

## COLUMNS

## SavArtScene: Work of Savannah's James 'Double Dutch' Kimble is an overlooked treasure

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James "Double Dutch" Kimble got his nickname from the homemade bus he once fashioned, Frankenstein-style, out of an old mail truck.

He created it by cutting a hole in the roof and bolting a Ford pickup camper to the top, then fusing the anterior of a Grand Prix to the front. He drove his double-dutch bus around town giving joy rides to all comers, and quickly became known as "Dutch" or "Double Dutch."

Kimble is a Savannah native and is one of the city's true artistic treasures. Too few are aware of his prodigious output, however, due in part to the fact that he exists in the realm of so-called folk or "outsider" artists. He isn't necessarily preoccupied with the idea of selling his art to the highest bidder or acquiring gallery representation (though he'll gladly accept a reasonable payment for the pieces that are for sale). Kimble creates his art for the love of it and for the benefit of the community, especially the younger members.

Kimble's artistic life began at an early age. His father was a military man and when Kimble was 5 years old, his dad took the family overseas to be stationed in Germany. It was there in grade school where his teachers taught him how to make things out of papier maché. Even at that young age, a seemingly innate desire was activated by working with his hands and molding shapes out of various materials. He soon began making things on his own for his own enjoyment.

"I used to go and get big washing machine boxes and cut a door out and put on puppet shows for the other kids," Kimble says.

He'd make puppets out of socks and papier maché to keep the kids on the base entertained. At 13, he returned to Savannah. His dad was then deployed to Vietnam, which left his mom home with a housefull of children (five boys and two girls), and it was then that Kimble says he "started running the streets."

"I was a loner. I wasn't in a gang, but if somebody bothered me, it was a fight."

Kimble ended up dropping out of school in ninth grade, but was prescient enough to know he was headed for trouble, so at 17, he decided to join the military like his dad.

"I talked the old man into signing for me. He didn't want to sign because he knew the war was still going on," Kimble says.

Nevertheless, Kimble ended up serving from 1973-76, though he thankfully wasn't stationed in Vietnam. When he came back to Savannah, he enlisted at Savannah Tech to learn auto body work, which again satisfied his desire to work with his hands.

He soon began making various large-scale animals like elephants and giraffes in his spare time, using sawhorses as a frame and sculpting their bodies out of papier maché and wire, then finishing them with house paint and varnish. He'd display his creations on the property he used for car repair for neighborhood kids to play on. He's been on that same property for nearly 40 years now, embellishing and expanding his phantasmagoria of elaborate creations for the enjoyment of young and old.

Undoubtedly the most significant addition to his menagerie occurred in 2002 in response to the still somewhat controversial African American Monument (or African American Family Monument) on River Street, which was dedicated that same year. The monument came under scrutiny even before it was erected because of the confusing nature of what exactly it was supposed to symbolize. Some wanted the monument to explicitly memorialize the sacrifices of those who suffered in the slave trade. Others wanted to "soften" the image so as not to offend the delicate sensibilities of tourists who might get excessively bummed out about the realities of slavery while bar-hopping with their to-go cups.

The monument, ultimately sculpted by a white woman, includes a quote by poet Maya Angelou about the stolen families who suffered, which was also "softened" by the inclusion of an additional upbeat line at the end. At the time, Angelou objected to the change, but eventually relented and added a bit about "faith" and "joy," however incongruous with the expressions on the figures above it.

Kimble attended the dedication ceremony in mid-2002 and was somewhat dismayed by what was revealed. The monument, which depicts an African American nuclear family with dour looks on their faces and chains at their feet, is a confusing narrative, to say the least. Unhappy with what he saw, Kimble went back to his property and built what could be considered the cornerstone of his work, the Black Holocaust Memorial.

At direct odds with the memorial on River Street, Kimble's memorial depicts a man in loincloth and chains, flanked at his feet by a woman and two children. His intention was to provide an unflinching presentation of the middle passage to use as a teaching tool for neighborhood children, some of whom he says don't know their own history.

"How many kids out of this neighborhood are going to go down to River Street to see that?" asks Kimble. He says he uses his memorial as a conversation starter about issues that schools sometimes try to avoid.

"I have kids come up and ask me what it is. They don't know, so I explain it to them. The Black Holocaust Memorial represents the slaves that died for your freedom. It also represents the slavery that you're going to put yourself in when you go out here and the police have to put their handcuffs on you."

Kimble believes the River Street monument potentially does more harm than good.

"Instead of telling the kids what really went on, they tried to soften it up for the generation that's out there now ... That's also why a lot of these young black kids are out there doing what they're doing, because they really don't know what people went through to get where we are now. A lot of people don't stop and think, you see?"

The irony of Kimble's body of work is that, beyond the Black Holocaust Memorial, the rest of his fabrications are whimsical and some downright humorous. What he wants is to create a safe space where neighborhood kids can come to just be kids, and maybe learn something while they're at it. He leaves his tools out for kids to fix their bikes and there's a small slide built into his fantasy farm for them to use. Kimble also regularly hosts Halloween get-togethers for the neighborhood and generally acts as the wise uncle who's always keeping his eyes out for the kids.

If you're ever in the area of Anderson and Broad streets, stop by and soak up some of Kimble's crazy genius. He's almost always there and he's always open to talk. You might just learn a little something while you're at it.

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