

**STRAIGHT AT THE HEART:**

**CHARLES SMITH'S AFRICAN/AMERICAN HERITAGE MUSEUM**

Charles Smith's African/American Heritage Museum and Black Veterans Archive is an indoor-outdoor museum situated in and around Smith's home on the outskirts of Aurora, Illinois. The museum is an art environment featuring small and large sculptures in mixed media, arranged to trace and commemorate Black-American history from slavery to the present day. When Smith announces "Most artists make art. I made a museum!" he is not exaggerating. The African/American Heritage Museum and Black Veterans Archive offers an impressive installation of more than one hundred Smith's sculpture. A self-trained artist, working alone, Smith has built a moving tribute to a community's struggle toward recognition, redemption, and triumph. But more than that, Smith's museum is a powerful personal testament to that struggle, proof that one voice can be heard and that one pair of hands can make a difference.

Smith brings a life-long commitment of community activism to his work. A native of New Orleans, he moved to the Chicago area as a teenager. An ordained minister, Smith also holds degrees in social work and evangelical guidance. He served in the Marine Corps, seeing combat in Vietnam, and after his discharge he used his training and experience to counsel returning veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. In 1986 a back injury prevented him from working,

and in the time of inforced rest he recognized that he too felt the hurt and anger of the Vietnam war. Despite the fact that he never painted, never sculpted in his lifetime, he built a memorial to his lost companions.

Fueled by the belief that he could help people through his works as well as his words, Smith continued to build. His subjects now include history, folklore, and cultural tributes. But, his museum confronts the viewer with social shame as well as community pride. Monuments to Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King appear with tragic commemorations of the Rwandan massacre and the death of Robert Sandifer. The now vast installation fills his yard, covers his house, and even shares his dwelling space inside his home. Smith laughs at his own productivity: "I'm a one-man machine. You got to return to the site over and over to see what's done."

Smith hopes to use his museum as a "healing place," a center for ancestral and cultural discovery and a forum for open and positive dialogue. His artistic philosophy is simple but powerful: "When you design a work of art and aim straight at the heart, you're gonna hit 'em."

The exhibition Straight at the Heart: Charles Smith's African/American Heritage Museum was inspired by repeated visits to the Aurora environment and by the conversations held with Smith during those visits. To convey the spirit and passion of Smith's mission and museum, we assembled a

set of documentary photographs and ten selected sculptures for temporary installation in the main court gallery in the Wright Museum of Art. Our purpose was two-fold: to celebrate the energy, will, and talent of a single man of commitment and to urge the visitors to our exhibition to make their own trip to the African/American Heritage Museum and Black Veterans Archive.

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