

# Genius at work

## Inside Aminah Robinson's world



*A year has passed since the MacArthur Foundation recognized the brilliance of Columbus's best-known artist. What changes have sudden fame and wealth brought to this modest spirit?*

**T**here's no doorbell at Aminah Robinson's little east-side house, so you are forced to knock. That presents a dilemma: Well-behaved people are trained not to lay hands on artistic creations and Robinson's double front doors certainly qualify as pieces of art. Sinuous figures are powerfully carved into the wood and brilliantly colored—acting as sirens on this modest street. They are almost too big to take in while standing on the cramped stoop. If the first timid knocks rouse not even her protective dog, Sweetie, then there's no choice but to put some muscle into pounding the artwork.

BY ANN STARR



When Robinson answers, having checked first through the peephole, she pauses to consider a polite conversation opener. She chooses the doors. Not their content, mind you, but the nifty mail drop specially designed for her, in reaction to Sweetie's irritation with the sound of the mailbox at delivery time. As the sizable mixed breed ambles off into another room, Robinson is left to handle the visitor; it quickly becomes clear that she would rather talk about anything else—the door, the dog, the mail slot—than herself.

For being a living legend in Columbus, a recipient of a 2004 John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant and an artist with a national show that opens this fall at the Brooklyn Museum, Robinson remains utterly free of the big-headed characteristics popularly attributed to people of her reputation. There's certainly no room in her house, let alone in her world, for a big head. There's only room for art.

Robinson made her first art more than six decades ago, at age 3, and she hasn't stopped since—undeterred by youth, a brief marriage, single motherhood, a grim stint on welfare, years of insufficient employment and the death of her only son.

Marlana Hammond Keynes, co-owner of Hammond Harkins Galleries, which represents Robinson, says, "Her talent calls people to her. Her creativity has sustained her through those hard times. She has a tremendous sense of self, who she is, and what she's about."

Looking around her house, one would hardly have to be told. It would be impossible to live as she does, densely surrounded by work, unless she felt almost no separation from it. Stashed around the house are mountains of colorful materials—tubs of embroidery threads, bottles of acrylic paints, boxes of colored pencils, venerable brushes so clogged with paint residue that they have taken the appearance of little soldiers.

Her kitchen cabinet doors serve as canvases for graceful black line drawings; against the walls are propped sculptural constructions, assembled from parts of abandoned cabinets, which display a collection of thimbles—a tribute to the caring and capable hands of women across time. Her kitchen table has disappeared

beneath another door. It's part of a work called "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," an assemblage for her forthcoming show at the Brooklyn Museum. It is bristling with characters and scenes made of earth and buttons and sticks and shells. It has become the boat in the basement. Robinson wonders how she'll get it out of the house.

The buttons and ties prominent as elements in her work often come from the wardrobes of deceased loved ones of friends. Sometimes these are anonymous donations: Robinson tells of opening the door in the morning and finding boxes of old clothing on her stoop. Susan Saxbe,



Robinson's dear friend and agent, collects upholsterer's fabric sample books for her, and she has even arrived at her home in a van loaded with boxes of marbles—each of the glass balls spread across the backyard to be washed by the rain. "I feel like an enabler sometimes," Saxbe says, with a droll roll of the eyes.

Yet everything at Robinson's house is well-organized. There is no mess; it is the opposite of chaos. There is just an encircling, exhilarating, comforting sense of abundance. She's like a pirate, deep in riches, in her lair.

Robinson likes to talk about "walking the walk." She means it as the match between a person's inner and public lives. Her own literal walk is graceful, relaxed and alluring. But some of the other ways she conducts her daily life could madden any but the most devoted of her supporters.

Take her attitude toward the telephone. Very few people call Aminah Robinson because she is wary of sharing her number. The few who have it would never betray the privilege. For Robinson, the phone is at best a mixed blessing, at worst an intrusion on deeply rooted habits; for years, she has begun her work as early as 4 am.

So what happens when a stranger needs to interrupt? For instance, Dan Socolow, the director of fellows at the MacArthur Foundation in Chicago, who had pressing news in September 2004. "Genius grant" is the popular nickname for the MacArthur Foundation's annual awards to "highly creative individuals" (strategically left undefined) so they can "leverage their potential." In 2004, there were 23 recipients out of thousands of nominees. Among them were a Stanford microbiologist, an MIT nanotechnologist, a ragtime pianist and composer, a man who coaches the debate team at a California urban high school and the president of a foundation devoted to improving primary care for native Alaskans.

The candidates are researched without their knowledge. The foundation not only reads as much as possible about them, but, according to Socolow, it interviews 30 to 40 people—each sworn to secrecy. Discretion on this scale is itself a phenomenal accomplishment. Because of the vast conspiracy of silence, news of the award arrives in a way that is

as close to a divine intervention as is possible in this life.

