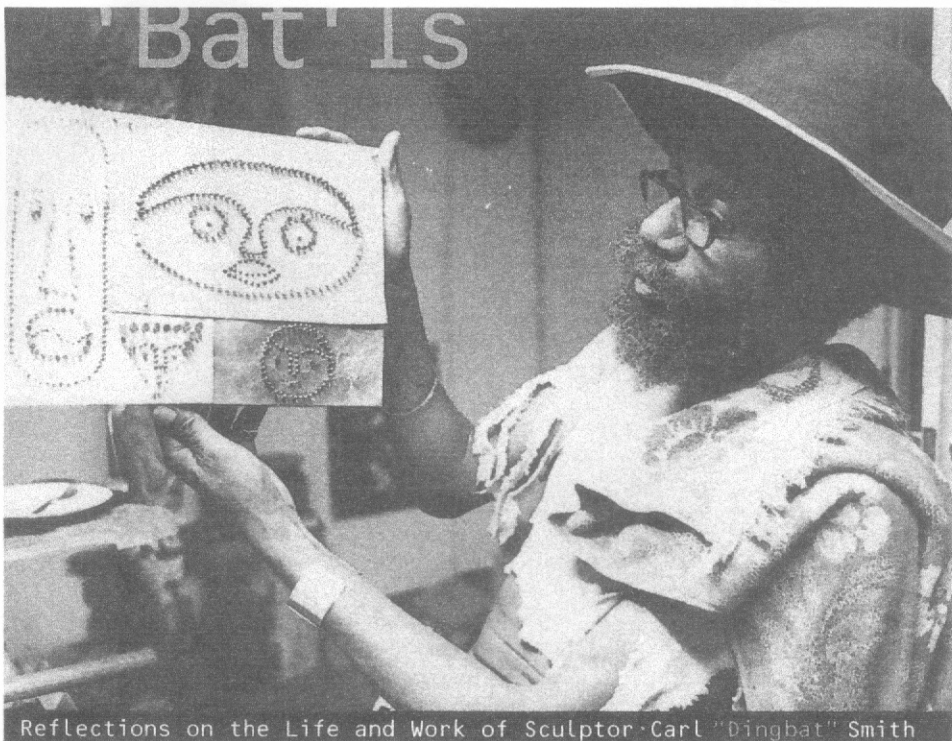


'Bat' Is

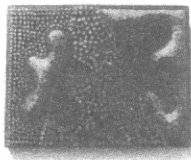


Reflections on the Life and Work of Sculptor Carl "Dingbat" Smith

BY AUDRA MELLIX

Little biographical information exists about sculptor and artisan Carl "Dingbat" Smith. We know he was born in the Hill District in 1927, grew up in Pittsburgh, attended Lincoln Elementary School in Homewood and died in the late 1980's. It is the overwhelming testimony of friends, who knew him as Bat, that this legacy of enigma is fitting. For them, 'Bat' was never born and never died. Bat is. Much like the Bakongo medicinal art tradition of nail fetish and the Antebellum arts of iron working, woodworking, blacksmithing and basket weaving created by slaves that he incarnated, his presence pervades and is called upon.

in the Shadyside and Hill District late 1970's, a happening of constants manship. While the use of nails unique to Bat, his sensitivity to



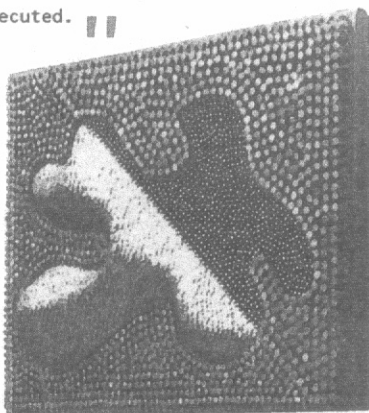
medium fascinated this sub-culture of political thinkers, writers and artists. Living the skilled improvisation that was the jazz, the revolution, he free-formed pieces spontaneously, wielding the hammer ever hanging from a belt of bullets he created. Bat brought a fluid movement to the medium that many were not aware was possible. Other artists had copied Bakongo pieces, using nails as exclamation or accent, but true to his vibe of individualism, Bat was a breakthrough figure using the material to create entire relief sculptures resembling soft metal fabric. Here, in tribute, his contemporaries discuss Bat's most important contribution—his approach to art and life, uniquely unified.

