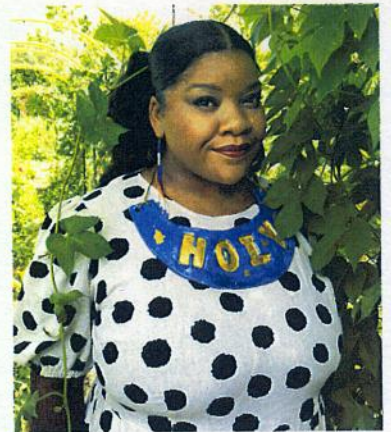


ARTISTPROFILE

BY ELIZA BROWN

Citizen Artist

In multimedia works that address social issues while embodying hope, **Vanessa German** explores the transformative, healing power of both art and love.



Artist Vanessa German.



or Vanessa German, art is a communal activity. The artist-in-residence at The Frick Pittsburgh has spent her first year in the post weaving together a busy schedule that connects the Point Breeze museum with her studio and public art activities in the Homewood neighborhood just a few blocks away.

Born in Milwaukee and raised in Los Angeles and Ohio, German adopted Pittsburgh as her permanent home in 2000, after her father was relocated here by Heinz. "I have the spirit of adventure," she explains, "and I wanted an opportunity to experience myself in a new geographic location with a new history and to see what life could be like for me in this place." As she has embraced the neighborhood, this community activist has become a cultural icon not only in Pittsburgh, but also nationwide.

German is a self-taught, multimedia artist renowned not only for her talent as a sculptor—which is on display at the Frick—but also for her paintings, poetry, spoken-word performances, and activism. Her career has benefited from a mother, herself an artist, who raised her five children to be "makers." From a young age, German was "given authority to act on what was in her imagination" and "to see with eyes that were hungry to be inspired." She explains with gratitude that she "grew up" in museums, which she describes as "safe places of wonder to encounter art and natural history." Another aspect that she savors is "the way that a museum tells you that an object or a story is important."

German believes in "the transformative healing power of art and love." Her work, which tackles the topic of hate in the world while also projecting a sense of hope for the future, has been



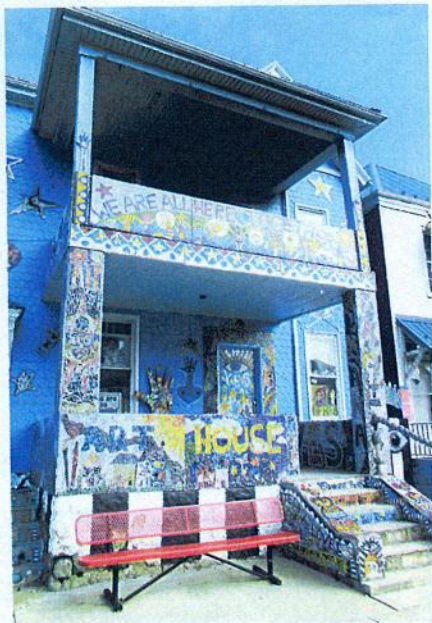
Left: *Reckoning: Grief and Light* is the first of three installations Vanessa German is creating for The Frick Pittsburgh as artist-in-residence. Its three altarpieces are an elegy to Black lives lost due to racism in America. Each is made from glass pieces commissioned from the Pittsburgh Glass Center and an array of objects both found and fabricated by German, including (inset, left to right) a figurative sculpture depicting the profile of Elijah McClain, who died at the hands of police and paramedics in 2019; pieces of jewelry; and a clock. (Photos by Steve Groves.)



Black Botanical #7, 2021, by Vanessa German.

described as compelling, joyful, provocative, and insightful.

She envisions producing three series during her residency at the Frick. The installation *Reckoning: Grief and Light*, which is on display through May 1, is the first, and it expresses a shared anguish over Black deaths and the longstanding system of oppression in this country. The triad of altar pieces showcases her signature assemblages, which she calls power figures. Set amidst a backdrop of Renaissance devotional paintings, these life-size sculptures combine found and fabricated objects such as doll parts, clocks, birds, feathers, flowers, and household objects. German describes the creative process as “an act of distilling, of working with all these ingredients and finding a core resonance, a language of clarity.” For this current installation, German commissioned a collection of hand-blown cobalt glass objects from the Pittsburgh Glass Center. Collectively, they are evocative of a



ARthouse, the creative center that artist Vanessa German established in Homewood, is currently being restored, following a fire in February.

cascading wall of tears, offering a focal point for reflection about loss and injustice.

Ultimately, German’s three-year residency will culminate in a large-scale exhibition of her work in 2023.

“It’s an honor to have an artist of Vanessa German’s caliber engaging so deeply with our collection, visitors, and team during her residency,” says Frick executive director Elizabeth Barker. “Her artworks and performances are already breathing fresh life into the Frick. I can’t wait to see what the next two years will bring!”

The Homewood community has already benefited greatly from German’s presence. In 2011, she founded Love Front Porch, a hands-on arts initiative for neighborhood women, children, and families that was spawned when she moved her own art-making to the front steps of her Hamilton Avenue home. Three years later, further down the street, she opened ARthouse, a creative community center and studio in a century-old house, which is currently under renovation following a fire earlier this year.

German’s work has been widely celebrated and displayed in private collections, public museums, and traveling exhibitions. In 2012 she was named Emerging Artist of the Year by Pittsburgh Center for the Arts (now Pittsburgh Center for Arts & Media), and that same year her work was included in the “African American Art 1950-present” touring exhibit from the Smithsonian Institution. She was a 2015 recipient of the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant and the 2018 Don Tyson Prize, a \$200,000 award from the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

But even as her work receives more and more international recognition and accolades, German remains firmly grounded in her neighborhood and committed to the nearby museum that has invited her into its fold. As she explains, “The [Frick] residency offers the opportunity for a living experience that can be responsive to the needs of the artist, the institution, and the community.” For the Frick, this partnership showcases the role that museums can play as agents for change in the community. For German, as she says, “the community is the museum.”

Vanessa German’s installation *Reckoning: Grief and Light* is on display at The Frick Art Museum in Point Breeze through May 1. For more information, visit thefrickpittsburgh.org. SA



“A thing of beauty is a joy forever.”

— John Keats (1795-1821)

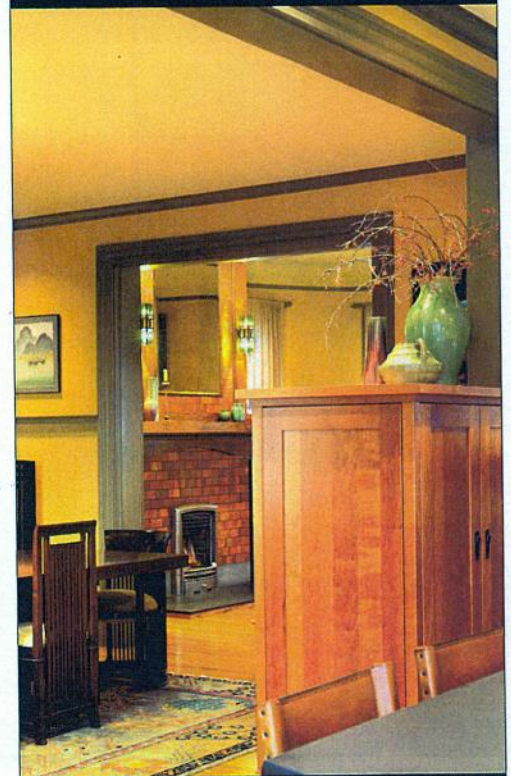


Photo: Dave Bryce Photography



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