

New Jersey Artist Nyugen E. Smith Considers Climate Change in the Caribbean for CulturalDC

Bundlehouse: Ancient Future Memory is presented in a 40-foot shipping container and examines forced migrations.

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Caribbean American artist Nyugen E. Smith walked down the staircase to the lobby of CulturalDC's Source Theatre to welcome a sold-out audience awaiting his performance art piece "While You Sleep (An Excerpt from the Jouvay Dream II)." With a Trinidadian accent he greeted the crowd with, "Look at people!" then led the group, with calypso music in the background, into the black box theater where he would take the stage.



Nyugen E. Smith at his exhibit *Bundlehouse: Ancient Future Memory* Credit: Vivian Doering

His dynamic performance exudes the rhythm of the Caribbean, particularly Trinidad, during carnival. In tandem with his artworks, the performance prompts the audience to consider the Caribbean cultures at stake if climate change, which poses a great threat to the region, is not addressed. Smith, who was born, predominantly raised, and currently works in Jersey City, spent time in Trinidad, where his mother is from, during his childhood. His father is from Haiti.

In *Bundlehouse: Ancient Future Memory*, presented in a 40-foot shipping container inside CulturalDC's Mobile Art Gallery, Smith builds narratives about the forced migrations of people throughout the world. Smith decided to focus his work on looking at forced migration as a global issue after meeting a photographer who documented refugee camps in Uganda. At the time, he was making sculptures with found material, but he didn't have a message surrounding his art. The connection, however, grabbed him: The photos captured refugees using found materials to build temporary shelters, which looked like sculptures

to him. "There's a way to utilize my work to be able to raise awareness of these issues that are happening globally," he tells City Paper.

Smith is keenly aware that global warming is having a serious impact on its islands, so he prioritizes the Caribbean in his work. "Every year we're constantly, as a global community, watching, sometimes in horror, as the strength of the storms, and the power of the storms, are increasing and so is the damage that they're causing in the Caribbean," he says. He's concerned that Caribbean countries are not able to develop adequate structures to withstand the weather because they don't receive enough funding to build them. The lack of funding, he says, is a legacy of colonialism. In his work, Smith thinks a lot about the impacts of colonialism in the African diaspora.

"Even though it's rooted in the context of thinking about the African diaspora, it's also a universal body of work," he says about his art. "It's a work that speaks to being human, about the history of human migration, and the future of migration and displacement."

In *Bundlehouse*, Smith focuses on those who have been forced to leave their homes as a result of nature, war, enslavement, colonialism, or industry. The D.C. exhibit is the result of CulturalDC's Capital Artist Residency, an annual initiative that began in 2021 to support artists of color who create work contributing to regional and national artistic discourse.

The work is full of symbolism that can be assessed to form a narrative about forced migration past, present, and future. Blue, which is ubiquitous in several of Smith's pieces on display, is representative of water; it reminds him of a song by Nigerian musician Fela Kuti, "Water No Get Enemy."

"No matter how much water causes our disasters, it's also something we can't live without," Smith explains. In addition to blue representing the life and death power of water, it's also representative of the ways in which Africans were transported forcefully throughout the diaspora.

In one artwork, Smith draws what looks like makeshift shelters on the land, as can be imagined that someone might create in a refugee camp. Each drawn "bundlehouse," meticulous in their renderings, is unique in its conception. "In a way, if any one of us had the same materials, and we were told that we needed to build a structure, some sort of shelter, we would build totally different structures, right?" he asks.

Though he employs a variety of disciplines, including drawing, painting, assemblage, installation, performance, writing, video, and photography, each one is executed with a level of care and attention. "I think of these different disciplines as languages," he says, "Sometimes in order to truly express what I want to say, I have to flip and resort back to another language."

The Bundlehouse series began in 2005, and Smith has presented it as solo exhibitions in varied iterations at various art institutions. His work has been featured at the Congo Biennale, Art Basel, and PRIZM Art Fair during Miami Art Week. It was only after nearly 15 years that he started to be significantly recognized for his work. In 2019, he was the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts grant; a year later he was awarded distinguished alumnus from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he received his Master of Fine Arts.

Bundlehouse: Ancient Future Memory, by Nyugen E. Smith, runs through March 12 at CulturalDC's Mobile Art Gallery. For global accessibility, an interactive walk-through is available online. culturaldc.org. Free.