

Pittsburgh-born artist gets a show at the museum where he took art classes as a kid



A gallery view of "Sharif Bey: Excavations," at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

Nearly four decades ago, Sharif Bey was as a 9-year-old student in the Carnegie Museum of Art's Art Connection program. Every Saturday, he'd get driven over from his home in working-class Beltzhoover and join the other kids in the Hall of Architecture for drawing sessions.

But that wasn't all. Art Connection was also Bey's ticket to explore the conjoined museums of Art and Natural History unchaperoned – a rare privilege.

“What was really special for me is the kind of autonomy I had in this institution as a young person,” said Bey. “And that autonomy allowed me to wander about the museum and, you know, see things that maybe other kids wouldn't spend time with, or maybe some things that their parents might drag them away from.”

Bey, now 47, went on to become a ceramicist and mixed-media artist whose work is shown around the world.

And those early wanderings have come full circle with “Sharif Bey: Excavations.” This Black artist's first solo exhibit at the Carnegie is based on his recent digs through the two museums' collections, with his own works displayed alongside, or sometimes incorporating, the art and artifacts that inspired them.

A suite of his sculptures, for instance, were sparked by one of the museum's *nkisi* power figures, West African tribal sculptures of humans typically crafted from wood, and bristling with nails.

“It was kind of one of the major objects for me as a kid,” said Bey, visiting the museum the day his exhibit opened. “It was an object that evoked a lot of different kinds of curiosity for me, and I later started to kind of add that into my repertoire as I explored a number of different kinds of vessels, and figures.”

Bey's takes on the form in the new exhibit are ceramic rather than wood – though they're often still “impaled,” as he puts it. Some are hung on the wall, and some are actual tabletop vessels, complete with stoppers. It's a reminder that along with Art Connection, another part of Bey's arts training was learning ceramics through the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild Apprenticeship Program.

He'd go on to study sculpture abroad, in the Slovak Republic, and earn a bachelor's degree in ceramics, at Slippery Rock University, and a master's of fine arts at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Bey is now a professor at Syracuse University. His works drawing on traditional African art, the natural world, and more, have been exhibited in public collections as far a field as

Indonesia, Uganda, and Sudan, and he's had solo exhibitions, and been in group shows, all around the U.S.

In "Excavations," Bey even incorporates forms and objects from the Carnegie Museum of Natural History.

The most direct appropriation is featured in two wall-mounted works, each featuring 100 or more colorful, feathered bird skins from the collection, arranged in radial patterns, like mandalas. The museum collected these "study skins" from all over the world between 1889 and 1993 for research purposes; Bey puts their hues and forms to more purely esthetic purposes.

"It felt like to me like I was painting or weaving, or maybe doing both, because I'm literally spinning colors with objects," he said.

Another piece, "O'Keeffe's Leis," harks to Bey's childhood fascination with not only the museum's iconic dinosaur skeletons, but with the steel frameworks that supported them, which he considers sculptures in their own right. In keeping with his interest in recent years in works in the form of jewelry – he calls them "adornments" – "O'Keeffe's Leis" is a big necklace, though far too heavy to wear. And it's made from casts of the vertebrae of two dinosaurs: the duck-billed Edmontosaurus and the apatosaurus.

"I actually used vertebrae casts that the paleontology department had here, and I made molds from those to produce them in glass," said Bey. "I literally used an object from natural history and translated it into glass." (The work's title alludes, of course, to the work of painter Georgia O'Keeffe, who had her own fascination with skeletons.)

The show's largest single piece is "Raptor Rougher," 10-foot-tall necklace made of colorful, patterned, cast-glass raptor talons and mounted on the gallery wall.

Other installations include a display of some of the museum's Tonga axes, agricultural tools used by the Tonga people in Zimbabwe. There is a story of colonialization here, as some Tonga were dispossessed by the British, but Bey said he was also simply intrigued by the form of the axes, with their rough steel blades.

Closer to home, Bey includes in the exhibit some walking sticks carved by his father, Nathaniel Bey, a boilermaker who also frequented the Carnegie. The sticks hang next to staffs carved by Sharif Bey.

Though his work has been exhibited around the world, getting a solo show in the institution where his art career in some ways began is especially meaningful, Bey said.

“It's not just a win for me personally, it's a win for my people. It's a win for my community, it's a win for Pittsburgh,” he said. He added that the honor spotlights the importance of arts programs for kids, funding for which has been cut in schools and communities around the country.

The Carnegie's Art Connection program, however, survives, much as it did when Bey trod the museum's hall nearly 40 years ago.