

Arts

by Frank Magiera

Cassandra Fay Smith's dolls create history

She's 49 years old, a historian, a writer and a business consultant. And she's still playing with dolls.

Well, not exactly playing. Cassandra Fay Smith is, for want of a more formal term, a doll artisan. She builds dolls, designs and makes clothing for them and then creates their history.

History, in fact, is the most crucial element of Smith's dolls, which are figures based on 19th-century American slaves and free blacks. For the last month, Smith has been in residence at the American Antiquarian Society, poring over photographs, paintings and documents that she hopes will enable her to bring even greater authenticity to her artwork.

"I'm doing a lot of clothing research," she said, "looking at images of blacks in paintings and photographs. I'm collecting information on free blacks in the northeast corridor, about some of their stories and the clothing they would have worn. That's what I use to get started."

Specialty

Smith's work falls into the category of "miniature" dolls, a specialty in which dolls and their houses are built to a standard scale of one inch to the foot. The porcelain heads and dark-hued faces of her dolls are molded and painted by other artists. She constructs the body parts, hair, hands, arms, feet, legs, torsos and clothing.

Often Smith's dolls carry a child, a book or some tool that identifies their role or occupation. Sometimes they are exhibited with a copy of a poster advertising the slave auction where they were sold, a reward for their return or a notice of their manumission (release from slavery). Others are shown in a miniature stage set or diorama, with a vintage photograph used as a backdrop and a foreground of facades, platforms and props built to scale by Smith.

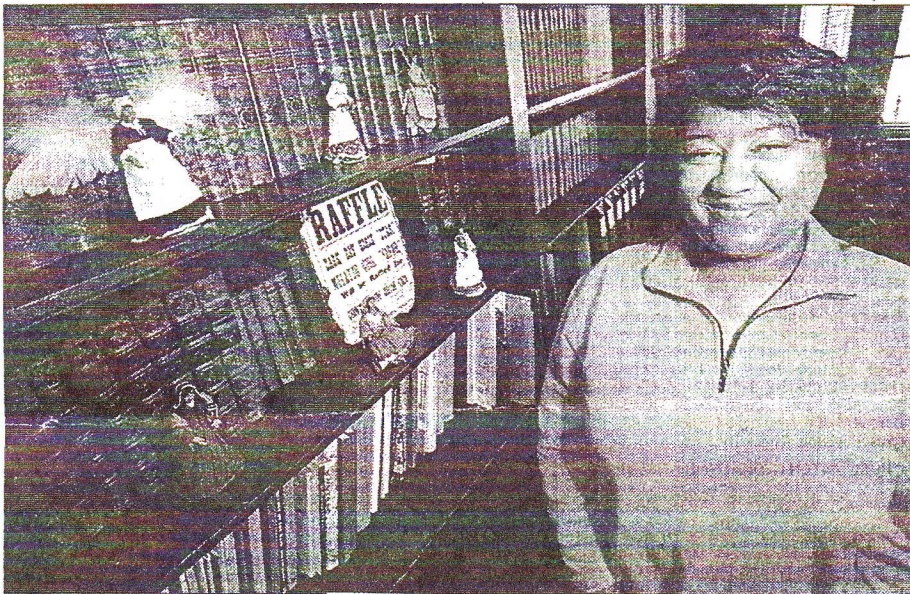
And for each figure, Smith creates a brief history that establishes a foundation for their character and places it in a specific context.

"Mary Alice Tollbridge; weaver; 22 years old; Culpepper, Virginia; 1826," begins the label for one doll clad in worn gingham and carrying a swaddled infant.

The label continues: "Mary Alice Tollbridge, listed only as Mary Alice on the plantation ledger, took her last name, Tollbridge, two months ago. Her husband was sold. She believes that he is headed for Alabama, as the last she heard he was in a wagon that crossed the river at the Harper toll bridge and headed west."

'Snippets'

"They're snippets of stories about a person's life," Smith said. "One of the things that was frustrating for most of black history is that there are very few documents. And if you do find a document, it's just a sliver, a snapshot from someone's life, the one time they came in contact with



Cassandra Fay Smith: "The challenge is getting it to look like it's fabric of the time."

T&G Photo/PAULA B. FERAZZI

the courts or a manumission paper that just says the person's name and age and maybe who bought them. For slaves, free blacks and runaways, you often didn't get much more than that."

Smith, a native of Detroit who now lives in Chicago, earned an undergraduate history degree from the University of Michigan and a graduate degree from Howard University. She specialized in the history of women and slavery. She taught at Howard and then spent five years researching early black history at the Smithsonian Institution.

"So I began to write these snippets based on a single moment of time," she said. "It's a character and a moment in their life and how that moment changes their life."

"When I decided this doll was a mother and had a baby, I started thinking more about a slave woman and her child. I noticed in runaway ads or manumission ads there was some kind of conflict going on between the names the slaves chose for themselves and the names the owners gave them. They were things like '... Her name was Eliza but she calls herself Eliza Courcy' or the owner would say this is her last name but she says that is her last name."

Smith said historians thought at first that slaves' last names were based on their owner's last names. When they traced former slaves after the Civil War, however, they discovered that most did not use their former owner's last name. Nor did most former slaves identify themselves as members of the same religious denomination as their former owners.

"After the war people would take the last name of someone they were close to, who was sold away, or the name of the town where their father

was born. Many people would take the name of the place they lived because they felt that this place was theirs. There was a variety of ways that people would construct their last names in that first generation after slavery."

Smith said she designs costumes that fit in with the dolls' occupation or the story that she has created around them. She gets fabric for her dolls' costumes mostly from clothing in second-hand stores like the Salvation Army's store. Depending on the peculiar character of each

doll, she often distresses the fabric to make it look field-worn and frequently laundered. (She developed a process for aging the dolls' petticoats using coffee stains and a toaster oven.)

"With miniatures, when you're on this small a scale, you have to make it look like human scale," Smith said. "The challenge is getting it to look like it's fabric of the time."

In the 1980s Smith gave up her career as a historian and went to business school. After earning her mas-

ter's degree in business administration from the University of Southern California, she worked as a product manager for various corporations. In the early 1990s she began writing fiction. After some of her short stories were published in literary journals, an agent approached her and suggested she write a novel.

"So I started a novel that was set during slavery," she said. "But I realized I didn't have enough of the details of daily life, like what did the slaves sit on, what did they eat. So I started doing more research into what I call the physical environment of slavery."

She did her research and writing by day. At night she began building a miniature slave cabin, based on the research.

"I spent about a year, really, before I started working doing the research so I'd know exactly what the room would look like, what would go in it, what kind of tools people would use, the arrangement of furniture if there was furniture, kitchen utensils. Slaves often used barrels for all their furniture as well as storage."

When the house was finished, Smith wanted to buy miniature dolls for it but discovered that the only black dolls available were stereotypical "Mammy" dolls.

"So I started making my own. Once I made a couple of them, I couldn't stop."

Smith said she surprised herself with her late fascination for dolls.

"I've observed grown women collecting dolls," she said. "In my 20s, I used to worry that in my midlife I would go to dolls. I said no, I would never do that."



One of Cassandra Fay Smith's dolls.