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Visual Arts: Bruce Robinson's art reflects the layers of meaning behind his passion

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Bruce Robinson with "Duet" *Nancy Gilson*

Bruce Robinson creates magic from a simple material – plywood.

The artist, 73, and professor emeritus at Columbus College of Art & Design, began his career as a painter but in recent years, shifted to creating sculptural wall hangings and pedestal pieces from cut-out and carved plywood.

“Can I take this hard construction material and get it to be more fluid, more supple?” Robinson said he asked himself about his work.

An exhibit of 23 of his pieces, “Bruce Robinson: Flutterby,” is on view through mid-April at the Pizzuti Collection in the Short North. The subjects of these sculptures range from athletics to music, dance, art history and civil rights. Like the material of which they are made, the pieces have layers of meaning and reference.

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A number of works were inspired by Robinson’s high school years competing in track and field events, including “Flutterby,” an interpretation of a broad jumper and whose title is shared by the exhibit; “Front Runner” that pays homage to Olympic gold medal 400-meter hurdler Edwin Moses; and four runners whose movements are beautifully captured in two companion pieces, “Rundown #1” and “Rundown #2.”

“Forerunners” honors Jimmy Winkfield, the last African American jockey to ride a winner in the Kentucky Derby. The piece shows two horses, neck and neck, and their riders as they barrel toward the viewer.

Robinson, who works from his studio in his Driving Park home, begins his pieces with a drawing, recreates the drawing on plywood, and cuts out the image using a jigsaw or RotoZip saw — all from one continuous piece of wood which, in the last part of the process, is painted. His works are like three-dimensional line-drawings in which negative space plays an enormous role — giving the athletes, musicians or other figures a feeling of animation.



“To me,” Robinson said, “plywood is a material that has layers, which is a metaphor in addition to being the support for the artwork.”

Several of his pieces, Robinson said, reflect his love of music — classical, blues and jazz. “Duet” imagines a performance by jazz artists of different generations: Keith Jarrett and Thelonious Monk, with the pianists playing on keyboards directly across from each other. In “Playoff,” a figure strums a double bass. The sculpture has a double meaning in that its composition references the Titian painting “The Flaying of Marsyas,” portraying the fate of the unlucky satyr who lost a music contest to Apollo.

Several works in the exhibit depart from the plywood medium. The small wall sculpture “846” is titled for the eight minutes and 46 seconds George Floyd was pinned to the ground under a

Minnesota police officer's knee. Under an American flag whose star field features scenes of protests hang three pendulums carrying the number 846. The piece is subtly powerful.



Sitting on the gallery floor are three mobile assemblages that Robinson built of found materials and outfitted with transistor radios, drums and chimes — allowing them to move and make noises like friendly mechanical aliens.

Robinson received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Kansas City Art Institute and a Master of Fine Arts from Indiana University. He worked for more than 30 years teaching at CCAD.

At the Pizzuti Collection, Robinson's works are found on the second floor near the huge Alison Saar sculpture "Nocturn Navigator," a tribute to the Underground Railroad. The placement is appropriate given the subject matter of Robinson's works, said

Tyler Cann, director of exhibitions and curator of contemporary art at the Columbus Museum of Art that oversees the Pizzuti Collection.

“We’re delighted to have Bruce’s work here,” Cann said. “He’s the right artist in the right place at the right time.”

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At a glance

“Bruce Robinson: Flutterby” continues through April 24, at the Pizzuti Collection of the Columbus Museum of Art, 632 Park St. Hours: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Fridays through Sundays. Admission: \$5, free to members and veterans and active military and families. Masks are required. Call 614-221-6801 or visit www.columbusmuseum.org.

<https://www.dispatch.com/story/entertainment/2021/1/14/bruce-robinsons-art-reflects-layers-meaning-behind-his-work/6357191001/>