

Richard, Paul. "The Power and The Spirit," *The Washington Post*, 19 February 1983.

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

The Power and The Spirit

By Paul Richard

February 19, 1983 at 12:00 a.m. EST

The galleries on the A-level of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, 901 G St. NW., are windowless and drab. But the five black artists showing there have done more for those basement rooms than one would have thought possible. They've honored and transformed them. Their exhibition celebrates Black History Month. It does so in a way both subtle and surprising.

While free of propaganda, raised fists and cliché's, this show of abstract modern art never turns its back on blackness. Its unlikely materials--cut-up tires, rolls of butcher paper, wooden dowels, piles of sand--somehow yank into the present old African traditions. Through their patternings, their rhythms, their expressive choreographies, these pieces summon powers. They hint at unseen spirits, rituals, weaponry and feasts.

"Five Installations" was coordinated by Sam Gilliam. It includes large works by Yvonne Pickering Carter, an associate professor at the University of the District of Columbia; Simon Gouverneur, an artist-in-residence at Howard; Clifford Hewlett, a student at UDC; Martha Jackson-Jarvis, a former Howard lecturer and artist-in-residence, and Keith Morrison, a professor at the University of Maryland. Their varied, yet coherent, show reminds us once again how much local universities, following Howard's lead, have done for new black art.

"Cast of Prayer Stick" by Jackson-Jarvis dominates the first room. Made of clay and sand and eeriness, it is part object and part place. Imagine a long and legless table set with desert landscapes instead of bowls of food. Seated on all sides, where the diners ought to be, are groups of rolled-clay "prayer sticks." Are they feminine or masculine, scepters, icons, weapons? No matter how they're read, they conjure something timeless--a ceremonial hunt, a priestly convocation, the Last Supper, the Sahara. Another memorable Jackson-Jarvis work, equally suggestive but less self-contained, is currently on view at the Washington Project For The Arts. This one is even better.

It politely coexists with the wall-hung works beside it. "Two Poems to Ecology" by Gouverneur, and Morrison's "Notes to a Native Son" treat the Jackson-Jarvis installation with deference. Both flirt with three dimensions, but stay loyal to the wall. Morrison's slight drawings are self-deprecating, modest. A few small colored marks, as melodious and slight as bits of distant bird-song, are scattered here and there on sheets of partly crumpled paper. Gouverneur's dozen drawings, with their grids and repetitions, manage to evoke K Street and computers, calendars and game boards, prayer rugs and the tiles of Middle Eastern mosques. Hewlett's cut-tire installation suggests the haunted visions a Michelin Man might meet in a medieval dream--gold and silver tires, and tires that have given up their dull, pneumatic bulges for strange ethereal laciness, and rubber monsters moving through enchanted woods.

Carter's piece is called "Vestibules, Vestiges, Virgins and Voices." Made of wood and paint and graceful drapes of canvas, it, too, calls to mind a dissolving reverie. One enters a long room, an armory of sorts, arrayed with ghostly standards and pale battle flags. The deeper one advances, the stranger the images become. Some make one think of helmets, others call to mind trophies, faces, doors. "Five Installations" closes Feb. 28.