

LIFE PATTERNS

The Libation Series: Sculpture by Denise Ward-Brown

Curatorial Statement by Susan Watt,
Emison Art Center Gallery Director

In her sculpture *Come Fill My Lovin' Cup*, Denise Ward-Brown adorned a spilled cup and vase with an accumulative pool of buttons placed on an heirloom doily over an antique table top. She drenched the flowing mother-of-pearl and plastic circles with a thick varnish. Each day for several months, she repeated the process. The varnish drippings have hardened in mid-flow and seem to hold – seal – the vessels and spheres into a past repeated action. By looking at her work, one may



Come Fill My Lovin' Cup (detail), varnish libations and assemblage, 18" x 18" x 10", 1999

imagine the motion of Ward-Brown's hand as she poured the varnish over the top of the objects. The work is a record of her movements – now her stopped motion. This record of applying the varnish, called varnish libations, reveals the actions of the ritual behind the making of Ward-Brown's art. A libation, by definition, is the pouring of a liquid offering as a religious and secular ritual. A libation tells the story of a process. It is in the making – of art, of rituals, of heritage and of people – that Ward-Brown makes herself heard and invites us, the viewers, to wonder and discover.

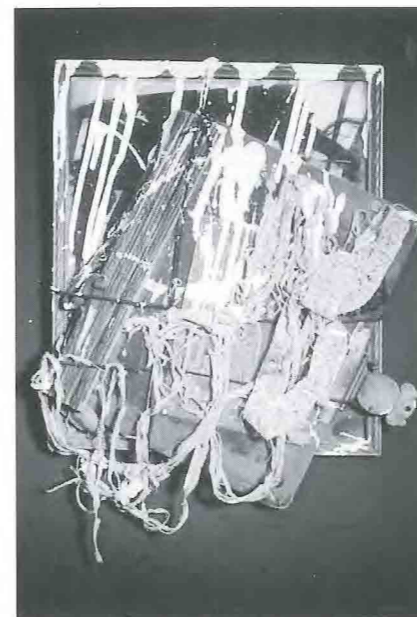
Ward-Brown's sensitivity to objects allows her to place them in relationships with each other and with colors and forms. The objects in her art are familiar to us: a ruler, a rose petal, a clawfoot table, a communion tray or a folded piece of paper. Objects hold the memories of their uses, their times and their associations. Ward-Brown's art beckons us to recognize how these objects were combined – the actions, the rituals behind the making – and see how the materials and colors may be read metaphorically to suggest connections and new forms.

The *Libation Series* seems a natural development for Ward-Brown, who in 1998 was in Ghana, West Africa, researching architectural patterns, textures and rituals as a Fulbright Scholar. She was struck by the symbolic gestures of daily life in Ghana, and moved by the elaborate tributes that encompass the Ghanaian funeral tradition. She recognized that in much of her own work as an artist, she strived "... to accomplish the same thing; to figure out how to honor someone's life after they're gone." Through her active work, Ward-Brown has succeeded in remembering and respecting her ancestors. From 1993-95, she created the series *Heading East and East*, a memorial to the millions who died on slave trade ships bound from Africa to the Western Hemisphere (called the Middle Passage). In her *Libation Series*, Ward-Brown's works become not only memorials, but turning points where past and future meet. For example, in *At the Cross Roads of Now*, her materials of paper and paint libations evoke a ship, spilled blood and a sea in an overflowing serving bowl. But because Ward-Brown wrote her aspirations and goals on each piece of paper before every folding, the work also serves to commemorate what is yet to come.

Ward-Brown calls rituals and traditions "four-dimensional patterns." What I see her work revealing are life patterns. Through her assembled sculptures made of layers of remnants from the home or from nature, Ward-Brown holds her memories, her past, out for us as viewers to examine and interpret. Her art takes on the life of the actions that happen when she makes her work; she creates new objects made through her rituals, but they still are tied to the past. She lists her processes as a material. The materials, in combination with the titles of her works, all bind with history, renewal, ritual and action – a recognition or acknowledgment of what has happened, is happening or will happen.



