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Martha Jackson-Jarvis: The Process of Discovery *by Curtia James*

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Music of the Spheres, 2003. Glass, carnelian, jade, mortar, and steel, 7 spheres, 10 x 40 x 40 ft. Work installed at Fannie Mae, Washington, DC.

The obsessions that awaken mixed-media artist Martha Jackson-Jarvis each day emanate from her love of family, her passion for cooking, and, she's the first to admit, from her unabashed fascination with the elastic dimensions of clay. For years, the material has served as the basis for her site-specific floor mosaics and installations, for landscape projects, for her complex coterie of sculptural objects, and, these days in particular, for three large-scale commissioned installations by this Washington, DC-based artist.

Music of the Spheres and River Spirits of the Anacostia are two recent projects in the District of Columbia, and Techno 368 will be installed in the Bronx. Each

installation tempers its urban setting, contrasting the architectural with the ethereal, physicality with myth. The projects not only reference years of study and aesthetic development, they also, through their erudition and elegance, offer glimpses into the essence of the woman herself.

The challenge, Jarvis says, has been to manage the expanses of time that each project demands: "It takes being able to see the big picture and at the same time to see all of the many minute details along the way. So there's a vision of the microscopic and the macroscopic at all times." She admits, "The days of solace and solitude in the studio are over. Today when I arrive at the studio, I must be prepared to do the work conceptually of seven people. I must be the eyes that see the subtleties of the moment and the ears that hear the call of the next step."

Each work is encoded with layers of identity-based and universal messages, touchstones open to interpretation at each viewer's level of understanding. Densely textured references accompany the abstract in the vivid palette she employs. Through imagery that reflects the African American and human experience and found objects with personal and general resonance, Jackson-Jarvis provides a readable amalgamation of painting and sculpture. Her inclusion of family remnants alone, from objects broken in her own household to plates she received from her mother or grandmother, as independent curator John Beardsley has written, has "served an incantatory purpose, bringing forth the benevolence of those who had possessed them."

Jackson-Jarvis's conversation, like her art, is peppered with references to the mores, art, and deities of Africa, whose art she admires for its "immediacy and humanity." The African concept of ashe or energy courses like a pulse through her early works and informs her public artworks, albeit on a grander scale. "I'm interested in those kinds of in-between places where light, reflection, texture, and form all merge to make this unknown thing happen. This unknown thing has to do with

energy and life and force, and it speaks to each of us in a different way," she says. "It's something I grasp for."

Thematically, Jackson-Jarvis's work, regardless of its venue, is reflective of such energy, spontaneity, light, death, and life. Such an eclectic formula is detected in the luminous jewel tones of the stones and glass in the spheres, the fluidity of the river depictions in the Anacostia work, and in the mathematical references in Techno 368. The ceramic bird abstractions that she began to form three decades ago served as a catalyst for such patterning and imagery, particularly through their emphasis on freedom, motion, otherness, flight, and possibility. Explaining the progression, she explains, "The bird spirit, that notion of flight, was a strand or thread that tended to weave itself through the work through the years. It would change in its physical manifestation, but certainly that energy was always there."



Music of the Spheres, 2003. Glass, carnelian, jade, mortar, and steel, 7 spheres, 10 x 40 x 40 ft.

For New•Land•Marks (a project of the Fairmount Park Art Association) in 1999, Jackson-Jarvis worked with fellow sculptor and landscape designer JoAnna Viudez to redress West Philadelphia's neglected Malcolm X Memorial Park, achieving a fluid integration of concrete obelisks, bird houses, ground cover, spiral railings, performance space, flora, and river stones. On trips to Ravenna and Carrara in 1992 (through a Lila Wallace-Readers Digest Foundation Arts International grant), she studied Italian mosaic techniques, stone, and tesserae cutting, all of which she used to enlarge her repertoire. In 1996, her work was celebrated with a 20-year survey at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. She was the artist/designer for Daughters of the Dust, the 1989 Julie Dash film based on a South Carolina island family, and her site-specific sculpture Rice, Rattlesnakes and Rainwater proved to be a highlight of Charleston's Spoleto Festival in 1997.

