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Out of Africa

The City's new gallery at Waterfront Park hosts three superlative MOJA exhibits

BY CAROLINE SAFFER

How fortunate Charleston is to be home to a number of arts festivals spread throughout the year, punctuating the city's culture with an influx of attractive exhibitions and performances. One such celebration is MOJA African-American and Caribbean Arts Festival, which in its 20th year has become another Charleston tradition. Among its many offerings this year MOJA brings with it a particularly thoughtful and well-organized visual art exhibit that will regretfully be on display only for a brief time.

The show, housed at the relatively new City Gallery at Waterfront Park, actually brings together three separate exhibitions in one space: *Memory Speaks* by Tiebena Dagnogo, *Corapeake* by Kendall Messick, and *Whose Song Shall I Sing?* by Juan Logan. Organized by Mark Sloane, the director of the Halsey Gallery at the College of Charleston who has worked with past MOJA events, the overall effect of the show certainly exceeds the sum of its parts. The lofty space of the new City

Gallery, with copious natural light pouring off the river that runs just before it, leads the viewer through the individual exhibits in a natural progression, giving adequate space to experience each one in its turn but remaining visually integrated. While each of the artists' perspectives, styles, and the type of work he produces are very different, all of them are connected by the conceptual continuity of presenting the community with ideas concerning African-American life in modern society.

Memory Speaks is a collection of mixed-media works that Tiebena Dagnogo, an artist from the Côte d'Ivoire, created while serving as the 1998 artist-in-residence at the Halsey Gallery. With an interest in "linking sculpture, painting, and all traditional forms of African expression" (according to a printed introduction in the gallery) through his work, Dagnogo drew upon tribal symbols and objects to create art that references African history and culture. At the same time, many of the works look much like the assemblages and combine paintings made by American artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns in the 1950s and '60s. Dagnogo seems clearly drawn to the Western abstract traditions

Visual Arts

MOJA Festival Exhibits
Memory Speaks
Corapeake
Whose Song Shall I Sing?
Through Oct. 15
City Gallery at Waterfront Park
34 Prioleau St.
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in art, in addition to his native African influences.

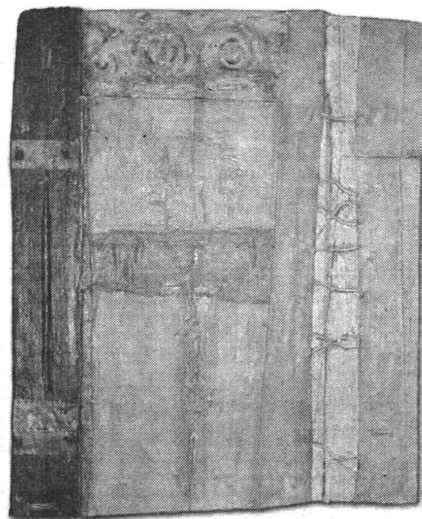
In these works, Dagnogo uses rough, primitive materials, synthesized in a surprisingly fluid manner. Instead of canvas, Dagnogo uses wood pieces for the foundation of the sculptural "paintings," onto which burlap, twine, and metal scraps are attached. Most of the works are positioned vertically, evoking the doors the artist saw in Senufo tribal villages in Africa. The concept of the door is symbolic as the entrance to the privacy of one's home and culture; furthermore, many native traditions see the door as a spiritual icon, the idea of a portal separating the physical and spiritual worlds. Dagnogo employs geometric shapes

two diamond shapes are cut out, with slender scraps of wood forming crosses inside them like two windows, or perhaps a pair of eyes guarding this "door." The word "Dozo" is featured farther up, the raised letters carved right out of the wood; it is painted to look almost like a plaque, fixed by two scraps of metal overlapping it. Arrows pointing upward and to the left are tooled into the metal, as if indicating the possible directions the viewer can follow when approaching this door — to enter or to turn away. A number of appendages are fixed to the piece primarily by small loops of twine from which they hang, the carved wooden pieces simulating primitive tools such as an African craftsman might use. The entire

piece is painted over in ochre, olive, and gold hues so that the shapes blend into a unified, three-dimensional construction.

Also on the ground floor of the gallery is *Corapeake*, a project by Kendall Messick; the black-and-white photography that composes most of this show is a fresh contrast to the abstract colorations of Dagnogo. The photographs, as well as the film running continuously in a corner of the exhibit, document the interactions the artist had with the residents and environment of Corapeake, a small North Carolina town, over a course of seven years. Messick, a filmmaker and photographer based in New York City, first visited Corapeake in 1995 at the request of his best friend, who wanted Messick to photograph her aging relatives there. "In the people of Corapeake," the artist noted, "I found unconditional acceptance and love that had been born amidst hardship and faith." It was a particular revelation to the artist to find himself forming such close bonds with these individuals despite their different backgrounds (Messick is white, Corapeake's residents are black).

In "*Corapeake*," which sprang largely from journals, scrapbooks, and audio recordings, Messick explores the details of the town's culture and traditions through perspectives of the past that relate and connect to the present. To underline this, the smaller photographs with their glossy veneers and high, bright contrasts, are matted against collages of old



Tiebena Dagnogo's "Kacou Anawze" from *Memory Speaks*

throughout the works and earthy colors that seem directly garnered from natural pigments; the thickly-handled paint and broad fields of color look to the Abstract Expressionism, again a 1950s style centered in America. Every physical piece and artistic detail of each work seems deliberately placed, as if each "door" has its own spiritual connotations.

