

KEY EVENTS IN YOUR AREA

Central Arkansas & Beyond!

Local Artist's Painting to Become a Permanent Feature of Museum



by Ariana Barrett
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The past couple of years have been a little rough around the edges. Thankfully, creativity will always find a way through the doom and gloom. From May 20 - August 1, Mosaic Templars Cultural Center (MTCC) hosted an exhibition, developed by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Services (SITES), called The Negro Motorist Green Book. The exhibition is based on the book by the same name created by a Harlem postman, Victor Green, in 1936. The book was primarily used as a guide for "safe zones" across the country for black people who were travelling, especially with the prevalence of Jim Crow and segregation during that time. It may be sad to think about the fact that black people needed to even have these safe zones in the first place, but it's comforting to see so many black-owned businesses that were operational at that time; and now. So, when MTCC opened a flash call for artists to create a piece for the exhibit in early July, local artist, Sondra Strong seized the opportunity. Using inspiration from the museum's exhibit, Ms. Strong's piece was selected for the permanent collection. Her period piece speaks volumes without saying too much. Recently, I was able to chat with Ms. Strong about her featured artwork.



Strong's, "Green Book: The Black Family Travel Plan"

Did you always want to be an artist when you were younger?

"Yes...I started out as an oil painter. My father was an oil painter, you know, that was his hobby. He worked with me and that just evolved over the years. So, when I went to college, I wanted to be an art major. Unfortunately, there was some prejudice there at the school I started at...and when you tend to say "I'm an artist", people think you're going to end up starving somewhere. And so, I actually mastered a difficult subject that I had issues with in high school. I switched from art to math but [in the end] I came back to that art background."

Is the room in the painting a familiar place to you?

"No, actually the influence for that room came from the exhibit. In a lot of my pieces, I like to tell a story; so, when I went to the exhibit to look around, I

could imagine this family going south to visit relatives, particularly in Arkansas. I wanted to make sure it was somewhat of a period piece with the wallpaper, the paneling on the door, even the style of the mother's dress. There [used to be] phone coves that would be in the hallways of the homes then where they would actually have to sit and make calls to people. Those were built into those older homes. I knew I needed to go to that sort of time period."

Why is the family in the painting faceless?

"That's my art style. I leave my images faceless so anyone can relate. It doesn't have anything to do with color. Another reason is, even when I was an art major, a lot of people would try to say I was painting someone specific but I just wanted it to be the story. I leave everything to the imagination of the viewer. I love telling a story through my work."



Quantia 'Key' Fletcher (Executive Director Mosaic Templars Cultural Center), Artist, Sondra Strong, and Carmen Hamilton-Parks at MTCC's Green Book closing reception

What message were you trying to convey through your work?

"That it was a part of black travel. Period. We have to realize that, I believe, the last [Green] book was published in the 60s. You're talking about maybe 50-60 years ago. The message is that this was not that long ago. It wasn't long ago that people had to use this book just to get to loved ones safely. That there had to be a set plan just to travel. There were no GPS' and if you took a wrong turn, that was your life that could've possibly been taken. It just wasn't that long ago."

Did you travel a lot with your family as a kid? Can you relate?

"I did travel, but I was more a kid after the last book was even published. Ironically, and I didn't realize this until listening to D.L. Hughley's radio show recently that, there are still "Sundown" towns. Meaning that you could not be black in those towns after dark. They will tell you. This is still happening."

What is it like being a black woman in the industry?

"It has its rewards. I think there are more eyes on African-American artists, but still there is a fight to get your voice heard or recognized. But for myself, it is that continual push to persevere, to have people see your work and to have a voice in it, and for people to understand the mission. I'm still growing but I love the journey. Every high and low, I love it! It helped mold me as a person, but it is hard. It's hard work. You have to, no matter the reviews/feedback, you have to have heart. Also know to keep pressing no matter what anyone says."

Last Question: What kind of advice would you give the young black community, especially artists like yourself?

"Know Your Purpose. Find your purpose. Know why you're here and fulfill it. The doors will open. If it is your purpose, it will make room for you. And not to let anyone discourage you from that path. It won't be easy but you can make it."

Ariana Barrett is a student at UALR where she is a Mass Communications & Anthropology major. A lover of writing and storytelling, in her free time she enjoys hiking and traveling with friends & family.

