

FORT GANSEVOORT

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Vanessa German marries art, activism

Tony Norman

January 16, 2018

Vanessa German, an artist known for her citizen activism through art, was walking her dog in Frick Park in November when she got a call from a Chicago area code.

United States Artists, a philanthropic arts organization that has awarded more than \$22 million to artists since 2006, was calling with good news: Ms. German, 41, had been selected as a recipient of a \$50,000 USA Fellowship along with Pittsburgh multidisciplinary artist Bill Shannon and 43 others from across the country. Mr. Shannon won in the dance category and Ms. German in the visual arts category.

“It’s an award that someone in the art world nominated me for,” Ms. German said of the group of anonymous scholars, critics and artists across nine disciplines chosen by USA Artists to do the initial round of nominations.

In past years, she had been invited to nominate others for the prize. Despite national and international acclaim for her art in recent years, Ms. German didn’t expect to win the grant. She is self-taught with no earned academic credentials despite a long list of universities where she has lectured over the years.

Winners can use the \$50,000 however they want. Past winners have used it for everything from furthering an artistic project to paying outstanding medical bills.

In March, Ms. German will go to Chicago for a Fellows Assembly that will bring this year’s winners together. She has had a good run lately. Last year, she won the American Academy of Arts and Letters Jacob Lawrence Award and a single artist Matrix exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Conn. She has hilarious and sobering tales about a trip to the Czech Republic last year.

In recent weeks, she has been putting together an exhibition for Concept Art Gallery in Regent Square. It’s called “The incredibly true sometimes humorous often horrific adventures of a wacky black girl, or, a visual ritual into the power of the black imagination.”

Ms. German’s “power figures” are playful, totemic sculptures exuding equal amounts of joy and trauma. She depicts women, most of them black, in various stages of self-discovery, confrontation or defying annihilation.

“I’m mining the cells of my body for information,” she said.

She refers to the “technology of my soul” — a process of surrendering her whole self to the mystery of creating. Her use of found objects and material in her work is an instinctive, revelatory process.

FORT GANSEVOORT

“I’m making power figures from a place of being a black person — a female person,” she said. “Power figures are meant to protect, feel and articulate without words.”

If Ms. German’s work were parts of speech, they would all be verbs, even the ones that appear quiet in repose. Their features are exaggerated and their bodies are contorted, yet graceful. They carry the weight of found objects and commercial detritus with goddess-like grace.

“I can create a sense of movement, urgency, horror, disgust inside a sculpture,” she said. “I’m making art to shape-shift the reality. Making art is a matter of life and death. In my work, everything means something — every element.”

“Vanessa was particularly impressive,” said Deana Haggag, president and CEO of United States Artists. “Our panel was eager to fund her work. We were immediately drawn to the caliber of her sculpture and her citizen [artistry].”

She noted how Ms. German marries art and activism. In addition to creating majestic sculptures that art lovers find so arresting, she teaches children how to create art at her ARThouse project in Homewood.

“[Vanessa] creates work that sits at the intersection of contemporary practice, social change and human rights,” Ms. Haggag said. “All of her work is beautiful and compelling. She’s wonderful.”

Previous local winners of the USA Fellowships include poet Terrance Hayes (2011), now poetry editor of The New York Times, Rust Belt photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier (2014) and Jasiri X (2015), a hip-hop artist who is reconnecting rap to its activist roots while mentoring the next generation of media savvy young people through the “1 Hood” initiative.

In addition to the Concept Art Gallery exhibit, Ms. German has several pieces currently on display as part of the Mattress Factory’s 40th anniversary exhibition. The prolific artist has created hundreds of paintings, drawings and sculpture pieces. During an interview, she sketches on the white surface of a pedestal.

“I make art in order to survive the next 365 days,” she said. “Art is my way of answering: What do I have to do?”

“The incredibly true sometimes horrific often humorous adventures of a wacky black girl” has its official opening celebration at the Concept Art Gallery on Jan. 25, 6 pm to 8 pm. Vanessa German will do a spoken word performance with writer Deesha Philyaw. On Jan. 27, Vanessa German will be in conversation with artists Gavin Benjamin, Alisha Wormsley, Morgan Lindsay and Allie Rose. On Feb. 8, Vanessa German will perform Poem Prayers. On Feb. 17, the artist will conduct a walk and talk through the gallery from 2 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. All performances are open and free to the public. Concept Art Gallery is at 1031 South Braddock Ave., Pgh. 15218. Go to www.conceptartgallery.com for more details.