Melvin and Rose Smith met on a blind date when they were students at the University of Minnesota. Rose was an art major. Melvin, acknowledged as a child for his artistic abilities, was studying journalism. Melvin says he fell in love with Rose's art before he fell in love with her. Rose continued to paint while Melvin pursued a career in journalism. Rose and Melvin married and had children. Two decades later, Melvin again picked up his brush. The way the story goes, Melvin gave Rose one too many suggestions about what to do with a particular painting. As Melvin tells it, “Her response to my suggestion was to encourage me to make my own art!” And for over twenty-five years, they have been blending their lives as partners and as artists with complementary but distinct styles. They embody a deep admiration for each other as artists while at the same time they stretch, encourage, and inspire each other.

The Smiths are prolific artists. Rose is primarily a painter, who works in acrylics, oil, and watercolor. Melvin creates works in collage and sculpture. Working from the depth of their own creativity and the breadth of their roots in African American culture, the Smiths create deeply personal works that command the viewer’s attention. Their art often portrays people they have known, visual stories of family members, acquaintances, communities, neighbors and places that they have visited. Through images and sculpture, the Smiths tell moving and evocative stories about society.

Their work, described by them as often arising from their subconscious, evokes a variety of experiences and emotions, often contradictory in nature. Subjects and scenes that treat solitude, community, struggle, dignity, innocence and poise, come alive on canvas through the use of exquisite color combinations, or through the alignment of scraps and the creation of sculpture. The full range of human expression—sorrow, joy, wonder, and delight—can be seen in response to the human condition.

The Smiths, who grew up in the Midwest, knew that their creative roots were connected in some way to the influence, creativity, and imagination that had come out of Harlem. In the early 1990’s, they journeyed to New York to see Harlem firsthand, walking streets, riding buses, and taking cabs. They returned and began a new body of work that included depictions of taxicabs, famous New York landmarks, and street scenes. Their work reflects the energy of the Harlem Renaissance, but they have forged their own identity for a new time, creating works that are distinct in style and subject matter. They are a husband and wife team whose art focuses on capturing and interpreting the African American experience.

Rose J. Smith
My drawings, watercolors, oils and acrylics have always been for me the means by which I render my true feelings to the world. In essence, my art is a confession made to clarify what I have witnessed in life.
—Rose J. Smith

Rose J. Smith

Contemplation
Acrylic, 35 x 50 inches

Melvin R. Smith
A self-taught artist, Melvin Smith’s work frequently includes scenes from Sandtown, Oklahoma, near Oklahoma City, where he was born and raised as a child. Melvin’s art often tells stories of the African American experience, depicting urban scenes and family relationships in bold colors and strong shapes. Accomplished in a variety of media, Melvin is perhaps best known for his work in sculpture and collage.
Rose J. Smith, a native of Kansas City, Missouri, grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota. Rose says that she has been painting ever since she discovered, at the age of five, how easily in a brush stroke one can journey to others’ worlds.¹ In addition to the University of Minnesota, she studied at the Minneapolis School of Art and Design. She is the recipient of several Minnesota art awards.

Her large but elegant figures, often disproportional in shape, fill the canvas, easily expressing emotions such as loneliness, dignity, solitude, peace, and tranquility. Her exquisite use of color and shape create women who are strong and unforgettable, beautiful and powerful, innocent and strong. The starkness of her backgrounds encourages a focus on the figure, bringing the viewer’s attention to the power she bestows on each woman. Smith says of her art,

While practicing free association, I move back and forth between my conscious and unconscious worlds in search of my innermost feelings about nature. Surrealism has always been a strong force in my paintings. I don’t know where it came from; it was just always there like the color of your skin. My images have evolved and are wedded in patterns of light and color, reflecting my visual reactions to the world around me. I create dreamlike characters from another place and time.²

In a society where so much emphasis is placed on the human figure, her depiction of these women with elongated arms and legs, lengthy fingers, oversized feet, and small heads present themselves as exquisite in their perfection. The women are stunning in their beauty; their elegance and dignity emanate from the canvas.