One of the more arresting works in *Memory Speaks* is "Dozo." Several wooden planks are fixed together vertically with horizontal planks bordering at the top and bottom, creating a natural frame. Near the base of the work,

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newspaper clippings. The prints largely depict the colorful, emotional characters Messick encountered, particularly the more elderly inhabitants who could recount their memories, not only about the difficult living conditions they endured (especially in the cotton fields), but also details of their spirituality, superstitions, and daily customs. Beneath each of these photos is printed one of these quotations, rendered even more poignant when a Corapeake child is depicted; in juxtaposing the image of a young person with the words of their elders, the viewer is almost forced to wonder how much times really have changed in this place.

Several larger-scale photographs, matted simply and without text, also punctuate this exhibit, rich in realistic detail, particularly the so-called flaws of human wear and tear. A departure from Messick's focus on capturing people is "The Great Dismal Swamp" (1996), a gelatin silver print, which actually shows part of the scenery surrounding the Corapeake residents. The picture is taken from a perspective close to the ground, confronting the viewer with the thick, gritty texture of swamp sludge rendered in a silvery tone, and the slender tree trunks shooting up from the swamp, bursting into a canopy of leaves far above. The depiction ends up being quite beautiful in its ethereal and cathedral-like forms; nevertheless, one can imagine the stench and stagnancy of the swamp, which cannot help but affect those who live around it.

Juan Logan's *Whose Song Shall I Sing?* which takes up the entire second floor of the gallery, is probably the most complex, and certainly the most politically loaded, of the three exhibits. This exhibit, which has shown before at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, is typical of Logan, an art professor at UNC Chapel Hill, who asks questions concerning the history of racism against blacks and it has continued into the present. The artist, who was raised in the South and experienced its traditional prejudices, is very personally vested in his work. He seems particularly concerned with the iconography of racial abuses and stereotypes, demonstrating the ways people make judgements on certain surface values that prohibit them from seeing deeper truths.

Whose Song Shall I Sing? consists mainly of decorative sculptural objects lining the walls of the gallery that at first looked like small, gothic-style altarpieces, but upon explanation by Logan turned out to be re-creations of a type of "memory board" used by certain African tribes to record the events of their people; these works relate back to Dagnogo's Senufo doors. Through strategically placed objects and imagery on each of these boards, Logan creates miniature commentaries, many of which refer to slavery. One symbol that

arises consistently in all of Logan's work is the cruel, exaggerated caricature of "Aunt Jemima" in its original incarnation: the broad features and eternally grinning mouth. One example, "Lessons" (1998), is composed of leather, tin, copper, steel, wood, and lead. The surface of the board is covered with small, thin metal circles overlaid on top of each other, creating the effect of a pile of coins, such as those that might have been used to purchase a slave. Toward the top of the board is a relief of the "Aunt Jemima" face, below which are 15 pairs of breasts, also in relief on tiny rectangular panels arranged in three rows. The work is based upon the experience of Logan's grandmother, a slave woman forced to serve an overwhelming number of roles in her life, from mother to housekeeper to cotton picker. In fact, his grandmother's old leather kneepads used in the fields are attached to the bottom corners of the panel like two small knees in a spread, kneeling position.

Logan's exhibit also features other sculptures and installations, one of these the title piece of the show. *Whose Song Shall I Sing?* (2001) features 90 of the same "Aunt Jemima" faces made from polyurethane resin with a powdered iron coating. The faces, spaced in long, horizontal rows and looking much like theatrical masks, create a powerful impression through their repetition. Some of the faces are gagged, completely bound with a thick grating, or have blanked-out features, suggesting an inability to speak out or even be seen, limitations on the types of expressions that black people are permitted. The piece is concerned with identity and recognition of African-Americans as individuals and valued citizens; in light of continued racism in America, Logan questions whether blacks *should* sing the country's national anthem. The one disappointing aesthetic choice in the exhibit was hanging a number of large, cut-out heads by Logan down the narrow walls supporting the upper floor of the gallery. Although the heads do serve to unite the first and second levels of the show, these works seem more like decorative experiments, and in their dominant position distract the viewer from the more engaging works.

Shows that accompany an event like MOJA are essential in a city that has been home to blacks for centuries and that has thereby been shaped in part by the rich offerings of black culture. Conceptual exhibits based on a racial connection among the artists, however, may be disappointing when an appreciation of the works as valid art forms in themselves is subverted to superficial assumptions about the artists' political or social interests precisely due to their race. Often, it becomes nearly impossible to examine the art in an organic fashion because the issue of race actually hinders, not deepens, understanding. At the same

time, art cannot help but be, to some degree, an extension or reflection of an artist's being, of which race and ethnicity comprise a great part. The main reason *Memory Speaks/ Corapeake/ Whose Song Shall I Sing?* works so well is that these three artists from different racial backgrounds create thoroughly modern works with an ability to look at the past while relating it to the present; the feeling of the show becomes universal while retaining its African-American tone. The result is a compelling exhibition that transcends its black theme into something far more universal. CP



"Eley's Hands" from Kendall Messick's *Corapeake*.