



"Stars and Stripes," by Ekoa Holmes, 13.25 x 16.5 in., collage, shown at Cousen Rose Gallery, Oak Bluffs.

## Three Gallerists in Oak Bluffs

[Mathea Morais](#)

Three Black women define the two most important things in their lives: art and Martha's Vineyard.

Ann Smith, Zita Cousens, and Val Francis have known each other for many years. Smith is the executive director of Featherstone Center for the Arts, Francis is the owner of Knowhere Gallery and Center of Knowhere in Oak Bluffs, and Cousens owns Cousen Rose

Gallery, also in Oak Bluffs. None of them set out as young adults to bring art to a community and yet all three have found their way to what they define as the two most important things in their lives: art and Martha's Vineyard. During Covid they began to meet once a week over Zoom and when they reflected on what that meant to them, they realized something important had happened.

Francis, who noted that all of her interactions with Cousens and Smith over the years had been one-on-one, said, "When we started coming together, it became this really safe, warm, comforting space, and a place for us to exchange on so many levels; to be able to have a sounding board. I'm learning a lot from being in the presence of these two."

Francis, fondly referred to in the group as the "new kid on the block," has been in the arts world the shortest amount of time, but her love of art and Martha's Vineyard stretches back to when she and Smith grew up spending Oak Bluffs summers together and forming one of those quintessential Martha's Vineyard friendships — one that starts as children spending days together on the beach and extends into adulthood and next generations. In fact, all three women come from multi-generational Island families with ties to Oak Bluffs, and their lives have intersected in many different ways. "I remember going with my mother and father to purchase art from Zita," said Smith, and Francis and her husband and business partner, Ralph H. Groce, have also purchased art from Cousens over the years.

“Here we were, Val, Zita, and myself, three Black women gallerists, as I like to call us, all at different points in our lives and careers amongst the arts, trying to reimagine the curation of art experiences in a newly defined socially distanced world,” Smith told me. Even though the three all knew each other, they never spent time talking together. “And I thought, especially in this time of Covid, why not get into this Zoom space and make sure that we’re all okay?” The three began to meet regularly to talk about how they could support one another and think about ways to handle these difficult times as well as think about how they could support each other going forward, professionally and personally.

The social and racial justice awakening that happened last spring and summer as a result of the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd also got Smith thinking about what it meant that they were three women, three Black women, three Black women in Oak Bluffs, three Black women in Oak Bluffs who believe in the power of art to bring out the best in a diverse and thriving community.

Smith said she’s excited about how proud the Black community is about there being Black leaders in the art field. “I would be remiss if I didn’t talk about how important that is to me on a personal level and on a professional level. Black people have sought me out, they want to support our organization.” But, she explains, this isn’t because Black people only want to see Black art, it’s because “they want to support the connection that makes it a more welcoming place to see all different types of art.”

This rings true for Cousens and Francis as well. “I am a businesswoman, I’m an entrepreneur,” said Cousens. The Cousen Rose Gallery, which opened in 1980 and remains one of Oak Bluffs’ longest running businesses, certainly always carried Black artists, but she says it’s inaccurate to call it a Black gallery. “It implies that all I carry is African American art and I carry a wide range of art, a wide range of mediums, and from people from different backgrounds.”

Francis echoed this sentiment. “I’ve been in situations all too often where I’m the only woman and I’m the only person of color, of any color, sitting at the table and having to have a presence and an impact. From a personal perspective, I’m really proud of that, but I don’t want to be pigeonholed and I don’t want to be put in a box.” The mission and purpose behind her galleries, she said, is to be inclusive while telling a different story. “People who come to the gallery are in awe to see different types of art. That’s the beauty of being inclusive as opposed to exclusive.”

While Smith was fortunate and honored to follow in the footsteps of her mother, Francine Kelly, as the executive director of the year-round non-profit arts center for the Island, she too wrestles with what it means to be a Black woman in the art world. “As part of my cohort in the non-profit world,” Smith said, “I’m the only one.” But she, like Cousens and Francis, is in the business of creating enriching art experiences for everyone. “We may all have different missions, but our overall goal is to promote art and artists and for Martha’s Vineyard residents and visitors to have an arts experience in our spaces.”

