

SYD CARPENTER

Earth Offerings:
Honoring the Gardeners



ON THE COVER

Farm Bowl with Orchard, 2021
Stoneware, 9.5 x 18 x 21.5 inches

ROWAN UNIVERSITY
ART GALLERY

About the Exhibition

Syd Carpenter identifies and honors African American farmers and gardeners with her new series, Farm Bowls. By integrating the universal form of a stoneware bowl with architectural and organic forms observed on farms, Carpenter creates emblems of the African American experience and their connection to the land.

The bowl is a universal form that can serve as a ritualistic object, or as a common utilitarian tool. It may rest comfortably in the palm of a hand, or extend expansively as a receptacle.

Farm animals, tools, eggs, barns, and fences populate the rims and inner recesses of the bowl while the color personifies the land and the skin-tone of the farmers and gardeners that she visited in the South. Several bowls include the shape of the human brain as a supporting base to represent the seed, with the bowl as the fruit.

Carpenter is a gardener herself, having grown up in a family of gardeners. She pays homage to her early influences and her mother Ernestine Carpenter through her Mother Pin series.

The wood clothespin resembles an idealized female form with its graceful, upright, curvilinear shape. By locating the clothespin in different environments such as swirling water, or decorated with beans or plant forms, the pins become simultaneously mythical and familiar.

Syd Carpenter

Earth Offerings: Honoring the Gardeners

Presented by Rowan University Art Gallery

January 24, 2022 – March 26, 2022



Earth Offerings: Honoring the Gardeners

Berrisford Boothe

Professor of Fine Art at Lehigh University and
Principal Curator of the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art

The language at this moment, as a nation at a crossroads, is infused with the call for and promise of racial reconciliation. In all ways, the agency of art is reconciliation between the artist and those who come to a better understanding of the world and themselves through the power of art. Race and how it defines and divides us is the keystone of America's past, present, and future self. Race has presented us collectively with deep unhealed wounds that can only be solved by the full truth of our American history, and seeing in that amended history the gleaned evidence of Black American cultural resiliency and creative spirit. Syd Carpenter's passionately executed works of art are exemplary. Her mantra and mission is for her art to continually exert a positive impact on the community. She conjures from where she explores, and fashions as art a common ground of elemental forms. Her works emerge from where history and African American metaphorical aesthetics and cosmology stand together. From this place of heart and history, Carpenter creates image, form, and meaning. Most importantly, her art exists to communicate with those who (in her words) "may otherwise disregard its impact upon their lives."

All art is an ongoing conversation between the artist and their inner mind that the viewer gets to experience as a visual form. Syd Carpenter has been engaged in a campaign of artistic truth very much as a Black American cultural anthropologist. A disciplined aesthetic creative,

Carpenter studies African American land ownership, cultural and familial norms, and the displaced or forgotten economic relationships between her people and this American land. Syd Carpenter is a gleaner. She has centered her life's work as a visual artist in examining and reclaiming what remains of certain aspects of African American land sustainability and agrarian culture. Her steady artistic vision is to revisit and reconfigure the forms and elements she discovers into a distinct narrative that reassigns historical and aesthetic value to forgotten or unknown American history.

I have known and been involved with Syd Carpenter for over twenty years. As an emerging artist in earlier days exhibiting equally in New York and the Philadelphia area, Syd Carpenter's work was brought to my attention by the oracle of Black artists who were most respected in Philadelphia. I learned of Syd Carpenter from Moe Brooker and Charles Searles and Barbara Bullock and PAFA Black luminaries like James Brantley and his wife, art dealer Sande Webster. Although she was a generation removed and "emerging" alongside artists like Charles Burwell and others, there was palpable admiration for Syd's art. In fact, although she can accurately be described as a clay-artist, I have always considered her a gifted sculptor who works in and with whatever medium best gives voice to form.

Robert Irwin famously said (and titled his book), *Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing you are looking at*. It is commonly accepted that his inference and admonition is that keen observation is interrupted by nomenclature. But what about the inverse reality, where the juxtaposition of simple and elegant sculptural form prompts words that direct meaning? In *Farm Bowl with Mule*, each word is a form and the forms together atop a sculpted brain become the tight contour of the narrative. That narrative is that African Americans have had a complex intellectual and spiritual relationship with the land as part of the history of America. The land has purpose for a people. It has historically imprisoned enslaved Africans in America and equally been the source of our spiritual redemption. What the land takes in toil, we reclaim in ritual and spirit.

