

Artist takes 'beautiful opportunity' to exalt Ernest Withers' legacy

For Tarsha "Tosh" McGhee, Ernest "Baba" Withers was more than a famed photographer. He was a longtime friend to her grandfather and a fixture in her family's life.

Given the chance to exalt Withers' legacy in the form of a fine arts collection, McGhee stepped up to meet what she calls "this beautiful opportunity."

"It has been a blessing and a journey and I have been excited every step of the way," said McGhee.

In October, the centerpiece of McGhee's effort will be on display during the 14th Annual Stone Awards show, which will honor Withers who died in October 2007. She already was working on it for the Withers' family foundation before learning of the Stone Awards tribute.

McGhee describes the work as a "fine arts original."

"It's a collage. The pieces that are on the canvass are his original clothing that was donated by the foundation to incorporate into the art piece," said McGhee. "I've got his kufi, I have his suspenders and have also his necktie."

Working on and off, McGhee said it took about a month to complete the work.

"I had to cut and paste and try to make it mimic exactly the way it looks with all those different patterns. That was a very nice experience. I had never done it before without painting on top of it. I actually left it fresh with just a natural pattern," she said.



**Tarsha "Tosh" McGhee incorporated articles of clothing from Ernest Withers in her artistic tribute to the late, famed photographer. (Photo by Earl Stanback)**

Now that the work is finished, McGhee said there is talk of using the image on shirts or other visuals such as posters. She is going with the flow.

That's a natural move for the self-described, self-taught artist who is a product of The LeMoyne-Owen College.

"I graduated with a business degree and I discovered my talent as an artist (during) my senior year in 1995," said McGhee. "I started out doing images of musicians. Bob Marley was the first painting that I painted, which sparked the buzz with my art."

From there she expanded to do other musicians – Jimi Hendrix, Marvin Gaye, Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Sade among them. Her list of clients include celebrities such as Isaac Hayes, Julius "Dr. J" Erving and Jerry West.

"Elliot Perry bought my first painting....when I first started sharing my work outside of my private cluster of people," she said.

Her artwork notwithstanding, McGhee is an entrepreneur who works with a number of people in the entertainment business. She will retain the rights to the fine arts collection she is doing for the Withers Foundation and stay open to working out the details.

"The meaning is so much more than just the dollar bill. We are just letting the spirit lead us," she said. "It has been a wonderful union in trying to get it started so far and I see the temple as being wide open and enormous."

It means a lot to have any artist (paint) a picture of your father and put it into a fine arts print, said Rome Withers, noting the added joy in this case because McGhee's family and the Withers' family go back a long way.

As for McGhee's collage incorporating articles of his father's clothing, Withers said, "If you do a DNA test 100 years from now you will find Mr. Withers' DNA. That's very unusual."