It's part of the foundation's policy that the recipients hear about the honor through a personal phone call from Socolow, who gets to tell the winners that each will receive \$500,000 over five years. ("Are you sitting down?" he famously asks at the beginning of the call.) Socolow arranged for a mutual friend at the Art Institute of Chicago, where Robinson had shown printed books in 2003, to ensure that the artist would be home on the appointed morning to receive The Call.



Today, Robinson makes a wry expression when recalling the moment she heard from a man she didn't know. At first, she thought it was a crank call—she wasn't even aware of the MacArthur Foundation—and concluded she was being asked to create a piece of art about that famous general, Douglas MacArthur.

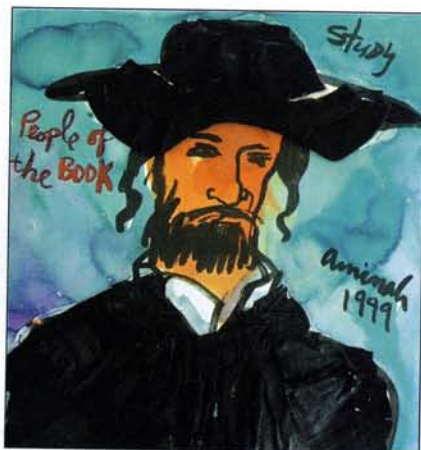
Saxbe recalls visiting Robinson after the call. Robinson was agitated because she had to promise Socolow she wouldn't tell anyone for a week, giving the foundation time to notify all the fellows before the press got their names. Robinson kept her word, sort of. Saxbe noted that

Robinson knows a woman who chooses to take her good fortune lightly and remain in the same east-side home in Columbus, Ohio. She is amused by the idea that she would move to a bigger house, let alone go to New York: "Honey! At my age?" she laughs. Keynes points out, "This is her community. It discovered her, it nurtured her, it appreciated her, and I think this, too, has kept her grounded. . . . The world will come to Aminah."

Robinson may dislike tags, but she is hardly indifferent to the blessings of her grant. Last spring, the MacArthur gave her the means to fulfill a lifetime dream of

continue my work, and if anything happens to me, I will be taken care of." In the meantime, she's made home improvements that seem small to outsiders, but are important to her. An open porch has been enclosed. A garage in the back of the house will be renovated into more work space.

But both Saxbe and Keynes say that prior to the MacArthur, Robinson was selling so well she'd been financially secure for some time. "Before the grant, she was appreciative, she was happy every single day for what she had. She was not struggling," says Saxbe.



Robinson's body language was intense: Something was seriously in need of expression. As they moved into the kitchen, Saxbe's eyes followed Robinson's pointing finger to the telephone. The caller ID box read, "MacArthur."

"We hugged," says Saxbe, "and we screamed and screamed and screamed!"

**A** year after receiving the MacArthur, Robinson is firm in saying that the grant "changes nothing. I am still the same, and I stand my ground. And that's it."

She is adamant in her dislike of labels, even when the tag is "genius" and the world is ostensibly her oyster. "I refuse to be put in a category or a label of any sort. Then people look at us as *indifference*." She explains: "Indifference covers a wide area of things—racism, black, white, blue, green. You're Mexican, you're African. You're an artist, bald head, bunch of earrings," says Robinson, who happens to be an artist with a bald head and bunch of earrings. "When people view you, then they view you in a certain way, rather than taking the time to see who people are and what they are. And I call that indifference. And that's the worst."

Anyone who cares to see the real

communing with the spirit of her most revered artist, Leonardo da Vinci. She traveled to Italy to see his world. In Rome, she had her hotel concierge procure a taxi with an English-speaking driver who drove her the approximately 375-mile round trip to his birthplace, Vinci, where she spent an enchanted day. Imagine how delightful this trip was to a woman who struggled as a single mother to make ends meet—and who learned to derive pigments from the earth because supplies from the art store were too costly. Leonardo manufactured his colors, too.

Robinson also has lots of new paints and brushes she purchased with grant money. Although good art supplies weren't out of the question for her previously, she hesitated to spend the money. (A top-quality broad watercolor brush can cost as much as \$400.) Now, she's built a virtual altarpiece, a sort of "brush-alabra," to hold her new natural-bristle brushes. Each has its own place, its beauty and potential celebrated.

Carole Genshaft, who curated Robinson's 2002-'03 solo show at the Columbus Museum of Art, says the grant "has had a wonderful impact. It has given her room to breathe easier and relax." For Robinson, the biggest thing is that the grant secures her future. "I am grateful to this MacArthur fund; it enables me to

A show at Hammond Harkins in October will feature work from a late 1990s trip to Israel. It will be her third gallery show there since 1997—the first two virtually sold out. The Columbus Museum of Art retrospective is going national in 2006, opening at the Brooklyn Museum, then moving to Tacoma, Washington, and finally to Toledo. She's created a heralded installation for the recently opened National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati and also has public works in the process for Ohio University and the Columbus College of Art & Design. All these were planned *before* the MacArthur award.

