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### THADDEUS MOSLEY NEVER STOPPED WORKING

by Will Heinrich



The sculptor Thaddeus Mosley, at his studio in Pittsburgh.  
Credit: Ross Mantle for The New York Times

Thaddeus Mosley wears his 96 years with panache. He doesn't move 250-pound logs around his crowded Pittsburgh studio by himself anymore. But it's not because he's stopped working, or hired an assistant — he's just making his abstract, treelike assemblages of carved cherry and walnut out of slightly smaller pieces.

Though they're as unadorned and approachable as folk art, Mosley's sculptures get deeper and more complicated as you spend time with them, and as their sources in European modernism, African sculptural traditions and the textures and shapes of the wood itself become clear.

"Thad is the forest," Mosley's friend, the artist Sam Gilliam, wrote in a 2020 poem, a "keeper of trees anywhere — old trees, round trees, big trees, heavy trees."

Mosley has been well known in and around Pittsburgh for more than six decades. But since 2019, when he joined Karma Gallery in Lower Manhattan, he's been getting some long overdue attention internationally and in New York. Last year he visited Paris for a show at the Musée Delacroix of bronze casts made from his wooden sculptures, and in March he'll have his second solo show at Karma.

Brought up in New Castle, Pa., Mosley studied English and journalism at the University of Pittsburgh on the G.I. Bill and briefly worked as a sports reporter. But in the mid-1950s, he was inspired to take up wood carving by the sight of decorative teak birds in department-store displays of Scandinavian furniture, and by the late 1950s, he had resigned from reporting in favor of a day job with the Postal Service that left him time for his art. We spoke in his studio and by telephone; these are edited excerpts from our conversation.

**You've mentioned Noguchi, Brancusi and African sculpture as primary influences. Your work shares Brancusi's soaring verticality, and the wood and the organic forms certainly evoke African sculpture. But what about the Black American experience? What part does that play in your work?**

Well, I think it's all sort of related. I think there is an affinity into infinity. One of my most popular pieces is "Georgia Gate," that I did in 1975, which the Carnegie Museum of Art owns. It's based on the sculptures from a graveyard in Sumner, Ga. I saw pictures of these sculptures in the 1950s, in Marshall Stearns's book "The Story of Jazz."

He was talking about the connection between American jazz and tribal history. When I saw these sculptures, I immediately thought of Brancusi. They were being done, I guess, around the same time Brancusi was coming up [in Romania]. Of course, they were made by what you'd call an outsider artist in Georgia. He wouldn't have known where Romania was, but when I saw those pieces I immediately thought of Brancusi. And like you say, that's where I distilled that upward movement into my sculptures, into very thin but curving shapes, just getting the essence.

**Do you feel any obligation to make that kind of connection, between American and European influences, more explicit?**

I never worried too much about what other people wanted me to do. Like during the so-called civil rights movement, where people were just doing what they called Black Art, it had to relate to Black people and Black situations — well, I still did what I wanted to do. I think just being who I am, and showing my influences, is showing enough.

**Did you get criticized for that?**

More than me, people that were prominent, like Sam Gilliam, who was on the national stage, a lot of people were sort of putting him down, you know. And he was trying to say, like me — because I think I have more examples of tribal art in my house than he did — but he was saying: Look at the colors in my art, look at the colors of Kente cloth. It doesn't have to be something that you can understand immediately. I think that all art should have a little mystery, so that people will be drawn to figure out how you did it, you know. And I think that, for me, that's what art is all about.

**Why do you say the "so-called" civil rights movement?**

I always felt that the civil rights movement started as soon as there was an Afro-American in the United States. There's always been a movement, but no one paid much attention till it got on television.

**You're also careful, as Noguchi was with his stone, to avoid interfering with the natural beauty of the wood you use.**

I always say I have extreme advantages since I have such beautiful material. Sometimes I feel like just taking off the bark and standing up the log.

**I mean, you could do that.**

But that's not what I'm really interested in. I'm not interested in finding the easiest way out. I like to challenge myself and see what I can come up with. And I think with Noguchi, the colors change, the texture changes, as well as the form. I do a little bit of that myself, of course. You don't know what the color's going to be, how much it's

going to change.