To reconcile our present value, we must reclaim our Black cultural and collective American histories. The cultural crime that Syd Carpenter is addressing and solving is a crime of omission. Her metaphorical postmodern assemblage sculptures tell stories by selection and whimsical configuring of sampled forms. Syd Carpenter is an American griot. She is a repository of a specific kind of knowledge that is employed as visual art to tell stories of legacy and resurrect the forgotten and their lives of practice from obscurity. Carpenter calls her sculpted/assembled objects, “farm portraits.” In ‘Indiana Hutson’, functional (jar), sustaining (eggs), architectural, and structural (fence) elements create a reference portrait to the artist’s master gardener grandmother, Indiana Houston. Her use of the pickling jar is a potent and often repeated metaphorical device in African American culture. To ‘pickle’ is to preserve. And within our cultural cosmology, preserving our erased or forgotten legacy is in itself a kind of sustenance.

3 Mother Pins on a Vine incorporates Carpenter’s most utilized form as figure, the round doll clothespin. Elegant to functional perfection as a form, these pins locate viewers of Syd Carpenter’s sculptures within a bygone era. Harvesting this form and recasting it as symbol of dominant Black matriarchal power reestablishes the domestic yet dominant value of Black women as sentinels of righteousness and guardian linchpins within Black culture. Black art is diverse, but in aggregate does not spend enough time or expression centered on Black women as the embodiment of power and preservers of Black culture. This is not an insignificant oversight. Syd Carpenter’s work occupies and gives value to that void with giants in American art who give equal prominence to Black female cultural power. American Artists like Elizabeth Catlett, Kara Walker, Renee Stout, Mikalene Thomas, Lorna Simpson, and Alison Saar, among others, all operate from this space of empowerment. In this work, Carpenter introduces sleight of hand Surrealism. The ‘head’ of one doll pin is replaced with a mechanical/functional wheel form. Another pin is in a position of rest or repose. And, the third seems to be in the process of being birthed from the umbilical vine. Whimsy meets the universally metaphorical to tell the story of presence, suffering, and potential.

“These first sculptures were not literal figurative portraits but interpretations of these mapped places through pattern, form and design. Having used the maps I know that to move the work forward, it would be necessary for me to make on site observations, to spend time with the farmers, to hear their stories first hand.”

— Syd Carpenter

The mapping of places, the artist’s own family history, her reference to herself as “belonging to a family of gardeners,” and her inspired professionalism, activates her work as both a cultural repository and a portal for further necessary discovery. I am an educator that has taught African American Studies, a visual artist, a curator, and a collector of African American art. Syd Carpenter’s works are aligned with a larger cultural awakening. African American food, architectural, oral, and spiritual culture by and large is defined by and constructed from what remained in our historically permitted experiences. ‘Helen and Joseph Fields’ (clay, found objects, steel), is an elegant elegy to what remains from marginalized lives lived, nourished, and housed. In the binary racial construct that is America, Blackness is often only given value when cast against ‘whiteness.’ Dig deeper, map, and unearth the soil we share, and American history is amended through art for our mutual understanding and benefit.

“When speaking of the project [Farm Legacy Portraits] in public, I always pause to repeat the names as in a roll call, to give them presence and a kind of immortality.”

— Syd Carpenter

Art grants all who accept her as a muse the power to say anything. But what creates critical resonance over time, what enriches the canon, is the willingness of the artist to say something. As Carpenter indicates in her quote above, she is engaged in conjuring the power of place, the power of dormant American spaces. Through intelligent use of salvaged and rescued elements as her language of form, she summons the spirits of those who toiled, endured, and persisted in life to enrich the reality of what America is today. Her voice in conversation and her art in practice is a tribute, a reparative act that grants visual immortality to (in the most loving sense of the word) common Black folk.

What can we look through? What has been there obscured but is now at this crossroads more relevant and potent for a nation’s destiny? Imagine how much of the back woods and dusty crumbling archival history of America remains to be explored. Beauty does not have to be mute. Syd Carpenter’s sculptured works are beautiful by every metric. The viewer — arrested by her crafted aesthetic — may not always understand each rooted metaphor, but they will easily see that these are works that speak with a common tongue. The agency of art is to promote understanding of what is new, imagined, rendered, and in this case, forgotten.

