

# AJC.com 'Material Girls' Show Strong Works of Art

Review by Felicia Feaster on September 13, 2012

The exhibition "Material Girls: Contemporary Black Women Artists" at Spelman College Museum of Fine Art features seven female artists who use ordinary materials: black plastic combs, plastic grocery bags, car tires, rebar and metal bed frames to create art. The work is often a charming re-imagine of an impersonal material world shaped to suit personal desires.

Gallery notes attest to how many of the assembled artists use materials in a way that is inspired by personal history. With family members who are cooks, blacksmiths, potters, mechanics and seamstresses, these artists have clearly seen how craft and manual dexterity can make something inert into something beautiful or functional.

Artist Maren Hassinger is a characteristic example of an artist who embraces the urban landscape around her and shapes it into something surprising. In "Love" the artist takes pink plastic shopping bags that look like wads of bubble gum. "Inflated by human breath," the bags are then stacked in a gallery corner to ceiling height in a pyramid form. Inside the bags are unseen love notes, lending "Love" an air of mystery. The piece attests to the secret yearnings that each of us carries inside of us.

If Hassinger is all about transforming man-made objects into thoughtful works of art, Martha Jackson Jarvis is inclined to use natural objects – volcanic stone, glass, wood – to create meditations on nature. Her most beautiful work here, "Scent of Magnolia I, II, III" is comprised of car fender-sized concrete forms encrusted with glass and stone – dead-ringers for the fat magnolia seed pods that litter Southern yards.

Hassinger and Jarvis create artworks laden with sentiment and remembrance. But artist Chakaia Booker is a bird of a very different feather. This art world rock star makes objects full of attitude. Booker's sculptures – which also appear through October in the Atlanta Botanical Garden's "Independent Visions" – are foreboding, strange, even intimidating. Her material? Rubber tires: the Firestones and Pirellis that get us from point A to B. But in a beguiling alchemy, Booker has taken something familiar and transformed it into something uncanny, a postindustrial collision of "Mad Max" and African sculpture. In "The Fatality of Hope", the artist has shaped and twisted tires into a teeming, frantic tangle. Bits of black rubber curl inward then project outward like tendrils of ivy or barbed wire from the wall.

Booker's material is grave and intense, while Maya Freelon Asante's is utterly ethereal. She uses ink soaked into tissue paper to create multi-patterned, colorful forms that can resemble tie-dye or stained-glass windows. Unfortunately, in several cases the work feels incredibly static: pretty colors and dreamy forms but not much more. "Gestation" is a more meaningful work, which uses bulging accumulations of colored paper to suggest the various stages in a fetus's growth. The final form suspended from the gallery ceiling bursts with suggestive life and energy, using an abstract form to get at the joy and magic of creation.

It is little wonder Renee Stout and Joyce J. Scott are placed in close proximity. Both artists use a magpie collection of objects: glass beads, light fixtures, guns, doorknobs, photographs, to address personal and shared myth. In the wacky and wonderful "The Thinking Room", Stout has filled a small room with furniture, paintings and decorative objects meant to evoke a fortune teller's lair. Walking into this nook tucked into an out-of-the-way corner of the gallery, you feel as if you are truly entering the artist's imagination. From the private to the public, Joyce J. Scott uses delicate, fanciful beads, coral, glass bottles and small objects to evoke systems of belief, from Catholicism to Buddhism to African folklore. Her work speaks to the human desire to create totems, talismans and figures to guide us through difficult times and unknown passages.

Another manipulator of our age of factory-made objects, Sonya Clark creates spare and compelling sculptures that often comment upon African and African-American identity. In "7 Layer Tangle" Clark creates a small tabletop mountain out of countless intertwined black plastic combs. Seen next to "Twisted Diaspora" in which tiny canvases sprout black thread woven into long braids, Clark conveys the powerful sense of identity embodied in African-American hair-care and hairstyle.

There is much strong work in "Material Girls" though the show can often feel overburdened by its concept. Each artist offers individual pieces that stand apart and others that seem included merely to show the varied forms their use of materials can take. "Material Girls" often lean too heavily on its ordering device of what the artists are using to create artworks, instead of establishing some essential connections between the works on display.