**F**or Robinson, the limited space in her home is full of possibility. Where there is no art now, there will be. The point is to fill the space with art, and her art is an extension of herself, as she herself is an extension of the stories that inspire her.

Those stories trace back to the neighborhood in which she grew up, Poindexter Village, around Mount Vernon Avenue and Long Street on Columbus's near east side. Her loving family, the merchants, neighbors, professionals and the colorful characters are all filtered



through her work via the stories she learned from them. Even now she continues to refresh and reinterpret those tales.

Her most important ones came from her great aunt, who was born in Angola and lived to be 105. She died in 1957. She told Robinson stories of being captured, branded and enslaved at age 5 and transported on the Middle Passage to Sapelo Island, Georgia. She eventually migrated to Columbus via Tennessee. "From 3 until 17, I listened to her stories. She made sure I understood. . . . She lived to tell me this story. It is a very, very sacred story, so these stories that I will reinterpret in her voice . . . these are her stories. But they are so many of our stories!"

Robinson's father taught her how to see a scene and then recall it later and reproduce it. The reproduction never will be entirely literal, she explains, because it will be illuminated with the spirits of the community, the ancestors and their stories. "I feel that I have been *blessed* because of my family, the community of elders of my family, and all those who have gone. . . . I view myself as a cultural voice. I hope I will help enlighten the past and hopefully bring about some experiences and inspirations for our young people."

Robinson's faith in the power of community stories told across generations has been broadly disseminated in Columbus over the years. The central staircase at the downtown branch of the Columbus Metropolitan Library is one of the city's must-see public artworks. Robinson is collected by the Wexner Center and the Columbus Museum of Art. The Greater Columbus Arts Council offices are decorated with her creations, as is the King Arts Complex. Ohio Dominican University, the Ohio State University Alumni Association, the Ohio Building Authority, Huntington National Bank and Columbus Public Schools are among the many other public and corporate collectors of her work.

Riverside Hospital's Center for Medical Education and Innovation recently installed two massive color drawings on paper. One is an illumination of Dr. Kickapoo's Medicine Show, which refers to "snakeroot cure-all" and "household remedies." The vibrant piece reminds the doctors at the medical-simulation center that they continue a long tradition of innovative

healers. "Her work connects us to the community," says director Pam Boyers. Robinson may not know about computer-aided laparoscopic teaching stations, but her cultural understanding of healing is genuine. It's found in the old stories about Kickapoo, experiences of her abducted and enslaved aunt, the loss of her son.

She doesn't wish to explore the death of her child, only to say she has recovered—as much as one can—after many years of effort. No doubt her art, like most every other major relationship in her life, has been influenced by the tragedy. But she is polite and clear: This topic is best left not discussed.



**I** have good people around me," Robinson says. "The best. I am 65. In the eve of my life. I feel that I've been surrounded by guardian angels."

Robinson's angels form the other community in her story. These are the people with her phone number. Even a genius cannot produce for so long on her level without active support and lots of it. It takes a village, indeed, to nurture someone who claimed the attention of the MacArthur Foundation. Inside the larger Columbus community, this village is constantly operating for her. Keynes points out that if Robinson were engaged with everyone who wanted to connect

with her, there would be little time for work, let alone contemplation.

Gisela Josenhans, a longtime supporter of the arts and artists, documented Robinson's work in the 1970s, when she couldn't afford the slides artists need to preserve and promote their images. Saxbe taught her not to give her work away, and she helps manage the phone-call level of her life. Keynes and her partner at Hammond Harkins, Bill Harkins, opened the door to exhibitions. In curating Robinson's first museum show, Genshaft researched and uncovered a lifetime of work, creating a full narrative. Denny Griffith at CCAD, Wayne Lawson at the Ohio Arts Council,

corporate, private and public collectors: These are among the many people who have become part of Robinson's network, in which personal friendship and participation in a brilliant career are inextricable.

Of artists, Robinson says, "You work hard. We all work hard." She defines the artist as a conveyor of hope despite any odds. The artist's biography is inseparable from the work; what counts is the spirit and the unity of the vision maintained through any experience. It is the walk that Robinson refers to. The walk may come naturally, it may be inevitable, but it is never easy.

Robinson has done a lot of walking uphill. She remembers when her work wasn't selling, even in Columbus. "People weren't interested," she says. "They didn't understand my work." She had been creating on a professional level ever since her teens, but her prodigy only got her taken advantage of by people who offered to sell her work, yet never returned money or the pieces to the struggling artist.

She focuses on the positive.

Robinson is perfectly serious when she asserts that the MacArthur award is only one in a long line of equally saving graces. While the world may see the genius grant as a singular, divine event, she is quite clear that it is the latest in a long series of good fortunes; each step forward for Robinson has come with the assistance of someone who has come toward her first, moved by her work. There's certainly no debating the good that accompanies a half-million-dollar, no-strings-attached grant. But the support it gives doesn't come with ideas or practical assistance or love.

And it doesn't bring marbles. ■

*Ann Starr is a freelance writer.*