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The Road Less Traveled 50th anniversary program was conceived by Amy Horst, deputy director for programming. The exhibition series was organized and curated by Arts Center Curator Karen Patterson. Special thanks to Emily Schlemowitz, assistant curator, and Amy Chaloupka, guest curator.

Front Image Cutline:

Dr. Charles Smith and Heather Hart at the African-American Heritage Museum + Black Veterans Archive, 2016. Photo: Madeline Power, 371 Productions.



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JOHN MICHAEL **KOHLER ARTS CENTER**

THINGS ARE WHAT WE ENCOUNTER: DR. CHARLES SMITH

+ Heather Hart

September 10, 2017–January 21, 2018

Dr. Charles Smith (b. 1940)—artist, activist, minister, and historian—explores neglected areas of American heritage. In 1986, Smith began creating a sculptural landscape in Aurora, Illinois, as a tribute to the more than seven thousand African Americans who died in Vietnam. The African-American Heritage Museum + Black Veterans Archive grew to be a memorial to all Africans and African Americans, commemorating hundreds of people and events from the inception of slavery to the present.

His subjects exude pride, celebrate talent, acknowledge despair, and reflect endurance; they are African American heroes and heroines, spiritual leaders, artists, musicians, athletes, and friends—figures encompassing the political, social, and personal.

THINGS ARE WHAT WE ENCOUNTER is one of fifteen exhibitions on view throughout 2017 as part of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center's fiftieth-anniversary series, THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED. Twenty thought leaders were invited to lend their expertise and provide new insight into the Arts Center's collection of artist-built environments.

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Dr. Charles Smith's African-American Heritage Museum + Black Veterans Archive (site detail), 2016. Photo: Madeline Power, 371 Productions.

In 2000, on his way from Illinois to New Orleans, Dr. Smith stopped in Hammond, Louisiana, for a meal. There he discovered a historical marker that read:

*Peter Hammond (1798-1870)
Under this oak is buried Peter Hammond, of Sweden, who founded Hammond, La., about 1818. Nearby are the graves of his wife, three daughters and a favorite slave boy.*

Beneath the marker is the simple granite monument, "UNNAMED SLAVE BOY."

Infuriated by the carelessness and anonymity of this marker, Dr. Smith was reminded that there is work to do.

He purchased a house and yard in Hammond and began his second African American Heritage Museum + Black Veterans Archive, where he continues to work today.

Unlike other immigrants, African Americans cannot simply investigate their genealogy; it was one of the many heirlooms stolen during the slave trade and the Middle Passage. His art environments stand in for these absent documents and records of history.

Although working from a different perspective, there are similarities between Dr. Smith's art environment and Brooklyn-based artist Heather Hart's immersive installations. Both activate landscapes and endeavor to connect with African American history and identity. Often referencing home, her architectural forms mix with family and oral histories, multiple narratives, and challenge audiences to move from passive to active participation. Hart visited Dr. Smith's site in 2016 and immediately found kinship with his activist spirit. Her site-specific installation encourages viewers to actively engage with heritage and identity and to seek ways of communicating with each other.

How were you introduced to Dr. Smith's work?

I'm sure Karen Patterson, the curator who introduced me to him, knew immediately that I'd find a connection with Dr. Smith's work based on what I work on in my larger practice. But my true introduction to Dr. Smith's work didn't come from looking at photographs nor even from touring his work in storage at JMKAC. It became Dr. Smith's work only last year when Dr. Charles Smith was standing in front of me, translating his work to me directly. He took me to church.

I was again reminded of how consistently disconcerted I am at how many Black artists, especially those who focus on art environments and public art, slip through the gaps of the art historical canon and contemporary media coverage. I, of course, had never heard of his work before Patterson introduced it to me. I was captivated. This entire process nestled neatly into the issues I explore in my work and fed the concepts I have focused on for this exhibition.



Dr. Charles Smith and Heather Hart at the African-American Heritage Museum + Black Veterans Archive, 2016. Photo: Madeline Power, 371 Productions.



Installation of THINGS ARE WHAT WE ENCOUNTER: DR. CHARLES SMITH + HEATHER HART at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2017.

How does your own background inform your response to Dr. Smith's work?

Through my interdisciplinary practice, I fuse fabricated and historical belief systems, legends that have been bequeathed through generations mixed with invention and intuition. I ask the public to take some responsibility in the art "viewing" process.

A few years ago I had been trying to find the 1870 census that included my great grandfather's mother, Minnie Wells, because I was able to trace the rest of my family back that far, as far as slavery. But she was missing. I went on the road following her husband's records and ended up in a small town with no wireless coverage at a library with two computers and a microfiche. On that microfiche, I found a marriage certificate for him and then found her. Through her other family members I found that 1870 census and discovered that the reason I had missed her before was because someone had transcribed her as "Winnie," not "Minnie." And her entire history had been transformed. For me, the family oral history has been more dependable than written history sometimes.

This is just one example of why I question so much: What is left out of a narrative, a history book? What is fact, really? Can truth transform? Where does the power lie in any given situation?

With inspirations of this liminal space between the tangible and the spiritual, a shifting of context, I was interested in creating a physical architecture for Dr. Smith's work. Like an oral history, carpentry, as a medium, is passed from person to person. It was taught to me as a child by my father. Within this piece, the visitor's physical perspective on their world changes as they interact, as a metaphor for a potential shift in perception. I am interested in not only creating site-specific liminal space but also in questioning dominant narratives and offering alternatives to them.

I'm continually inspired by the communication between Dr. Smith and me, by the communication between the public and him, the public and his work, and public and my work. I'm interested in representation of Black culture in an othered space. I'm interested in the concepts of Black persona, of agency and of authorship.

I'm interested in recontextualizing his work to amplify the situation and value system that reflects inherited belief systems and Black power in architecture. I want my installation to act as a proxy translator in a new language between his work and the public eye.

How has your working on your response to this exhibition changed or expanded your notions about what you do?

This process has reminded me that for every marginalized artist I was actually taught about during that "Black art week" in art school each year, there are hundreds that are missing from our records. That people in the neighborhoods know who they are.

But also that Dr. Smith is a contemporary, working artist. I think his work is more timely now than it has ever been. And like many prolific artists with his tenacity and important message, he deserves so much more notoriety, an echo and support. This has been a humbling experience for me. He has prompted me to examine and to use my privilege and power. This process has made me more diligent with my collaborative project, The Black Lunch Table, in making it known that he, and so many others like him, should have a "seat at the table."