The work at Rowan University Art Gallery titled *Earth Offerings: Honoring the Gardeners* is about reflection and rediscovery. Black and ‘white’ Americans alike will see these works as restorative and as possessing of their own sense of visual authority. The work in this exhibition and her future sculptures will help a reconciling nation rediscover a shared, more humanized past.

About the Artist

Syd Carpenter

“Working as an artist has been the source of all that has been meaningful and a source of joy in my life. Art is my common ground, around which revolves my interaction with family, teaching and community. The enthusiasm and commitment I bring to my teaching is an outcome of the level to which I am engaged in my art, while community involvement allows me to share the value I place on the visual with those who may otherwise disregard its impact upon their lives. Family is a constant source of inspiration both as image and encouragement. I don’t believe artists make the decision to become artists. They are born. The hope is that they find the will to pursue their vision, an environment in which to develop, and a culture respectful of their contributions.”

Syd Carpenter earned her BFA and MFA from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University. She has exhibited her work extensively throughout the region and nationally. Her work is included in the collections of Metropolitan Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Tang Museum of Art at Skidmore College, Montreal Museum of Art, Petrucci Family Collection of African American Art, Renwick Gallery of The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Jengdezhen Ceramic Institute, Jengdezen, China, and many others. She is currently Professor of Art, Peggy Chan Professorship in Black Studies at Swarthmore College, PA.



About the Author

Berrisford Boothe

Berrisford Boothe is currently a Professor of Fine Art at Lehigh University and is the Principal Curator of the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection. He was one of 100 artists nationwide featured in Robert Wuthnow’s book *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist*. Berrisford’s digital print collages, *Virtual Lithographs* were part of the exhibition, *African-American printmakers: The Legacy Continues* at The Aljira Center for Contemporary Arts in Newark, NJ. He was in the 2008 seminal exhibition, *In Search of the Missing Masters: The Lewis Tanner Moore Collection of African American Art* at The Woodmere Art Museum in Philadelphia, PA. His work has been featured in exhibitions at The Allentown Art Museum, The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA, The African American Museum, Philadelphia, PA, The William Benton Museum of Art, The New Arts Program, Kutztown, PA, and The State Museum of PA.





