

TRIB LIVE

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HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS FOR SCULPTOR MOSLEY

by Kurt Shaw

Pittsburgh sculptor Thaddeus Mosley lives just down the street from the Mattress Factory in the North Side's Mexican War Streets neighborhood, so it's no wonder he is something of a fixture at most opening receptions at the museum of installation art.

But earlier this month, he was more than just in attendance at another of the Mattress Factory's art openings. He was the guest of honor. That's because the museum opened the largest exhibit of Mosley's work since 1997, when the sculptor exhibited several large pieces in a solo show at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

In fact, with more than 80 works brought from Mosley's home and studio on display, this is the largest showing of his works in one place, ever.

So much so, the exhibit, titled "Thaddeus Mosley: Sculpture (Studio/Home)," takes up two floors. The museum's third floor is filled with mementos from Mosley's home, a documentary film about the artist and a large, interactive gigapan display of the third floor of his row house. The fourth floor is filled with nearly 80 large scale works in wood, metal and other found objects. All together, the exhibit highlights both the professional and private life of this legendary Pittsburgh sculptor, who this summer will turn 83.

A native of New Castle, Mosley has spent his adult life in Pittsburgh. After an enlistment in the Navy, he attended the University of Pittsburgh, where he graduated with majors in English and journalism. To support his family, he took a job with the postal service, a position he retained until his retirement in 1992.

During the 1950s, Mosley also worked as a journalist for the Pittsburgh Courier and various national magazines. This is the period during which his interest in carving and sculpture began.

Throughout the years, scores of solo and group shows followed, as did awards. In 1978, he won the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts' Artist of the Year award. Other awards include the Governor's Award for Pennsylvania Artist of the Year in 1999, the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts' Cultural Award in 2000 and the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts' Guild Council Service to the Arts Award in 2002.

Mosley's widely respected as an instructor, having given countless workshops on woodcarving at colleges and art centers locally and regionally. Most notable has been the Touchstone Center for Crafts in Farmington, Fayette County, where he has taught wood sculpture every summer for more than 20 years.

As visitors familiar with Mosley's career will see, his work has changed a bit since he showed at the Carnegie. The most notable change is the inclusion of found objects, some of which he has kept with him for more than 20 years, only to be used in recent works.

A tall piece, “Propelled Simulation,” contains a large, mangled piece of steel discarded from a rail yard he found when he lived on the South Side. Likewise, both “Weapons Massed” and “Percussion Patterns 2” feature metal cast-offs — a chunk of a radiator-type device in the former and a large steel disc in the latter — he found several years ago at the Warhola scrap yard. And “Tooth for Tooth” has pieces of animal jaw and other bones collected by a University of Pittsburgh psychology professor Mosley knew.

Most of Mosley’s works exist as pure abstractions. But “Tooth for Tooth,” he says, has to do with “the idea that, with all of the religious philosophy that we have about humanity, it’s still about tooth for tooth.”

Then there are signature pieces that are made entirely of carved wood, such as “Following Space,” a graceful arabesque that tops 11 feet high, and “Woman in the Vines,” which has a small maple log at the base from which vines wind up around a female figure carved in walnut.

“I don’t do a lot of figures even though I started out doing figures,” Mosley says regarding the 9-foot-tall piece that incorporates vines he and longtime friend and fellow woodworker Tadao Arimoto found near Mosley’s studio on the banks of the Ohio.

Mosley says this piece is one of about 30 included in this show that have never been on public display before. All told, Mosley says of the entire show, “This is 70 percent of what I did on the last 10 years.”

The home-related stuff in the third-floor display includes items such as toy cars, small experimental sculptures made of found objects and hundreds of artist show cards arranged on one wall in similar fashion to how the artist has covered every wall of the third floor of his home.

“A lot of this stuff is things that people wouldn’t see because I normally wouldn’t show it,” he says.

But, then again, that’s the point of this show, and exactly why Michael Olijnyk, co-director of the Mattress Factory, decided more than a year ago that he wanted to showcase Mosley and his work, after first seeing the interior of Mosley’s home.

“Thad’s sculpture obviously speaks for itself, but what really interested me during a site visit to his home were his personal collections and the stories he told about his life here in Pittsburgh,” Olijnyk says. “With this exhibition, we’re showcasing his sculpture, of course, but also Pittsburgh’s rich history told through Thad’s incredible voice.”