxer).

When his sculpture was included in a show at the Governor’s Residence in Harrisburg, Gov. Ed Rendell asked Mosley why he thought such exhibitions were important.

“If the political leaders don’t show that art is important,” he replied, “the American people won’t know that art is important.”

Mosley says he’d like to see President Barack Obama create a minister of culture position.

“We think we’re extremely sophisticated. Zaire, which some call Third World, has a minister of culture. They have an appreciation for the arts and in that respect are more sophisticated than we are.”