Laurie Mason, 2021
Stoneware, 14 x 22 x 20 inches



Indiana Hutson, 2021
Stoneware, 11 x 24 x 23 inches



Farm Bowl with Chicken, 2021
Stoneware, 11 x 18 x 21 inches



Mary Howard, 2021
Stoneware, 15 x 20 x 22 inches



Farm Bowl with Orchard, 2021
Stoneware, 9.5 x 18 x 21.5 inches



O'Neal Smalls, 2021
Stoneware, 13.5 x 23 x 17 inches

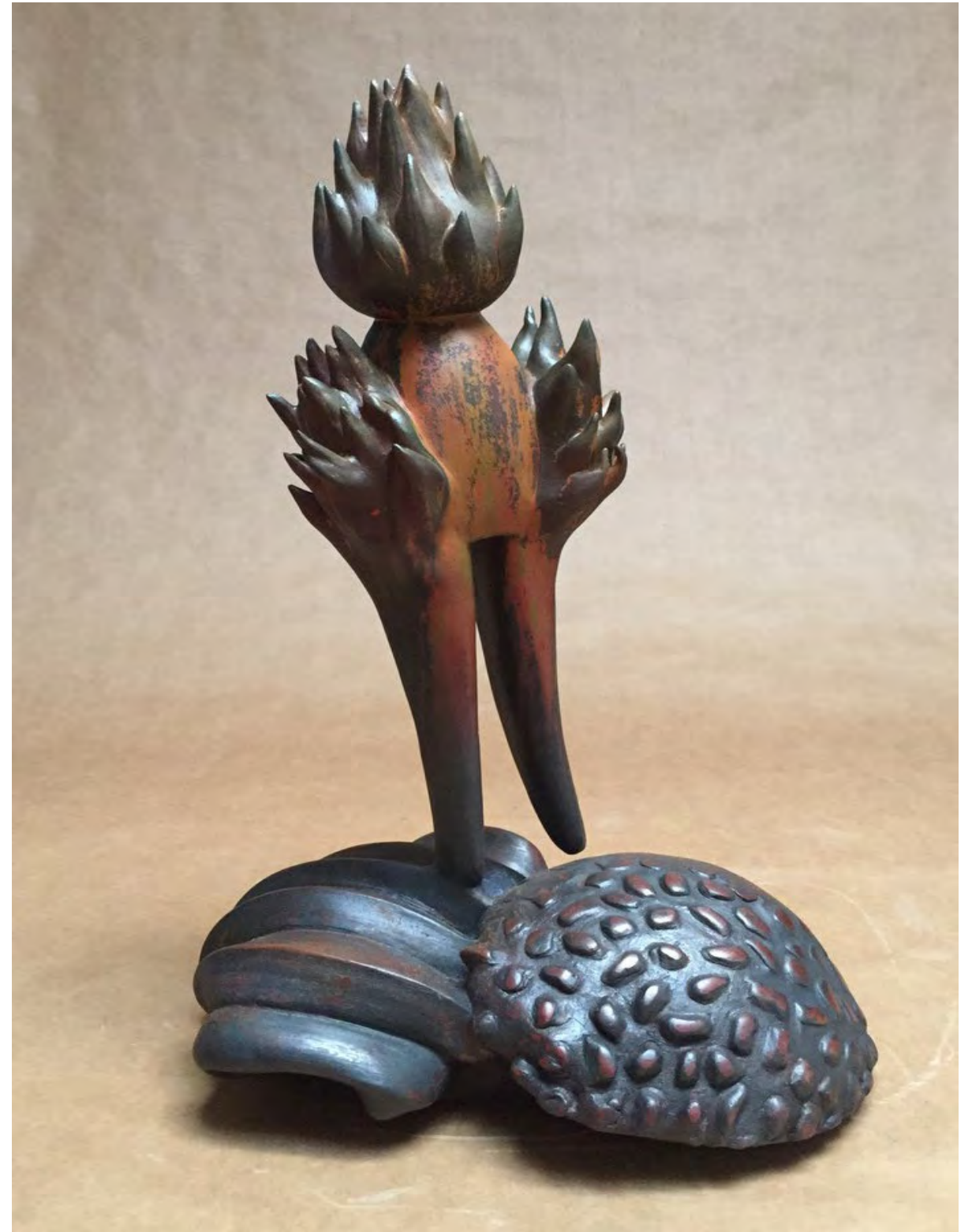


Mother Pin Transitions, 2021

Clay, graphite, water color, rototiller blades, 14 x 48 x 22 inches



Mother Pin Arise, 2020
Clay, graphite, water color, 28 x 19 x 19 inches



Mother Pin Afire, 2017
Clay, graphite, water color, 27 x 16 x 12 inches



Ramshackle Fence, 2008-2012
Earthenware, graphite, acrylic, 30 x 75 x 9 inches



Release, 2021
Wood, digital print on paper, clay, papier-mâché, steel, acrylic with graphite,
39 inches high x 59 inches diameter



Mother Pin with Basket, 2015
Clay, watercolor, graphite,
24 x 9 x 7 inches



Mother Pin with Seeds
Clay, graphite, 31 x 22 x 12 inches



Mother Pin with Shirt
Clay, graphite, 19 x 8 x 7.5 inches

Exhibition Checklist

Albert & Elbert Howard, 2021
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Rowan University Art Gallery

Where the University Meets the Community

Rowan University Art Gallery serves as a vibrant cultural destination for South Jersey, the Rowan community, and surrounding region. We are committed to cultivating an accessible and just environment that encourages dialogue and collaboration between exhibiting artists, students, faculty, and the general public through the presentation of interdisciplinary art exhibitions, artist talks and other public programming. Our mission is to present diverse forms of contemporary art by professional artists with content that is thought provoking, relevant, and timely. With our exhibitions and programming, we seek to engender curiosity and passion for contemporary art, enrich the quality of life for area residents, and create a welcoming and inclusive cultural destination at Rowan University.

Acknowledgments

Rowan University Art Gallery is honored to present this exhibition and we greatly appreciate the assistance of the artist Syd Carpenter on the selection of the work and exhibition layout design. Special thanks to Berrisford Boothe for the use of his thoughtful and inspiring essay.

Additional thanks go to our Art Gallery Coordinator Kristin Qualls, our Art Installer Tyler Kline and our Student Assistants, Emma Butts, Isabella Cristinzina, Kevin Curtin, Victoria Esquilin, Patricia Higgins, and Samantha Bursch for their support.

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CATALOG DESIGN

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PHOTOGRAPHY

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