**Melvin R. Smith**

*My intention is for my art to evoke time beyond events or hours or years. Hopefully, the underlying metaphor of much of my imagery will lie somewhere in this direction and has something to do with time lived and felt, moment by moment.* —Melvin R. Smith

A self-taught artist, Melvin’s work frequently includes scenes from Sandtown, Oklahoma, near Oklahoma City, where he was born and raised as a child. For a number of years, Rose and Melvin divided their time living in Minnesota and Oklahoma. His love for Oklahoma, combined with a desire to raise the visibility of African American artists in his home state, led the Smiths to open the Oklahoma Museum of African American Art. They hoped to inspire other African Americans from Oklahoma to follow their example and become artists. Their art was exhibited at the State Capitol, and Oklahoma Public Television prepared and broadcast a documentary on the Smiths’ work.

Melvin’s art often tells stories of the African American experience, depicting urban scenes and family relationships in bold colors and strong shapes. Accomplished in a variety of media, Melvin is perhaps best known for his work in sculpture and collage. He creates much of his work out of discarded objects. In the documentary about his work, he refers to a junkyard as an “art supply store,” stating that a visit leaves him in a fit of ecstasy.³

When working in collage, Melvin compares his process to jazz or improvisation. He begins by assembling all of the materials he will work with, including colorful scraps of
Melvin R. Smith, statement from the artist

paper, newsprint, or magazines. He does not start the creation of the collage until he
determines the exact number of pieces needed to complete the work. The result is
disciplined improvisation—room to create freely within a pre-established boundary.
Melvin says, “in a sense, my collages have a kind of improvisatory spirit about them—the
same ‘Psychic Automatism’ which many jazz musicians use during the expression of their
art. In this process, instruments free play to call forth sounds and feelings that exist below
the level of consciousness.”

An Interview with the Artists

Cindi Beth: Describe your art, your style and say something about the artists that have
had the most influence on you.

Melvin: I don’t lean toward any particular camp. My style is Modernism, that’s probably
the best definition. I like the work of Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, they were
both luminaries. Their mission was to express the feelings and history of African
Americans, which we are also trying to do. They were transferring information about the
African American culture. The artist who influenced me the most is Romare Bearden
though I had been doing art for years before I actually saw Bearden’s work. The earliest
influence on my art was actually Kurt Schwitters.

Rose: When I was growing up, Norman Rockwell was my favorite artist. I liked the way
that Rockwell drew the body, I was very influenced by him. When I got older people said
my art was similar to Milton Avery.

Cindi Beth: What is your favorite medium, what medium best expresses your work as
an artist?

Melvin: My favorite medium is collage. When I first

started I thought my collage work would be

abstract. I was doing small poetic pieces

but then images started popping up. I

realized that they were figures and that the

figures were often family members. My

family would visit, look at one of my art

works, and say, “There’s mom,” or “that’s

your brother.” I realized then that the

images don’t come from me, they come

through me.

Rose: I started drawing when I was in

second grade. No one told me about art, I

just started drawing. I don’t know where it came from. I started doing it and I wanted to
do more. Being an artist is something that is in you and that you don’t control, it is just
there. I like working with pen and ink, watercolor, and oil, but I really like oil because it is
so flexible. In oil I can rework images many times.

Cindi Beth: Melvin, how did you start doing sculpture?

Melvin: John Hock, director of Franconia Sculpture Park in Minnesota, encouraged me
to try doing sculpture and to work on a large scale. That wasn’t a big transition, collage
is stacking and gluing, sculpture is stacking and welding. The first piece I did was a large
warrior, and it sold right away. I’ve been doing sculpture ever since.

Cindi Beth: What is your primary motivation as an artist?

Melvin: It wasn’t something that I chose, it chose me. Being an artist is a calling, it is
more than a profession for me. It is who you are, not what you do. I went to the University of Minnesota to study journalism. At that time journalism was considered one of the most esteemed jobs in the country. My program included a prerequisite course, and I took an art class to complete the requirement. I realized art was going to be my mission in life. I also met Rose then, my future wife. I went on this artist journey with Rose, and I'm still on that journey, with her.

**Rose:** I want to record the history and experiences of African Americans, to put it on paper so it will always be there. I've been especially interested in recording the story of African American women. I want to document this so people don't forget that history. My current project is on African American males. It is a hard life if you are a black man in our society. I want to tell that story.

**Cindi Beth:** You refer to yourself as “messengers,” can you say more about what you mean by that?

**Melvin:** We are witnesses in telling the story. Rose first talked about this, the fact that we are like poets. Poets tell the truth about what they have seen. They bear witness to the story.