I had a collector buy a sculpture of mine. When he got it home where he could really see it in the living room, he called me and said, you know, "This wood is different colors! I thought it was all one color when I bought it!" I said, "You bought a tree!" Only way you change the color of a tree is you cut the wood in slices and have someone stain it to one color. That's why furniture looks the way it does.

### **Why wood?**

Well, I've always been a poor man —

### **I hope you're doing better now?**

Oh, yeah, it's the first time in my life I ever had two dollars to rub against each other. But anyhow, when I first started out I was looking at carvings from the Swedish displays and stuff, they were made out of teak wood and copper stems. Well, around Pittsburgh they have what they call a park service, and they go around all over the city and they cut down trees. Back in those days, you could just haul 'em away. So I had a ready supply. But also I love the color of the wood, I love the warmth, I love the grains.

### **You've been making and showing work since the 1950s, but would it be fair to say that the past few years have been a professional uptick?**

Oh, yes, yes. I was in the [2018] Carnegie International [exhibition]; I sort of had the hallway when you came in, so I was easily identified, you might say. But after that people got interested in me, and I decided to go with Karma Gallery, and they exhibited me there three years ago, two years ago, I forget when. I'll be having another show on March 4.

Between this show and showing in other venues — like an outdoor show in Milwaukee; Art+Practice, which is Mark Bradford's place in L.A.; and the Nasher [Sculpture Center] in Dallas — I've had more exposure, probably, in two years, at least prominent exposure ...

*... than in the previous 40?*

Fifty.

### **How does that feel?**

Well, I don't feel that the work has improved, but the situation has tremendously.

### **Doesn't it feel any different in the studio now that your work's getting so much more attention?**

No, no. I'm a person that, I want to see it done as best I can, even if no one sees it but me. I used to tell my children, always be on your best behavior, because you never know who's watching you, who's been looking at you.

### **Why do you think you weren't recognized earlier?**

Well, first thing, you have to be out there to be noticed. But you have to look back at a time when there were some very good Afro-American artists, like Norman Lewis, Alma Thomas, even people before Sam Gilliam. I'll digress here for a second — I remember when I was in the first Three Rivers Arts Festival in Pittsburgh, there was

a Black gentleman, I guess about in his 50s, that did flower paintings. So another Black artist and I, we were standing near our work. He came up, and he said, "Is this yours?" I said, "Yeah." He says, "Don't stand around your work. Because if white people see that you did it, they won't buy it."

**That's awful.**

But that wasn't the situation for me. In the '60s, when I had my first show at the Carnegie, Lefevre Gallery and Art Seidenberg were in Pittsburgh, and they wanted to know if I could do two shows at once, if I could move to New York. But they wanted me to quit my job, and no one said how I was going to live. Nobody told me, well, we're going to give you \$50,000 a year in advance so you can work.

No way I was going to abandon my kids to have a so-called art career. No, I didn't want to do that, because of my own upbringing. My mother and father divorced when I was 8 years old. After that, things really went downhill economically for my family, and we kids, we had a tough time. So I said, well, if I ever have children, I'm going to make sure that they're as comfortable as I can make them, no matter how the marriages turn out, you know.

**You've talked a lot about circumstance. You started working with wood because you could get it free; your sculptures are rarely more than 10 feet tall because that's the height of your studio ceiling. At this point, can you look back and call your life itself a kind of found material that you made the best of — and found the beauty in?**

I remember, the Carnegie Mellon professor David Lewis used to say years ago, "You know, Thad, if you were white, your situation would be different." I said, "Well, if most Black people were white, their situation would be different." I knew that I wasn't going to get the same recognition, have the same opportunity. But I tried, because it's something I wanted to do, to take advantage of as many possibilities as I could.

**Well, thank you so much for talking. I hope to see you in New York in March.**

I hope I exist that long! You know, I'm going on 97, and so, like I say, I don't buy a lot of green bananas.