

Smokehouse, 1968–1970

by Eric Booker

Smokehouse, 1968–1970 features archival photographs documenting the work of the Smokehouse Associates, a group of artists who developed community-oriented public art projects in Harlem aimed at transforming space through vibrant, geometric abstract murals, as well as sculptures. These images—photographed by Robert Colton, a Smokehouse Associate—depict the collective’s original members, William T. Williams, Melvin Edwards, Guy Ciarcia and Billy Rose, at work in Harlem, as they cleaned up sites and painted murals on city walls. Conceived and established by Williams, the collective initially spanned three generations of artists, eventually growing to encompass a diverse range of creative practitioners united behind the transformative potential of public art.

Opposite:
Billy Rose, Guy Ciarcia and William T. Williams (left to right) working on a mural at Sylvan Park (now called Harlem Art Park) at East 120th Street and Sylvan Place, New York

All artwork created by Smokehouse Associates, William T. Williams, Melvin Edwards, Guy Ciarcia and Billy Rose
Photos: Robert Colton, New York, NY;
Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY





Neighborhood children posing
with a completed mural at
E. 123rd Street, New York

Opposite:
Mural proposal in East Harlem,
New York

Reflecting the members' Southern roots and their social mission, the collective borrowed its name from the Southern vernacular "smokehouse"—a storehouse where meats are smoked and kept for times of need. They rejected the social realist imagery used by other muralists at the time, and instead believed they could change people's perceptions through changing the physical environment and making it "visually and aesthetically better and therefore more human . . ." Referencing the artistic applications of African and pre-Columbian societies, as well as the European Renaissance, as well as more modern influences such as Constructivism and Mexican Muralism, Smokehouse believed that the historical use of public art and the visual power of abstraction could be applied to neighborhoods throughout Harlem to improve the quality of contemporary urban life. The collective approached each project by engaging the community at every level, consulting neighborhood organizations and leaders prior to beginning work and employing local teenagers and elders during production. Murals were never painted above twenty-five feet, reflecting the group's practical nature—the height of their ladder—as well as their mission to physically and emotionally envelop the neighborhood through their

work. In turn, Smokehouse's collaborations created a sense of self-achievement and pride within the community. Children appear often in Colton's photographs, indicating Smokehouse's success in engaging and transforming the community. In some, they play among a series of outdoor sculptures also made by the group. As the collective refined its skills, the murals became more dynamic and spatially complex. The designs drew directly from the surrounding landscape—colors were taken from people's clothes, storefront displays and signs in the area, while the forms themselves reflected the architecture of each space. The collective alternated leadership of the design at the sites, and then responded to the initial murals with additional compositions on adjacent walls that formed a visual rhythm across the space. Collaged mock-ups for large-scale works—originally presented to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development—reveal Smokehouse's unrealized ambitions for murals that could be seen from a distance to draw curious viewers to Harlem to explore. Smokehouse was a radical experiment in public art. Although it flourished for just a few years, the collective created an unprecedented artistic platform for the community and inspired change throughout Harlem.