Music of the Spheres, commissioned by Fannie Mae, is lyrically choreographed in the northwest quadrant of Washington, DC, just outside the Van Ness-UDC station of Washington's Metro system, at the entrance to one of the company's headquarters buildings. Based on ancient theories of the harmony of universal order, the installation encompasses the transitory and the landmark, providing a setting conducive to purposeful contemplation for the students, commuters, and neighbors who pass by. It consists of seven orbs: one measuring 10 feet, one measuring eight feet, two at seven feet, and three at four feet in diameter. The spheres, which were installed in July 2003, are composed of concrete evocatively and singularly encrusted with Indonesian jade pebbles, cobalt blue vitreous glass tesserae, and carnelian. Through their combination of myth, lore, and science, the orbs inject a sense of the "other" into the visual clash of signage, steel, glass, and heavy pedestrian traffic that surrounds them.

The selection committee for the commission included visual arts professionals, residents from the surrounding community, and Fannie Mae officials. "I think what people liked about her plan," Alfred King, director of Fannie Mae's public affairs division, observes, "was that it was accessible without being imposing, that it was going to serve as a focal point for the area that wouldn't overwhelm the community. It seemed to have the right combination of scale and interesting materials and was something that could be appreciated by a wide range of people."



River Spirits of the Anacostia, 2003. Glass and mortar. Conceptual rendering of Anacostia Metro Station mosaic, Washington, DC.

One of the artist's favorite aspects of the spheres is that "they're huge, so you get to walk in between them." Their positioning incites an easy interaction between object and human that art historian David Driskell commented on in Jackson-Jarvis's earlier series, "Path of the Avatar" (1987), which was completed for "Contemporary Visual Expressions," the Smithsonian Anacostia Museum's inaugural exhibition. "These works," Driskell wrote in the show's catalogue, "function as an environment and as installations made more lively with people milling around and into their space. Though totally different in physical format and appearance, these sculptural works are closer to African art, that is, in motion and ceremonial use, than they are to

totems and sculpture in the round."

Across town from the Fannie Mae plaza, in the southeastern quadrant of DC, is the Anacostia community and the river of the same name, both of which Jackson-Jarvis and her family have found to be real treasures. When she first discovered that the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities had launched a national competition for an artist to complete a mosaic in the community's planned subway station, she knew she had to be the one to win the commission. Her concept for the lush, visually tactile, 400-foot glass mosaic, which ultimately won the commission, will wrap around the top four and a half feet of all four sides of the station's entrance.

She credits Rice, Rain and Rattlesnakes for Spoleto, a three-story atrium mosaic at the Prince George's County Courthouse in Maryland, as well as other public art projects with having helped her to prepare for such an initiative. The Anacostia mosaic is as figurative and narrative as the courthouse work, and both are decidedly more representational than her previous mosaics. River Spirits synthesizes her attempts to forge new concepts and, through them, to meld past, present, and future. "This piece is really about the energy of the river and the indigenous plants that grow along the shore and some of the life forms—the salamanders, the tortoises—that live there," she says, pointing to an image on one of the 52 panels.



Ochum, 2000. Red clay, river sand, cement, ferns, and plant materials, work installed at the South Carolina Botanical Garden, Clemson.

The mosaic, which is scheduled for installation in 2004, also pays homage to the slaves who were once brought to these shores along the river, as well as to the African cosmogram, providing figurations, which had been largely removed from her work throughout the '80s. And everywhere there are effervescent references to the river itself. "I'm trying, if you can imagine, to catch the energy of the river that's just flowing around this building and spilling out parts of its story as it travels around. And I really wanted it to be a centerpiece, a gem, a jewel for this community," she says.

In the heart of the Bronx, miles away from Anacostia, a glass mosaic, Techno 368, is slated for unveiling in 2005. Commissioned by New York City's Department of Education, School Construction Authority, and Department of Cultural Affairs Percent for Art Program, the mosaic will be installed on a wall facing the inner courtyard of the borough's science and technology high school, MS/HS 368.

Michele Cohen, program director for the Public Art for Public Schools program for the Department of Education, says that Jackson-Jarvis was a natural choice for the mosaic, not just because of her public art achievements, but also because of “the rich iconography that she weaves into her work and her original approach to the fabrication of mosaic art.”



Rice, Rattlesnakes, and Rainwater, 1997. Shell, glass, clay, cement, and steel, work installed in Charleston, South Carolina, for Spoleto USA 1997.

The opportunity will enable Jackson-Jarvis, who has taught and served as an artist-in-residence with various institutions for decades, to impact both educators and the educated and ultimately also to teach perpetually, albeit indirectly, about life, hope, calculation, and art. “There is an element of teaching that is really precious to me,” she says, “because I love teaching, and I love the energy of young people making discoveries for the first time. I keep a cadre of really interested young people who work as studio assistants, so I’m teaching, but it’s really at a very intimate level. And that’s something that I saw as I traveled to Italy. The notion of the apprentice is still alive there.”

