

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Arts & Culture



A road trip to Black farms in the South inspired Philly sculptor Syd Carpenter's solo exhibit at Rowan University

"Precarious is the underlying theme for our history on the land," Carpenter said, as she walked around her new solo exhibit honoring in undulating detail the legacy of Black gardeners and farmers.



Artist Syd Carpenter of Philadelphia is having a show of her work at the Rowan U Art Gallery: 301 High Street W Glassboro NJ. Photograph taken on Wednesday, January 26, 2022. In foreground ... [Read more](#)
ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff Photographer

by Amy S. Rosenberg
Updated 4 hours ago

GLASSBORO, N.J. — About a decade ago, Philadelphia sculptor Syd Carpenter took a road trip through South Carolina, Georgia and the Gullah Islands to visit and photograph Black organic farms.

Inspired by her mother and grandmother's love of gardening, and her own more recent interest, she feasted on the details of the farms, the stories of the farmers, their turbulent history and perseverance. And oh those details.

“Many of the farms that I visited on that trip had been in the families for multiple generations,” Carpenter said. “These folks, courageously, despite Jim Crow, despite vicious attempts to get them off of the land, they stayed. These farms were able to be passed down to subsequent generations.”

The trip is still bearing artistic fruit.



Artist Syd Carpenter of Philadelphia is having a show of her work at the Rowan U Art Gallery.
ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff Photographer

Seeing her seven sculpted farm bowls exhibited together in a new solo exhibition entitled *Earth Offerings, Honoring the Gardeners* was a revelation, Carpenter said the other day.

The red clay bowls seem to be in motion, their rims dipping, undulating even, the miniature sculpted houses, fences, animals, eggs, a porch glider, all perched on the bowls like they'd been caught mid-twister. Some are mounted on sculpted half brains, balancing, it would seem, on a foundation of memory.

“Precarious is the underlying theme for our history on the land,” said Carpenter, as she walked around the exhibition, which affectingly explores the connection of Black farmers and gardeners to their land, at Rowan’s High Street Art Gallery, through March 26.

“It’s never been supported by the government,” said Carpenter, a Mount Airy resident and professor of art at Swarthmore, where she holds the Peggy Chan Professorship in

Black Studies. Her work is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art and elsewhere.

“We were denied the loans and the advantages and the assistance to keep our land,” she said. “And this is all deliberate. During the Great Migration the idea was to get as far away from this history, this past, these experiences, as possible. This was a horror. But people stayed.”



Bowl sculptures by Artist Syd Carpenter of Philadelphia. The bowl in foreground is titled O'Neal Smalls.
ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff Photographer

Red earth tones and ‘silky dark’ skin

After she bought a house in Philadelphia, Carpenter felt an intensified connection to land. That, combined with the memories of her mother and grandmother’s devotion to their gardens, sent Carpenter on her road trip a decade ago.

In 2012, based on suggestions from the Southeastern African American Farmers’ Organic Network, Carpenter visited some of the farmers who had continued to farm down south— families who, unlike her own family, were not part of the six million African Americans who left the rural South for cities in the Northeast, Midwest and the West between 1916 and 1970. Her own family ended up in Pittsburgh, before coming to Philadelphia.

The Rowan exhibit combines two streams of her work: the farm bowls in the red clay tones, and the “Mother Pins,” a series of abstract clothespin sculptures in a clay that has the “silky dark Blackish skin” of many of the people she met, Carpenter said.

The Mother Pins are a true journey, but one that always represents her mother. In some, the work is simple: a pin dispersing seeds, or holding a shirt. In others, she combines vines, shackles, partial figures and themes of transitioning, death and arising.



Artist Syd Carpenter's piece titled, Mother Pin Arise.
ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff Photographer

The sculptures are named for the farmers themselves — Albert & Elbert Howard, O’Neal Smalls, Mary Howard (with the porch glider) and her grandmother, Indiana Hutson, represented by a bowl with eggs, a plate of rice, a little house, a mason jar and a fence in tribute to her grandmother’s 1940s “Victory Garden”.

It was important to name the bowls after the farmers and gardeners themselves, she said, to preserve their legacy out in the world. The Indiana Hutson piece is headed for the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal.

“The color of the bowls is pretty much the color of the earth in Georgia and South Carolina,” she said. “That’s something that I wanted to bring out as a reference.”



Artist Syd Carpenter with bowl titled Albert & Elbert Howard.
ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff Photographer

‘A clothespin with a shirt.’

With all the symbolism of the Mother Pins, the abstract anchoring of objects to represent people and farms, Carpenter says the sculptures also must stand on their own as works of art. (She also wasn’t buying the resemblance of her Mother Pin with a Shirt to a praying figure. “It’s a clothespin with a shirt. That’s all that’s there.”)

Sculptures have to “argue for their right to take up space,” she said, “because that’s what sculpture does.’

“It’s not only about these personal connections,” she says. “If nobody knew anything about me and this body of work, would they recognize that as a good work of art?”

"I'm thinking about design and form and having these pieces be more of the sum of their parts," she said. "Once they're out, and the signage is gone, they're there. They're autonomous objects. Once this moves into a room, it occupies space, and does it deserve that given all the other options?"

The pieces reward close viewing.



"Indiana Hutson," one of the Farm Bowl series of works by Philadelphia sculptor Syd Carpenter that pay tribute to Black farmers. Hutson was Carpenter's grandmother, who kept a "Victory Garden" in Pittsburgh.
Syd Carpenter



"Mary Howard," one of a series of "Farm Bowls," by Philadelphia sculptor Syd Carpenter on exhibit at Rowan University's Art Gallery in Glassboro, N.J. based on a trip she took to Black farms in South Carolina and Georgia a decade ago.
Syd Carpenter

The ones that have a brain for a base speak, "to a kind of location and imagination about places," Carpenter says. "The brain itself speaks to the human presence here, this notion of memory, where memory resides.."

The bowls are anything but still life. Like the history, things are in motion.

Take the Mary Howard bowl, with the eggs and porch glider.

"The glider, that thing moves," she says. "The wheels are turning. The eggs are bobbing around. The story is still ongoing. I'm not looking for something that's static and symmetrical."

The story of Black farmers and gardeners is still evolving, Carpenter says, as they are now "the vanguard in urban gardening across the country."

In addition, people are returning to the South “because it’s still considered a home place. There’s still connections that are irrevocable.”

The bowls reflect that unsettled narrative, a history that might double back on itself or push ahead.

“They’re resting often in precarious way,” she said. “. I want the idea of the imagination and the transitory feeling that these hopefully convey, that each one changes.”

“There is the potential for all of these to reconfigure over time.”



Artist Syd Carpenter with Rowan U Art Gallery curator, Mary Salvante. (Left)
ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff Photographer

Earth Offerings: Honoring the Gardeners is on display at the Rowan University Art Gallery through March 26. the gallery is open M-F 10 to 5 and Sat 11 to 5. Admission is free. An opening reception and artist talk will be held Feb. 3 from 5 to 7 p.m. with an artist talk at 5:30 p.m.