At the Cross Roads of Now, paint libations and assemblage, 46" x 32" x 33", 1999



What's Past Is Prologue #1, paint libations and bundle, 15" x 12" x 2", 1999



Meeting Friends, paint libations and assemblage, 7" x 7" x 3", 1999

DENISE WARD-BROWN

AWARDS AND GRANTS

- 1998 Fulbright Scholar Award; Ghana, West Africa
- 1994 Regional Artists' Project Grant; Mid America, NEA
- 1991 Individual Artist Grant; Washington, D.C. Commission on the Arts & Humanities
- 1989 Individual Artist Grant; Washington, D.C. Commission on the Arts & Humanities
- 1986 Outstanding Emerging Artist; Annual Mayor's Art Award, Washington, D.C.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1998 *Patterns*; Harwell Art Museum, Poplar Bluff, Mo.
- 1995 *Currents 62: Denise Ward-Brown*; Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis
- 1993 *New Work*; Pierce-Arrow Gallery, St. Louis
- 1991 *Sculptural Assemblages*; University of Maryland, Eastern Shore, Princess Anne, Md.
- 1989 *New Work*; Jones, Troyer, Fitzpatrick Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- Evolution of Form*; Montgomery College, Tacoma, Md.
- Assemblage; "O"* Street Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1986 *Isolation/Saturation*; Washington Project for the Arts, Bozeman, Mont.
- 1984 *History as Content*; Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C.
- Thresholds & Portals That Invoke Memories*; Cinque Gallery, New York

TRAVELING EXHIBITIONS

- 1999-97 *Seeing Jazz*; Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service
- 1992-90 *Next Generation: Southern Black Aesthetic*; Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1998 *Old Forms, New Rhythms*; Ghanaian National Museum, Accra, Ghana, West Africa
- Resonant Forms*; Center for African American History & Culture, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 1997 *St. Louis: The City Series*; Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, Cedar Rapids, Iowa
- 1996 *The Hardware Show*; Gene Pool & Associates, New York
- wild dreams/domestic obsessions*; St. Louis Design Center, St. Louis
- 1994 *Sources: Multi Cultural Influences on the Art of African American Sculptors*; University of Maryland, College Park, Md.
- History & Memory – Pictures & Objects*; University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, Wis.
- 1993 *New Blood*; Murray State University, Eagle Gallery, Murray, Ky.
- 1990 *Gathered Visions*; Anacostia Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 1989 *Installations*; Rockville Arts Center, Rockville, Md.
- 1988 *Bridges to the African American Aesthetic*; Strathmore Arts Center, Rockville, Md.
- 1987 *The Washington Show*; Corcoran Museum of Art, Washington, D.C.
- The Phillips Connection*; Shipee Gallery, New York

EDUCATION

- 1984 MFA, Howard University, Washington, D.C.
- 1975 BFA, Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia



Owning Freedom, assemblage, 6" x 17" x 14", 1998



Come Fill My Lovin' Cup, varnish libations and assemblage, 18" x 18" x 10", 1999

The sculptures in the *Libation Series* were created as daily rituals. A ritual, by definition, is a form or system of rites. A rite is a solemn ceremony, formal procedure or act in a religious or secular observation.

How a ritual is done is more important than what is done. What is done is arbitrary.

I choose abundance as a perspective to work from. Within this perspective, the objects and actions are defined by their intention. The intention invites the meaning into the life of the one who performs the ritual. The evidence of that act will surpass the ritual itself.



356°, paint libations and assemblage, 30" x 30" x 10", 1999

SCULPTOR
DENISE WARD-BROWN



At the Cross Roads of Now (detail), paint libations and assemblage, 46" x 32" x 33", 1999

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LIBATION

Sculpture by Denise Ward-Brown



Can I Get A Witness, paint libations and assemblage, 30" x 40" x 30", 1999

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DePauw University • Emison Art Center
309 South College Avenue • Greencastle, IN 46135-0037 • 765-658-4800
Gallery Hours: Monday-Friday 9 a.m.-4 p.m. • Saturday 10 a.m.-4 p.m. • Sunday 1-5 p.m.