Despite her success with commissions, grants have sustained Jackson-Jarvis through the years. Grants from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities have been instrumental in her professional development and have provided the resources for her to secure proper studio space, materials, and equipment. “I could not have engaged in the level of investigation that I have without grants,” she asserts.

Her research into various subjects and the resultant urge to stretch the parameters of contemporary art have proven as tireless as her pursuit of the funding necessary to realize her creative aspirations. “This is not something I can just fold up and do in the corner of an apartment. That will never happen. You need a studio. You need serious backing. So I forced myself to develop the writing skills for grants, articulating what it is I am thinking, no matter how obscure it is,” she says. “For an artist that’s a valuable choice, finding how to communicate what you’re doing to other people. Of course, the greatest communicator is the work itself, but first you’ve got to convince others of its importance, of its worth before it can really manifest itself in sculpture.”

She has always worked in the round, initially by employing a combination of traditional African dung firing and Japanese raku. In time, she has come to value clay’s infinite potential for surprise. For her, for example, the common disaster of a kiln explosion offers an opportunity in disguise. The results of the tension that leads up to a work’s conception has for years fascinated her enough for her to allow their remnants to become part of various mosaic works and a step along her aesthetic journey. She links “the shards, the little modules that happen by hitting fragments together” to the African and African American tradition of burial fragments and crockery. “It leads you from shards and broken things to old dishes and crockery to more formal venture, because now I’m working with glass mosaics. It’s a metamorphosis that happens along the way. It’s all part of the process of discovery.”

One work has informed another like the call and response of African ritual, improvisation, or jazz. Individual bird forms led to abstract multiples that she used to structure space rather than focus on individual forms. In time, her work progressed to include installations that embrace the notion of transcendence from one dimension to the next.

In 1989, at the urging of a former student, she secured a cache of antique Venetian glass, which she began to incorporate into mosaics. Through experimentation with the glass, she began to infuse a denser, more sculptural quality in her work, melding recurrent environmental references with the notion of objecthood. Over time, in addition to the glass, she began to broaden her use of materials, enriching her options to include coal, copper, slate, wood, and stone that she would anchor with cement or raked acrylic gels.

By painting and sculpting simultaneously, first at Howard University and later at the Tyler School of Art and Antioch University, Jackson-Jarvis learned to develop the surface of her sculpture. "In ceramics to deal with color takes years, because you're really talking about chemistry more than about direct color," she recalls.

Her earliest artistic impulses can be traced to her childhood in Lynchburg, Virginia, where she would dig for clay and spend time exploring its various guises while on her way to draw water from her family's spring. It was her grandfather's ability to design various gadgets and his willingness to let her join him in the process that inspired in her an acute awareness "that with the human hand you could manifest whatever."



Rice, Rattlesnakes, and Rainwater, 1997. Shell, glass, clay, cement, and steel, work installed in Charleston, South Carolina, for Spoleto USA 1997.

She credits these roots with fostering an inventiveness that has enriched her work process. "For example, moving these boards," she says, running her hand along the surface of one of the 300-pound, four-by-seven-foot panels that will compose River Spirits of the Anacostia. Along with a carpenter friend, she designed a cantilevered structure that enables her to remove, move, lower, and stack each panel on completion. "Along the way you come up with all these systems that work for you and hopefully not against you," she asserts.



Markings, 2000. Steel, concrete, stone, and plants, 4 x 40 x 40 ft. Work installed at the Montpelier slave graveyard, Orange, Virginia.

Washington, where she and her husband Bernard have raised four children, has offered her opportunities that for the past three decades have consistently served to fuel her vision. The architecture of what she describes as this quintessential "classical city" has served as a constant source of intrigue. "It's like walking through history. And there are also stipulations on the limits of the building heights," she says. "There's something about the human scale and the natural environment that is still possible here. You can still see the sky here."

It was at Howard that she first encountered people who knew that art could be a lifelong endeavor. She has since come to believe that art can and should edify the human experience, the environment as well as the lives of artists themselves. "There's a momentum to study and investigation and inquiry, so at the beginning you couldn't begin to say just where this is going to take you," she says. "You're always on the trail and on the journey. And I'm not bored yet."

Curtia James is a writer living in Maryland.

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