**Cindi Beth:** What have been some of the highlights of your career?

**Melvin:** A highlight for us was an invitation to come to the Southside Community Art Center in Chicago. Writers like Charles White, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Richard Wright came out of that institution. It was an incredible validation of our work.

**Cindi Beth:** You have often done a body of work related to a trip, a visit to places like Oklahoma, the Bahamas, Harlem and New Orleans. Which trip was most meaningful to you, which influenced your art the most?

**Melvin:** Going back to Oklahoma was probably the most meaningful trip for me. It was where I was born and raised. We spent quite a bit of time living there. We had the opportunity to open a museum there. I was an artist-in-residence at various schools in Oklahoma.

**Rose:** Going to New York and visiting Harlem was very significant for me. I learned a great deal about the history of the Black movement. We spent time walking on streets, riding in buses and taking the subway. Different modes of travel allow us to see different views, to actually see how people live. We have always taken different modes of travel on our trips. The mode of travel gives you a different point of view.

**Cindi Beth:** How have you been influenced by each other as artists?

**Melvin:** Rose influenced me most by giving me the first opportunity to show a work of art. She was having a show at the University of St. Thomas and she encouraged me to put one of my collage works in, to see what might happen. People responded to the piece, it received lots of attention, and I kept going.

**Rose:** We have different styles that are distinct but they go together. We can look at the
same thing and while we each have an artistic interpretation they are related in some way.

Cindi Beth: What do you hope people take away after they see your art?

Melvin: I hope that they can feel life, enhance their life, know that they are out there and alive. I hope that it makes life more bearable. Anything that can enhance a person’s journey through this maze called life is a welcome thing to have. It is a tough journey to take. You need something to enhance it in some way.

Rose: I hope that they can see what I am trying to say, to hear the stories that we are trying to tell.

Interview about the New Orleans: After the Storm paintings

In February, 2011 Rose & Melvin Smith installed a large exhibition of each of their works at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities entitled, New Orleans: After the Storm. The body of work, done after a trip to New Orleans conveyed the complexity and beauty of this well-known but often troubled city. Their images of individuals and their stories affected by Hurricane Katrina, engaged and educated the viewer about not only the challenges confronted by the residents of New Orleans after Katrina, but also draw us into an understanding of the human pathos in this struggle with nature and social conflict. The images shown are part of that exhibition. What follows is an interview with the Smiths.

Cindi Beth: Would you be willing to say something about a few of the works in the show?

Melvin: Can you Feel Me?

We went to New Orleans in 2007, to see what New Orleans was like after Katrina. We met people who had been waiting for a long time for assistance. We talked to African Americans who resented those organizations that were making a profit off their misery. People were coming into their neighborhoods on buses, looking at them. They said that they felt like monkeys in a cage. We talked with people and what often came through was their sense of anger. The anger can be seen in their faces and in their words. People were making money off of their misfortune. That anger is what came through in “Can you Feel Me?”

Melvin: Jitterbug No. 11. It is part of a whole series that I did on the Jitterbug. The dancer in this work is actually my cousin Richard. When I was growing up I would visit him in the summer. He took me to the places he enjoyed and he loved dancing, he danced all summer long. He was one of the best dancers. I am intrigued by how important the Jitterbug was to African Americans. The Jitterbug is done all of the world but it started in New Orleans, at Congo Square.
Rose: Playing Between the Lines
This is actually an image of my father. At the time I am creating an image I can’t see or know who it is. When you are painting you are sort of in a ‘trance,’ you move the brush and the brush puts the picture there. You don’t always know what you are doing until it is done but something is expressed. You know what you want to put on the paper but you let your hand do it and it does it for you.

Rose: The Persistence of Despair
After Katrina many people in New Orleans lost everything. People ended up having nervous breakdowns, needing medical care. They didn’t have a house, clothes, or any of their belongings. I wanted to try to convey what it would be like to lose everything. This is my attempt to capture on canvas the experience of losing everything.

The artistic husband and wife team of collagist Melvin and painter Rose spent years traveling by bus, care, and train in an effort to see African America. Their work is an extraordinary coming together of history, social observation, and artistic commentary. They are messengers who share their art with a missionary zeal.