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
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
discharged 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
reassesses 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 Houston*, 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 eroded or forgotten legacy is in itself a kind of sustenance.

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, Jengdezen Ceramic Institute, Jengdezhen, 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, N.J. 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 Small, 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
Stoneware, 15 x 24 x 21.5 inches

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Mother Pins on a Vine, 2021
Clay, mixed media, 18 x 37 x 26 inches
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 Cristinzinai, Kevin Curtin, Victoria Esquilin, Patricia Higgins, and Samantha Bursch for their support.

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