

Review/Art; Visual Arts Join Spoleto Festival U.S.A.

By Michael Brenson

May 27, 1991



See the article in its original context from May 27, 1991, Section 1, Page 11 Buy Reprints

[VIEW ON TIMSMACHINE](#)

TimesMachine is an exclusive benefit for home delivery and digital subscribers.

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not

alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems; we are continuing to work to improve these archived versions.

In the days before the opening here of the Spoleto Festival U.S.A.'s "Places With a Past: New Site-Specific Art in Charleston," which may be the most moving and original exhibition of contemporary art in the United States this season, some of the artists seemed to wonder themselves at the force and meaning of what they had brought into being.

Antony Gormley sat alone in silence by the copper tube, dangling from the ceiling like a golden rope or umbilical cord, that he had installed near the top of the old city jail he had just finished turning into an allegory of human transformation.

David Hammons sat on the sidewalk on America Street deliberating upon his "House of the Future," an amazingly eccentric, barely functional two-story edifice, roughly 6 feet wide and 20 feet long, pieced together with found columns, a found door and scraps of wood. Even as he sat there, it was becoming increasingly difficult to tell who the real architect was, Mr. Hammons or the residents of the black neighborhood, although only he could be responsible for such an inspired and unpredictable communal invention.

Joyce Scott -- whose mother, once a sharecropper in South Carolina, contributed to her grandly theatrical installation -- at times just sat on the ground and stared at the rustling beads she had hung like weeping willows branches from the tops of four columns standing at the edge of a park, and at her suspended black tree dangling like a burned, lynched figure rising from the ashes of the painted logs beneath it.

This year the Spoleto Festival decided to treat the visual arts with the same seriousness with which it has treated opera, theater and dance, and it has done so in style. This exhibition, which opened May 24, is unusually concentrated and pure. The artists chose their own sites. There is no evident dealer or collector involvement and no smell of power or money. The art is impermanent. When the exhibition ends on Aug. 4, almost everything will be dismantled.

All 17 installations are rooted in Charleston and its history. The 19 artists -- black and white, male and female, from Canada, Europe and Australia as well as from the United States -- explore Charleston and slavery, Charleston and the military, Charleston and religion, Charleston and its devotion to a glorified view of its past. A number of installations were conceived for old or dilapidated buildings, some for private homes. Some artists found the stories they needed to tell in a pump house, or in the Customs House, or in a church. Very little of the work is didactic. Almost all the artists came to Charleston to learn from the city, not to tell its citizens what to think.

The exhibition proves that art made for a specific site and shaped by a social or political orientation has no intrinsic limits. The best work belongs to Charleston and its history and yet goes well beyond them in implication and scope. In this rich and complex 300-year-old city, with its almost fanatical commitment to architectural preservation and with its magnificent yet seemingly impenetrable facades, artists in this show found themselves struggling with age-old issues of appearance and reality, memory and transcendence, life and death.

Along the dark corridor of a Confederate widows' home, Liz Magor has hung photographs that look as if they were taken during the Civil War. But they were in fact recently taken at re-enactments of Civil War events, re-enactments whose accuracy was largely determined from Civil War photographs. To experience these static images of men and women posing in the garb of the time, staging

heroic battles and acting out moments of camaraderie, sacrifice and death, is to enter a world in which past and present, fact and fiction, truth and delusion collide.

The exhibition is a tribute to Nigel Redden, the festival's general manager, who conceived of an ambitious art event that would use and call attention to the resources of the city. Its cost, paid in part by the National Endowment for the Arts and private foundations, is now estimated at more than \$800,000.

But most of all, the exhibition is a tribute to Mary Jane Jacob, a former curator at the Museums of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and in Chicago, where she is now a freelance curator. She selected the artists, led them through Charleston, negotiated their sites and maintained constant dialogue with residents and officials of a city that had no experience with this kind of art.

The sailing was not always smooth. The exhibition did not appeal to Gian Carlo Menotti, the founder and artistic director of the Spoleto Festival U.S.A., who threatened to resign over it at a board meeting last October. "It was not his idea of art," said Claudia Keenan of the festival's press office. At the same meeting, however, he agreed to go along with what the board wanted. "He has in some ways resigned himself to the show," Ms. Keenan said.

