

Building a 'Bundle House' with Artist Nyugen E. Smith

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Caribbean-American artist Nyugen E. Smith unpacks what it means to rebuild a home after crisis and what was lost in the African diaspora in his latest work, "Bundlehouse: Ancient Future Memory." When Smith was selected for CulturalDC's Capital Artist Residency, he was on a mission to make additions to his on-going "Bundlehouse" series. In reflecting on the Indigenous-Congolese Luba people, Smith takes influence from Luba ceremonial objects in his work, including Lukasa – the Luba memory board. Drawing on Lukasa, the artist expands on the idea of memory, depicting various identities of Black and African diasporic descendants.

In Smith's commentary on colonialism and celebration of indigeneity and diasporic identities, this latest work shows his interdisciplinary versatility as an artist. In various works, Smith elaborates on these themes through anything from performance to drawing and sculpting. "Ancient Future Memory" presents many forms, with sketch, painting and sculpture on display.



Nyugen E Smith. Photo by Raquel Pérez Puig.

Smith's love of performance was supported by the Cultural DC residency, which gives artists the opportunity to present a series of performances at the Source Theatre in January. Smith adapted his own original story, "While You Sleep (An Excerpt from a Jouvay Dream II)." The artist continues to reflect on memory and ancestry in this work, a theme that infiltrated most of his work during his time in the District.

We spoke with Smith about his Capital Artist Residency, the creation of "Bundlehouse: Ancient Future" and how the ideas of colonialism and diaspora saturate his work.

District Fray: How did your residency influence this project?

Nyugen E. Smith: I think learning how the city itself impacted my practice will probably come after the residency is over, thinking back on it. I realized that it's just being here in the Capital, and this idea of the United States of America. So all of the different types of things that kind of come with that, especially the imagery and the flag.

I came here in the beginning of October, then I went to Tennessee to do a performance and sculpture project. When I went to the salvage place to pick up materials and objects for the sculpture I was creating to make a performance with, it was not until I started to work with the materials that I realized I picked up so many red, white and blue things.

What does the term "Bundlehouse" mean to you?

A "bundle house" literally means bundling materials together in order to make a home. And I think about this as an immediate act; an act that's born out of necessity, born during the time of crisis. So, thinking about people who have to flee their homes because of natural disasters, human-made disasters, war, famine, genocide and those different types of things, where they just had to pack up and go and then have to rebuild.

Metaphorically, it speaks to people rebuilding their lives by picking up the pieces after a traumatic event or during some sort of crisis. How to start again, make new contacts, buy new clothes, figure out new language — all these different types of things. So, bundle houses are both the literal and the metaphorical. And crisis is at the core of this.

How do themes of colonialism, indigeneity and diaspora inform your work and specifically "Bundlehouse: Ancient Future Memory"?

They informed my work in so many different ways on so many different levels. And I think at the forefront, it is really thinking about the lived experience of people now living in the diaspora. Over time, the impacts of colonialism change.

You start with a certain kind of architecture within a certain time period. And over time, this architecture evolves, right? I'm using architecture as an example because it's something I've directly used in my work; "Bundlehouse" being a form of architecture. So, if we think about architecture from the colonial period, it looks a certain way, they're using certain types of materials. But now as time goes on these materials — let's just say wood — these things have changed over time. Now people are using more concrete. They're putting air conditioners in their homes as opposed to designing homes where the air and breeze freely flows through because of new types of technologies.

But it's not only just the new technology available, it's also about a kind of colonized mind — to think and look towards these architectural models outside of the region, and not necessarily tapping into the resources that are available naturally or developed locally. This is, in my mind, a byproduct of colonialism: to colonize the minds, where you look outside of yourself for the solutions to contemporary problems. This is the way I'm thinking about the impacts of colonialism now. What are the impacts now, as opposed to 50 years ago, 60 years ago?

Your work unpacks colonialism and reflects a lot of thoughts on the African diaspora as well as different indigenous cultures, but how does your own identity as Caribbean-American influence your artistic vision?

For me, personally, it's important to travel and spend time in the region. Because, you know, when I first started making work related to these ideas, I had been making it primarily from the United States. I was very concerned

about how the work [was] being received and how it's being read. Thankfully, when I finally did go back to Trinidad after many years, after people had seen my work for a while, the response was really positive. And so that was encouraging. And it also was a definite reminder, highlighting the fact that I need to spend more time in a region because it's about the experience — experiencing the things I'm thinking or reading about.

When I was an MFA student, I was writing a story that took place in Carnival. This story is actually the premise of the performance I did here. I was writing the story not having not visited Trinidad in about seven or eight years. I had never experienced Carnival as an adult. I was writing the story all from research: I was reading, watching films lists, calling people who live in Trinidad and actively participating in Carnival to interview them.

Then I went to Trinidad in 2017 to experience it, to go to all the lectures and all these different types of things to learn more about Carnival and its history. I came back home, I read the story and I felt like I was still writing it from such an outsider perspective. It's important to visit and stay in touch with the region to be able to make work that I feel has more of a lasting and a deeper impact.

What sets apart this version of your ongoing series "Bundlehouse" among the others?

I think the biggest thing is that new study on the Lukasa, and how the Lukasa is helping me think about organizing my thinking about composition in a different way and thinking about the representation of spaces, places and time within the "Bundlehouse" work. I would also say definitely the Luba art because I'm also making carvings. I love that their carvings, to me, hold these powers. And that they come through even in such a simplified very simplified objects. The way they carve is not incredibly ornate, like some of the other types of artifacts and figurative sculpture from different parts of Africa. I just love the beauty and grace of these objects, and I'm bringing that into into the work too.

In the bio written about this exhibition, you noted that "Ancient Future" by Protoje was a big influence behind this work. How did the album immerse you into this project and what does it mean for you?

I really enjoy Protoje's music. I continue to go back and listen to it. As we think about this idea of Black Afrofuturism and Black speculative futures, this title "Ancient Future" is very much in line with that. We are who we are within these bodies because of the past, right? We are descendants of other people who have histories and knowledge essentially still within us, in our DNA memory. And so we're not only ancient, but we're also the future, right? So whether that is literally as we may create offspring, or we provide or create something within this time, that continues to live on and has some sort of impact in the future.

And so I'm applying that idea to the work I'm doing here. Acknowledging these kinds of legacies from the past and as DNA memory within me. We have a memory of the past. So, this idea of the memory will essentially never go away. Unless, you know, everybody's wiped off the face of this planet. And then still, the water will contain the memory.

"Bundlehouse: Ancient Future Memory" is on view until March 12 at CulturalDC's Mobile Art Gallery. The gallery is open Wednesday through Sunday, 12-5 p.m.

To see more of Nyugen E Smith's work, visit nyugensmith.com. Follow him on Instagram @bundlehouse.

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