

Cash, Stephanie. "Review: Tires, love letters, hair combs and more are stuff of art for Spelman's seven 'Material Girls,'" *ArtsATL*, 28 September 2012.



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By Stephanie Cash on September 28, 2012

The often-debated distinction between craft and fine art is irrelevant in "Material Girls: Contemporary Black Women Artists," at the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art through December 1. The seven artists on view – Chakaia Booker, Sonya Clark, Maya Freelon Asante, Maren Hassinger, Martha Jackson Jarvis, Joyce J. Scott and Renée Stout – embrace both, sacrificing neither concept nor craftsmanship.

The women all hail from the East Coast, primarily Baltimore and Washington, and all but Clark and Freelon Asante were born before 1958. All have educations in fine art and familial ties to craft traditions. Though their choices of materials vary widely, their works all touch on personal history, heritage, craft, recycling and tradition – and the recycling of traditions.

Booker, the best-known artist in the show, makes sculptures and wall reliefs using slashed, cut and twisted rubber from salvaged tires. They are muscular and assertive, whether pedestal pieces or immense mural-size installations. They're usually abstract but can be biomorphic, as with "Mixed Messages," which resembles an octopus sitting on a pedestal with its tentacles swirling below. More typical is "The Fatality of Hope," a 17-foot wall piece laden with bent, curling and thrusting pieces of rubber that erupt from the panel.



Maren Hassinger's "Anklet" (2006), made with copies of
The New York Times.

Stout makes a strong showing with "The Thinking Room," the parlor of her imagined alter ego, herbalist and fortune-teller Fatima Mayfield. The hot red interior features walls, shelves and cabinets lined with bottles of potions, religious icons and symbols, African masks and painted portraits. A ledger listing clients, their ailments and remedies sits on an ottoman in front of a fancy settee. The space crackles with magic and mischief.

Clark layers her sculptural works with references that, while sometimes obvious, imbue the minimalist pieces with associations of identity and race. "Wavy Strand" is a curvy line of upright black hair combs that suggests a strand of curly hair. "Plain Weave," a wall piece resembling West African kente cloth, is composed of two layers of hair combs arranged in a checkerboard pattern and bound together with earth-toned thread.

Four works by Hassinger are evenly divided between successful and not. One of the show's outstanding pieces is her monumental corner installation of pink plastic bags, some "inflated by human breath," each containing a small handwritten note that says "love." Bunched on the floor, the

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bags rise up, in a triangular form, to the ceiling – perhaps a metaphor for the uplifting human emotion.

Clustered in another corner are what appear to be five small poufs made from twisted pages of *The New York Times*. A wall label shows Hassinger wearing what turn out to be anklets in a performance at the Studio Museum in Harlem, referencing African dance traditions. Less compelling are her sculptures using steel cables, concrete and other industrial materials to evoke a garden and organic forms, to lament the loss of nature.

A number of Freelon Asante's pieces made of colorful and stained tissue paper offer little beyond cosmetic appeal, though a coil of tightly wound multicolored tissue paper is texturally appealing. "Gestation" lends some symbolism to the mix; it comprises eight wall pieces that increase in size, like a pregnant belly, and a ninth element that is suspended away from the wall, representing a newborn child.

Some examples on view could pass for outsider art, perhaps an inevitable association when using found materials in quirky assemblages. Scott's work definitely falls on the craftier side of the divide. She employs blown glass, glass beads, African figurines, stone, wire and other materials, in figurative sculptures that resemble goddesses and shamans.

Jarvis conflates nature themes and natural materials in works such as "Umbilicus II," two organic forms, both constructed of concrete, glass and jade stone, and tethered together by tree limbs. Their metaphorical weight doesn't compare to their material heft.

As artistic practices become ever more digitized, outsourced and theoretical, it can be refreshing to return to the physicality of artmaking, the magical transformation of matter into meaning. The best examples are still those that marry idea and medium instead of using one to prop up the other.

"Material Girls," curated by Michelle Joan Wilkinson, is slightly altered from the original exhibition, which debuted last year at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African-American History & Culture in Baltimore.