

# ARTSLANT

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### BELOVED SCULPTOR THADDEUS MOSLEY ON 91 YEARS OF CARVING HIS OWN PATH

by Jessica Lanay



Thaddeus Mosley at home. Photo: Tom Little.

Walking into Thaddeus Mosley's studio is like entering a bestiary that has exploded from its pages. From three feet tall to scraping the ceiling of the workshop, the wooden bodies of Mosley's sculptures radiate warmth and power as they cut through the air. Inspired by birds and the art of Brancusi, Mosley's daring compositions arc into splendid, gravity-defying geometries. With works weighing as much as four hundred pounds, one wonders how this 91-year-old artist is still intimately engaging the wood with his body, chiseling it by hand, some seven decades into his career.

On November 8, in an event filled with cutting-edge poetry and performance, Mosley received the Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professional Achievement Award from his alma mater, the University of Pittsburgh. I was lucky enough to interview him in his studio about how he eschewed the trappings of the commercial art world, how to define "Black Art," and what advice he has for aspirant young artists.

**Jessica Lanay:** How long have you been making art now that you are 91? What made you start?

**Thaddeus Mosley:** I have been making art since I was in my late 20s. In the early 50s Scandinavian design furniture came to the United States and at Kaufmann's Department Stores they did all sorts of things that stores don't do now: they had a whole display floor of Scandinavian furniture and they always had sculpture and paintings up. They had small teak birds and fish on wire stands. I looked at those and said, "well, I can make those." I didn't use teak wood, I just used two-by-fours. So I went to the hardware store and got some brass rods and I made my own fish and birds and stuff.

**JL:** Did you have experience with wood carving before?

**TM:** Oh, no, no, I had a lot of experience with looking at the stuff.

**JL:** Did you find that you had an affinity for drawing and painting?

**TM:** When I was a kid I did, but in schools that I went to art was not a big part of the curriculum. In grade school they had art, but in my young days young folks did athletics. I thought when I was a kid I would like to be a painter.

At the University of Pittsburgh I had a friend who painted but he went into sociology. We used to go to the Carnegie, particularly to the Internationals because in those days the directors would travel around the world for three or four years and choose [artists] individually, so we couldn't wait to see what would be in the Carnegie International—those were the type of things that spurred me. When I was young, I always thought there wasn't anything I couldn't do if I wanted to do it.

**JL:** When I came into your studio, I saw influences from Dogon art, Makunde art, sculptors like Edmonia Lewis, I saw Alberto Giacometti; I see lines similar to lines in the drawings of Modigliani—which visual artists influence you?

**TM:** My main influences are Brancusi, Noguchi, and African Art. I like David Smith's sculpture a great deal. And out of West Africa, where I think most of my influence comes from, it would mostly be the Central Congo. A lot of African Art and Noguchi's things include repetition of form or variations on form or a theme, where a shape is turned different ways or elongated or diminished. There you get to see some of my vision.

Another thing people should be aware of is the connection I have with the material. I want to show the beauty, the warmth of the wood by creating more texture, and most of the woods just have a natural finish. That is the main advantage of this material, as opposed to steel or clay. It has an organic warmth that inorganic materials don't have.

**JL:** Your work represents an incredible defiance of gravity. Some pieces seem to me as if they should be falling over, but there is this balance of air and shape. I imagine that you aren't only looking at the wood, but the space around it. Compositionally, take us through making a piece.

**TM:** I have a philosophy of weight and space and that means that everything should rise from the bottom to the top to get the feeling of levitation; I would say my talent is making things that come apart—most of these pieces can be taken apart. Sometimes you get the feeling of intimacy between shapes. I always look to see how well they hold up in space. You can almost take the same thing in music, how it punctuates the space around it—what it does in the silence you might say.

I always say there is a dance: does the piece look like it has movement even though it is standing still? I like for them to look like they are supposed to move. I try to visualize in my mind how things are going to look when they are done. Sometimes I get a piece of wood that is interesting and I see interesting shapes. Most of this is mental and not physical pre-planning. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

**JL:** A lot of emerging and mid-career artists decide to move to larger cities—New York or Los Angeles—to be closer to the commercial art industry. What inspired you to stay in Pittsburgh?