If "Places With a Past" demonstrates the maturation of a new kind of art, it also reflects a new attitude toward history. For the artists in the show, there is not one history but many. Almost all of them have a need -- almost a mission -- to bring into the open histories that remain largely unrecognized or unwritten.

Walking through Ann Hamilton's 14,000-pound tumulus of blue work shirts and pants glowing in the natural light of an abandoned garage on Indigo Street -- with the names of the men who wore the shirts still on the pockets or collars -- it is possible to feel the presence of a mountain of forgotten people. For the

duration of the exhibition, someone, sometimes the artist herself, will sit behind the mound and erase the kinds of history books (with blue covers) many Americans grew up with.

Walking through Elizabeth Newman's installation, on the top floor of a four-story house that was once a water works, listening to a recorded lullaby and to the continuous running of hot water in an old bathtub, seeing a photograph of a black nursemaid and a white child, there is a clear sense of the role black nursemaids played, and still play, in Charleston life. And because of the seven little chairs and seven glasses of honey and the overwhelming smell of talcum powder, the installation also bears the full-bodied presence of children.

Walking through Lorna Simpson's installation in five rooms of a former slave quarters, seeing the names of slave ships and looking at black baby dolls suggesting infant mortality and seeing photographs of trees in the garden while listening to Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," there is a sense of the passage of slaves from Africa to Charleston and their lives there.

For people unfamiliar with this kind of work, the first question is likely to be, Is this art?

It certainly is. The best artists in the show think in images and have a strong feeling for materials, and they are determined to use images and materials in a sensuous, physical way. Although the works are first and foremost about content, their formal power can be startling. Ms. Hamilton's glowing blue mound, with its shirts and pants stacked like bodies, is a visual tour de force.

Only a handful of works in the show are unsuccessful. Ian Hamilton Finlay's hive- and medallion-shaped memorial to the 1942 Battle of Midway, citing the names of destroyed Japanese ships as well as of the carrier Yorktown, is so inconsequential that it might as well not exist. James Coleman's slide projection

in a parish, based on an inaccurate Currier & Ives print of the Battle of Bull Run, is better suited to a classroom. Cindy Sherman's photographs of body parts, primarily feet, hands and skulls, installed near the entrance to the Gibbes Museum of Art -- the reference point for the exhibition -- would be more at home in a New York gallery.

Some works are worth preserving. The "House of the Future" has brought money and attention to the black section of Charleston. Because of Mr. Hammons, a dirt mound diagonally across from his magically illogical house is to become a little park. Instead of a billboard advertising cigarettes there will be a photograph of black children staring at a black nationalist flag rising out of the mound like the flag out of the sculptural mound of Iwo Jima.

Mr. Gormley's installation unfolds over seven rooms of a worn but seemingly indestructible jail built in 1802 and closed in 1939. All the doors and windows are now open so that wind circulates through the cells and everything is illuminated by natural light. The aim, Mr. Gormley said, was to take this building with its specific history of confinement and "liberate it."

The floor of one room is packed with an army of 20,000 hand-size terra-cotta figures facing the door. A nearby room is empty except for three large rolling iron globes. The floor of a third room is covered with mud from the harbor and water from the sea. In the room directly across from it, five figures, all lead and Fiberglas and made from a mold of the artist's body, are embedded in the ceiling: they could be lynched but the way they defy gravity also makes it seem as if they are walking on a plateau of air.

Two smaller rooms contain giant seeds (made of plaster, oyster shells and mica) that are both massive and light (they suggest clouds) and seem swollen to the point of exploding. Concealed inside each one is a male figure. The mouths and

penises of the figures within the eggs are connected by tubes. They face the same wall, like prisoners in different cells trying to communicate.

The culmination of the installation is the golden copper rope or umbilical cord, alone in a room with rusted walls that seem like flayed skin, carrying the journey from mud and water and fertilization to the sky. This visceral, multi-layered and richly textured work carries within it the feeling for the past and the call to consciousness and transformation that is being issued by almost every artist in one of the most visceral, multi-layered and richly textured exhibitions this year.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section 1, Page 11 of the National edition with the headline: Review/Art; Visual Arts Join Spoleto Festival U.S.A.