In addition to Covid bringing the three of them together, there are ways in which being in the arts world during the pandemic has changed their approach to their work. For Smith, she said it helped her understand at a deeper level that life is fleeting. “It became more about appreciating that simple things in this moment are significant, rather than chasing the what’s next, what’s bigger, what’s more. We were allowed to take it all in fully and completely — each show, each piece of art, each day, each minute, and make it count.”

“I loved the intimacy that Covid brought,” said Francis, whose gallery really had to shift gears in terms of how to schedule shows. “It allowed me to be more present with the guests and to have time to breathe in between. It also gave me more time to showcase the artist.”

Cousens agreed. “The people who came into the gallery last year needed nourishment,” she said. “That’s the only way I can describe what it looked like and felt like. I hope that that intimacy and closeness, that engagement stays the same.”

Smith also noted that the combination of heightened social justice awareness and society being forced to pause and then slowly pick itself back up, meant there was meaningful reflection including a slowing down and looking at art and a slowing down and having conversations where the dialog changed dramatically. “Because of Covid, there are now deeper discussions and an openness of many to educate themselves and a willingness to understand, respect, and appreciate others’ ways of life.”

Cousens saw a similar trend, especially with new white patrons specifically coming to her gallery. “People made it a point to find their way to the gallery to indicate that they were supporting the arts, and in particular a Black business.”

For all three women, the Island has always played an important role in their work. “The Vineyard is their happy place,” Cousens said of the people who walk into her gallery in the summer. “Not just, gee, I feel good, but they’re relieved from stress, just for a moment in time. I’ve been coming here since I was a baby and the feelings that existed for me back then, exist for me now and exist for the people who come here.” Cousens tries to bring that feeling into her gallery. “When people come in, I want them to feel welcome, comfortable. If their children are with them, I want the children to have fun. Fine art doesn’t have to be pretentious.”

Smith agrees. “People come here to exhale,” she said. “It’s an open invitation for creative expression and inspiration.” For Francis, as the third generation of her family spending time and living here, “the Vineyard is a place where visitors are able to shed all that goes on in the world, where they can feel connected, share a sense of oneness with the environment.” It is this feeling that Francis wants to enrich for those who walk through the doors. “Whether they buy something or not. When they leave, I want them to leave feeling empowered, informed, learning something new, or thinking a little bit differently.”

Looking forward to the new season, the three gallerists are hoping for a summer that continues to see people focused on the arts.

“Covid brought out creative experiences for everyone,” said Smith. “People who would’ve said, ‘I don’t like art’ are true engagers now. I hope that in the future, the arts will play an even more active role in their lives.” Francis agrees. “I think we’re going to see a huge influx of support,” she said, “as people are looking to build their space with beauty and images now that they are allowed outside of those spaces again.”

As far as collaborations go, the three gallerists will be jointly producing a Black Illustrators Show in August. Cousen Rose Gallery will feature work by illustrator Ekuia Holmes and Knowhere Gallery will be showcasing illustrator Charley Palmer. At the same time, Featherstone will have a show entitled Awarded Black Illustrators with guest curator Rich Michelson.

So what will change now that the Island has mostly lifted Covid restrictions? Well, the three gallerists will continue to meet and support one another — hopefully in person now that all are here on the Island. For Smith, “I don’t think there’s a going back. We can only be forward-looking in what we do and how we do it, with open minds and hearts. Engaging in the arts will continue to contribute to overall well-being, personal growth and joy.”

*Mathea Morais is the author of the critically-acclaimed novel THERE YOU ARE (Chicago Review Press, 2019). She is also the Director of Literary Arts at Featherstone and a teacher at the Martha’s Vineyard Public Charter School.*



Pictured left to right: Zita Cousens, owner/curator, Cousen Rose Gallery  
Ann Smith, executive director of Featherstone Center for the Arts  
Val Francis, owner, Knowhere Gallery and Center of Knowhere