**TM:** Well, two or three things. First of all, I never liked the commercial aspect of this business. Like any business, for the people that are seeking to get in—whether you are a writer or dancer or actor—you are almost always at the will of the controllers. You do what they want you to do, when they want you to do it, and for the price they want you to do it. In the '60s, Leon Arkus asked me to have a solo show, my first solo show, at the Carnegie Museum of Art. Leon brought in Art Seidenberg and Lefevre Gallery, people from New York, to look at my work. Both of them wanted to know if I could do two shows at one time and I said that I couldn't produce that much work. And they asked if I could move to New York and I explained that I would have to get transferred from Pittsburgh. They said, "what do you mean transferred?" and I said, "I can get transferred from the Post Office here to the Post Office in New York." Then they said that I couldn't have a job—that I would have to spend all of my time working on my art. In the meantime I was married with children. If I had been a single guy I might have considered it. But I said that I couldn't do it. That aspect of churning out work helped me discover that it wasn't about the art but about something they could sell.

I was married twice, I had three kids living with me, and I had to get a house. I always believe that your first consideration if you are a parent is your children. Then I guess I got past the age that people were really interested in me. I was in a show in Philadelphia and one of the critics said that he couldn't be interested in someone's work who is past the age of forty. I was surprised that you recognized all the African influence in my artwork; very few African American institutions have been interested in my work. But I have never depended on art for a living—I was in the civil service for many years. I have a pension and can do whatever I want. When you are involved in the commercial aspect of the arts you always have the pressure to produce and sell, and I never really wanted that.

**JL:** How have you been able to sustain a whole life of art? I know there are a lot of artists who give up because they feel they can't work full-time and do their art. Or a

lot of people who find it hard to get exposure for their work and give up because they figure they are never going to be able to do anything with it. What has been your life philosophy for continuing to make art no matter what?

**TM:** At an art residency I came across a young man who asked me how he could make a living doing sculpture. I told him that there are numerous ways you can make a living at this but I think the main thing you have to decide is why you are doing this. Like someone that is writing poetry or someone who is writing novels—because everyone hopes that they are going to become another Picasso or someone like that—I never felt that way. I made sculpture for myself. I was very selfish. I wanted it in my house. I think the main thing that sustained me was that I wanted to find out what I could do and I haven't found that out yet. I tell anyone, I don't think anything is as exciting as finding that you can do something yourself. I am always eager to come to the studio and if I get an idea I start working on it.

You have to have the spirit of an amateur, loving to do something just for the doing. I knew people who started out as painters and they didn't sell anything so they quit. They would be better off selling cars than painting if that was it. A lot of times there is a lack of mutual support that makes people stop or question themselves. When you are first starting out you don't have the greatest confidence, you're finding your way. But for me, it has always been a very internal and selfish quest.

**JL:** What are your thoughts on Blackness or a Black Art Aesthetic in terms of your art and process?

**TM:** I was in the time when the Black Revolution was on in the '60s. I knew Dana Chandler and some of those people who were Black Revolutionary Artists. I knew people like Baraka. Some of these people were like, if you weren't writing about the protest or if your painting did not address the conditions of the African American in the United States then it was European Decadence. And I knew a group of people that had spaces here that said that any artist that shows in White institutions can't show with us. And I said, "well, you just did me a favor."

I had friends that adhered to this philosophy, but I think that your first responsibility is to your own mind and your own integrity and what you see as an individual. If you think that you need to belong to a herd to be comfortable then that is okay. But I also knew people who were chanting freedom but wanted the woman to walk four or five steps behind them and be subservient to them and I said, "you aren't talking about freedom, you're talking about being in charge, you want power over other people, you want the same thing that you're deriding."

I have a friend—I think he is one of the few great painters in the country—Sam Gilliam, and people were putting him down because they did not think he was doing what they called "Black Art." People ask, well how do you know if someone is doing Black Art? And I say that the easiest definition is to look at the artist—I don't care what the art looks like. I just feel that an artist first has to not worry about conforming. I just do what I do, and if you don't like it, that's fine. I like it, that's fine.

I like it and I am not going to make something I don't like.

**JL:** What advice would you give to an artist trying to find their way?

**TM:** The first thing I would say is to look a lot and read a lot. How I learned was looking and reading and buying art books and going to museums and galleries and looking to see how I think the thing was made. I would tell them to find out why this is making your life interesting. There are a lot of things that aren't very valuable in life so you want to do something that is going to increase the value of your life or enhance it to some degree and, as odd as it may seem, this is what makes my life, even in my old age. I am always happy. The good, bad and the ugly, I enjoy looking at it all. If it is not fun making it then I have no interest in it.