The Toohpick Man

Mike Smith finds artistic flair using wooden slivers

Mike Smith displays a church in a bottle that he created with toothpicks, a coat hanger and a lot of patience.

EXHIBIT
Mike Smith's toothpick sculpture will be on display at the Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame Museum at the Lincoln Theatre, corner of Eddie Robinson Drive and Myrtle Street, through March 1, according to Brenda Perry, museum director.

For special tours, call 225-343-0203.

The Toothpick Man is compact and muscular with a lifter's arms, not tall and slim as his nickname might imply, and he doesn't smile about with a toothpick protruding from between his teeth.

Mike Smith, the Toothpick Man, is a sculptor, and he acquired the moniker from kids he teaches because of his unusual choice of medium which is -- toothpicks -- the same ordinary, tapered, blond birch sticks best known for dental hygiene and kitchen use. In Smith's full, careful hands, however, the brittle slivers are transformed into remarkable creations that curve and bend, and have movement, dimension and texture.

A sturdy trestle table, rescued from a curb somewhere, dominates his dining room, his work space. With a headpiece wired to a phone on his belt, his hands are free to find what he needs on the cluttered tabletop among a jumble of works in progress, small boxes of toothpicks and a weave of loose ones, plastic bottles of Elmer's wood glue, metal cans of varnish, straight-edged knives, scissors, a coping saw, and a scattered rainbow of magic markers, rubes of glitter and tiny boxes of pseudo-jewels. Plastic drawers, stacked and bulging with odd art supplies, lean against a wall.

He smiles, his slight mustache rising to reveal boyish dimples that belie his 43 years. "I look at toothpicks as something magical I can shape and form into beautiful objects," he said. "And it's mine. Nobody taught me."

Toothpick sculpturing, as his obituary defines his work, is like an addiction and definitely "a gift that came from God."

The small house on 28th Street fairly bulges with toothpick creations. Delicate and elaborate multicolored jewelry fans across the corner of a table, a life-size pelican with ruffled wings stands on the rug. A snake, as light and shiny as the real thing, lies on a shelf beneath a linen-intricate, wall-mounted cross. Wearable hats and dancing flowers, a briefcase and a boat sculpture, and a fanciful, giant bird cage are located here and there. On top of the television perches a bottle sculpture -- a small vernacular building, with a furnished interior, painstakingly constructed, inside the narrow-necked glass by Smith manipulating a glue-tipped, bent coat hanger. It's one of the secret techniques he's taught himself, along with how to use broken toothpicks for airy effects, how to heat a glued stack of toothpicks.

Baton Rouge artist Mike Smith plays a working saxophone he made out of toothpicks. His hat is also a toothpick creation.

Among Us

where, dominates his dining room, his work space. With a headpiece wired to a phone on his belt, his hands are free to find what he needs on the cluttered tabletop among a jumble of works in progress, small boxes of Forrester toothpicks and a weave of loose ones, plastic bottles of Elmer's wood glue, metal cans of varnish, straight-edged knives, scissors, a coping saw, and a scattered rainbow of magic markers, rubes of glitter and tiny boxes of pseudo-jewels. Plastic drawers, stacked and bulging with odd art supplies, lean against a wall.

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picks in order to carve them into fantastic shapes, and the best way to shape galvanized wire frames necessary to support large creations.

Ginger Young, one of Smith's growing circle of admirers, owns galleries in Chapel Hill, N.C., and Atlanta that specialize in self-taught, primitive and outsider art of the South. "I was awed by his creative impulse (and) sense of flow and space," she admitted, "especially his detail and nuanced with something as ordinary and rigid as toothpicks."

Smith's natural ability with his hands emerged early. As a boy in White Castle, he entertained himself drawing and carving wooden toys. But his attraction to toothpicks began serendipitously in a sophomore art class at Port Allen High School. The assignment was to create something using cardboard and 12 toothpicks. Smith decided - he's not sure why - to add many more, producing a Christmas-tree-size toothpick sculpture. The art teacher was dazzled, and the student got the vision that "maybe I could build anything with toothpicks."

A two-year stint at a Baton Rouge business college studying commercial art ended without a degree, but not without success. The owner of the college bought one of his sculptures, his first real sale. Soon came an invitation to show his work in the lobby of a downtown office building where he featured, among other pieces, an enormous, but unfinished ship. It was 16 feet long, 6 feet wide, 5 feet 7 inches tall, with seven decks, paddle wheels, ladders, chairs, ropes, all fashioned from about 250,000 toothpicks. It's a project he continued to work on for more than 10 years, hauling it in pieces each time he moved.

His reputation grew. He joined the Guild Gallery for a year or so, sold his work at festivals, and taught art programs in libraries, churches and schools. His audiences ranged "from kids in kindergarten to senior citizens" and now includes occasional appearances at Bernard Terrace where his 11-year-old son, Michael Sanders, is a student. Most recently, Smith was accepted on the roster of the artists-in-schools program sponsored by the Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge.

"I'm not as advanced today as I should be" in terms of an artistic career, Smith said. "I'm just now becoming the person I am supposed to be."

With a handmade fedora on his head, Mike Smith works on the stump that provides a perch for his toothpick pelican. In the 1 1/2 years that he's been working on the bird, he has used more than 40,000 toothpicks.

Advocate staff photos by Richard Alan Hannon

"Mr. D," as he calls Dwayne Bailey, had established a warm relationship with the artist several years before, beginning after a counseling session when Bailey complimented Smith on his unusual cross necklace (made from toothpicks, of course).

"It hasn't been easy. Soon after completing the O'Brien House program and moving into his own tiny apartment, his son moved in for six months while his wife was jailed for prostitution, he said. "I loved my wife," said Smith earnestly. "We were together 16 years. But you can't make somebody do something until they're ready... she wouldn't give up drugs, and it was affecting my recovery."

In 1997, when his wife "just never wanted to (school) pick him up one afternoon," Smith was awarded full-time care of Michael, he said. Now he's working on legal custody. "I'm not on his birth certificate... but child custody gave me a document that says he's in my care."

"Mike's story is even bigger than his work," Bailey said emphatically.

He's delighted the Toothpick Man has started sharing the tougher parts of his history with selected middle and high school students in the art programs he teaches. "Mike has a great impact on people because of his sincerity and humility."

The Toothpick Man managed to acquire toothpicks and glue to create a few pieces. "My gift is one sometimes I don't understand," he said softly. "Even with nervous hands (from crack), I could still do my art... the high seemed like it would go away when I did my toothpicks."

In 1988, a thoroughly beaten down Mike Smith finally decided he was ready to change his life and went to "Mr. D," as he calls Dwayne Bailey, then a counselor at the Baton Rouge Substance Abuse Clinic, had established a warm relationship with the artist several years before, beginning after a counseling session when Bailey complimented Smith on his unusual cross necklace.

"O'Brien and Fountainbleau treatment center taught me how to feel like somebody again," said Smith. "I've been clean - off everything... for almost seven years, and I can't afford to go back where I came from."

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"I'd like to have my own gallery," Bailey said. "Mike smiles, a place to create and show his sculptures, and "a place for kids to come on weekends.""

"He's been clean, has been full of miracles and blessings. Surely one more is not impossible."

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