Bat flourished as a major personality art set of the late 1950's through the which served to develop his crafts—as an artistic instrument was not and execution of a previously rigid

■ ■ Bat, Thad and I went through a period of study together in the late 1950's. We used to sit around and talk, philosophize about art, what art is and look at the masters—Van Gogh—you know, rebels who didn't fit into their time. I left the country, went to Europe. Before I left he was trying a little painting and carving in wood and soap. When I came back Bat was a full-blown fantastic artist. His material had changed. He was the first, the first I had seen, to work entirely with nails. ■ ■

[Thad Mosley] SCULPTOR

■ ■ Bat was working with a few tacks on paintings at first in the early 1960's. His first piece, done entirely with tacks, is called 'Moon Face'. The pieces were all filled in. Later, in the middle of his career, he began to use more negative space, different types of nails for color and texture. His late pieces were more free-form. He would actually carve a piece of wood and build three dimensions. A lot of his work was very figurative, especially early on. While there is so much talk of innovation, Bat is truly innovative because of his medium. Some would just see a tack; Bat saw color and patterns. His biggest contribution is taking the very ordinary and developing it into a total medium. A marvelous craftsman, his pieces are meticulously executed. ■ ■



[Joseph K. Williams]

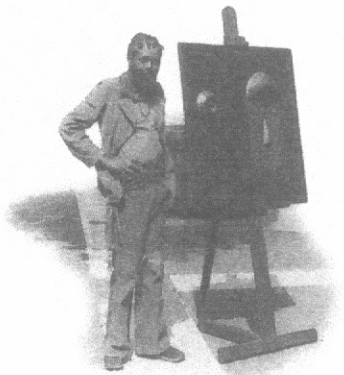
■ ■ I remember Bat liked energy. I lived in Shadyside in 1973-74 when Bat had studios on Ellsworth, Fifth Avenue and Kirkpatrick. I was always impressed with his medium and his personality. I watched him work a lot. He would start off with a three-quarter inch piece of plywood, lay it down and layer thinner pieces of plywood with nails around the perimeter for depth. Bat could crank out a couple pieces in a day and would joke and say no one could really afford his pieces so, in a way, he was just giving them away. He was an eccentric who would add life to anyone's party. He was accepted by a range of the social strata—from Walnut Street, the center of the happening where you could find anything all night long to the richest of the rich in Spain and Europe. ■ ■

It was amazing to see Bat work. He would start with one nail, put it in the wood and just go. It would just flow out of him. To texture something so hard and give it softness is amazing. Bat was more than dextrous, in his life and his work. He always dressed in his work, pieces of jewelry he designed and carrying his nail-working hammer. Bat was very sharp and defined about what existence is and well aware of his African-American heritage connecting to traditions Congolese, blacksmithing, jazz, and even though he didn't work with collage you could see the tradition. His death marked an important time for us all to redefine ourselves as artists. Remember that Bat is an important part of a bigger community, a process of us finding who we are. ■ ■

CARL DINGBAT SMITH, A RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION FEATURING THE INNOVATIVE WOOD AND NAIL SCULPTURES OF THIS PITTSBURGH ARTIST, AND DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY BY AL KIPELA HAS BEEN ORGANIZED BY THE SOCIETY FOR CONTEMPORARY CRAFTS AND WILL BE ON VIEW AT ITS ONE MELLON BANK CENTER GALLERY FROM DECEMBER 8, 1998 THROUGH FEBRUARY 14, 1999.

GENERAL EXHIBITION SUPPORT IS PROVIDED BY THE ALLEGHENY REGIONAL ASSET DISTRICT, THE PENNSYLVANIA COUNCIL ON THE ARTS, AND THE A.W. MELLON EDUCATIONAL AND CHARITABLE TRUST OF THE PITTSBURGH FOUNDATION.

WITH SPECIAL THANKS, WE ACKNOWLEDGE DR. CYNTHIA AYERS, MR. AND MRS. CURTIS HEFFLIN, MR. AND MRS. I.N. RENDALL HARPER, JR., VICTOR KELLEY, MANCHESTER CRAFTSMEN'S GUILD, GREGORY AND NONA MARTIN, THADDEUS MOSLEY, ERIC AND CECILE SPRINGER, WILLIAM E. STRICKLAND, JR., JOSEPH AND DARRYL FORD WILLIAMS, AND THE HONORABLE WILBERT A. AND MRS. YOUNG FOR GENEROUSLY LOANING WORK BY CARL "DINGBAT" SMITH FROM THEIR COLLECTIONS FOR THIS EXHIBITION.



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