



In 'Excavations,' Sharif Bey unearths his roots and shows what a Beltzhoover 'art kid' can do

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Sharif Bey's growth as an artist, professor and scholar led him away from his boyhood home in Beltzhoover to showcasing his richly textured artwork at the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C.

At New York City's annual Armory Show last month, the international art world saw his distinctive ceramic and glass sculptures and dramatic necklaces in the Albertz-Benda gallery.

Winarick. Gordon. "In 'Excavations,' Sharif Bey unearths his roots and shows what a Beltzhoover 'art kid' can do," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. 1 October 2021.

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On Friday, the 47-year-old artist opens “Excavations,” his first solo show at Carnegie Museum of Art, the Oakland museum that changed his life.

The exhibition runs through March 5, 2022, and next spring, Bey’s work will be exhibited at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, N.Y., with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The artist now lives in Syracuse and teaches at Syracuse University.



The artist chose the title of “Excavations” for the Pittsburgh show after multiple visits to the museum’s art and natural history collections and talking with curators. Along with the work of sculptors Constantin Brancusi and Isamu Noguchi, he was influenced by the sculptural elements of dinosaur bones and the vivid colors of birds there.

One of the artworks, “O’Keefe’s Leis,” was made out of glass from replicas of dinosaur bones and named for the American artist Georgia O’Keefe. This necklace resulted from Bey’s 2017 residency at the Pittsburgh Glass Center, where he expanded his talents into a new medium.

“Casting also gives me an opportunity to translate these components and add elements like translucency and color and transparency,” he said in an telephone interview. “The light shines through them and casts color on the wall. The light being reflected through the object and creating a halo of color around the shadow — that was a happy discovery that I didn’t anticipate.”

At age 9, he was recommended for the Pittsburgh museum’s Saturday art connection program, where he learned to draw and was transfixed by the treasures he saw before and after classes. (The 90-year-old art program launches again this month under Dana Bishop-Root, director of education and public programs.)



“I could browse the museum independently. I felt privileged to have that experience,” Bey recalled, adding that by the time he was a teenager he was taking two buses to reach the museum and dreaming of going to college.

Being recommended for the art classes, he said, “was the first accolade I ever received. It was the first time I was recognized.... My experience at the museum kind of launched this journey. I became forevermore an art kid.”

One sculptural figure in the natural history museum that fascinated him was the Nkisi nkondi, a power figure made around 1875 by the Kongo peoples of Africa. Not quite 3 feet tall, it is made of wood, pigment, iron, ivory and cotton. The ritual object “reconciles disputes as nails are driven into this figure,” said Rachel Delphia, the art museum’s curator of decorative arts and design. “Sharif talks about it as an old friend,” she added.

“It got me to wonder what goes on on the other side of the world,” Bey said. “What purpose does it serve and its ineffable power. I couldn’t articulate why. That’s why sometimes we make things. The feeling is ineffable.”



The figure became such a visual touchstone that when he attended Carnegie International exhibitions of contemporary art, he made sure to visit it again.

“Sharif is very interested in revisiting his own past — what was there, what he remembers — and bringing it forward to the present,” Delphia said.

The everyday life of functional objects also inspires the artist, she said. “He is interested in the history of vessel forms. Many of his sculptures merge a vessel with a figure.”

Bey is also influenced by art from North Africa, that region’s Islamic culture, and especially functional and ritual objects. The large necklaces he creates borrow from a long history of art made from beads and shells. His aunt, Elnour Bey Iskander, moved to Egypt when she was a widow with a young son.

“She brought back food, fashion and makeup. His aunt was a great influence who embodied Egyptian culture,” Delphia said.



“He is a Black man, and he responds to many West African artistic practices of making masks and headdresses. He is very interested in these objects formally. He is also a Muslim man.”

In Islamic art, Delphia said, there is a prohibition against depicting human figures and faces. But Western and South African cultures celebrate the human face and figure. The tension between the two forces the artist to deal with ambiguity.

“His figures celebrate longstanding traditions of mask making, of ritual objects that celebrate the figure, that reference deities or other spiritual beings,” Delphia said.

“Excavations” asks two questions: How do people come to see themselves as artists and learn to believe in their potential and talent?

Working with clay in art classes at Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild showed Bey it was possible to be an artist and earn a living that would support his family. There, he took instruction from Pittsburgh sculptor Thad Mosley, ceramist Ed Eberle, and artists like Marie Kelly and Diane Samuels. Another influence was Black artist David McDonald of Syracuse, N.Y.

Bey wants his solo show to explore “the issue of accessibility and who gets to become an artist and who gets to tell the story.”

“There are two myths that I grew up hearing. You are either a starving artist or you’re a rock star. There’s nothing in between. You’re Picasso or you’re panhandling,” he said.

The example set by teachers at Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild showed him the path to becoming an artist.

“Thad Mosley worked at the post office. He had a degree from Pitt in journalism. It’s not like he lived in Paris,” Bey said.

Artists, he added, can come from anywhere.

“The truth of the matter is we’re everywhere, and we are shaped by many different circumstances. Helping young people understand that that’s a possibility” is essential, he said.

“This was something that Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild helped me see,” the artist said, adding that his teachers had master’s degrees, active artistic practices in their own studios and taught regularly.

“Ed [Eberle] grew out of that. His studio on [Route] 28 was like an amusement park for young artists. He had his bed in the corner and his coffee pot.”

Seeing Eberle’s studio prompted Bey to think, “That’s what I want to be when I grow up.”

Attending Carnegie Mellon University’s pre-college art program in Bennington, Vt., and the governor’s school for the arts at Mercyhurst College in Erie shaped him, too.



“It became about being a part of different communities. Beltzhoover didn’t often provide those opportunities for young people,” Bey said.

Knowing that Mosley and Kelly were watching his progress encouraged him.

“When you discover that people you admire and look up to in that way are rooting for you, the last thing you want to do is let down any of your heroes. There was no way I wasn’t going to go to college or exhibit or get an M.F.A.

“Thad has a lot of humility. That’s what I learned about him. There is something else beyond being the art star, making the art about integrity,” Bey said.