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'Material Girls': 8 African American Artists Update a Tradition

They collect discarded objects, such as tiny glass medicine bottles. One dyes tissue paper and creates floats of color. One goes to a quarry and uses volcanic rock to make sculptures. Another sees beauty in the hardness and blackness of tires.

A group of African American women are paying homage to the generations-old tradition of turning the castoff into art at a show in Baltimore that looks back gently at grandma's hands but delivers art that has today's edgy energy.

"Material Girls" — at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture — features work by East Coast-based artists Chakaia Booker, Sonya Clark, Torkwase Dyson, Maya Freelon Asante, Maren Hassinger, Martha Jackson-Jarvis, Joyce J. Scott and Renee Stout.

Michelle Joan Wilkinson, the museum's director of collections and exhibitions, selected the artists for their ideas and their use of textures and colors. Walking through the exhibit, Wilkinson says, "These are artists who had a concern for objects and materials, and some are heavily concerned about the environment." The artists — some established, others still experimental — express themselves boldly and surprise their audiences while exploring themes that range from a mother's love to the benefits of solar energy.

The contrasts in the long gallery are provocative.

Asante, 29, a painter and sculptor who has a master's degree from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, works with tissue paper. She dyes the paper, leaving watercolor shades and then rolls and twists them into shapes that suggest stories.

One piece, created when Asante was pregnant, follows the nine months of gestation. She created nine billowing pieces, each one larger than the last, displayed on a wall-size, free-standing surface, the last tissue form flies alone, away from the wall.

Using rubber tires, Booker, 58, a sculptor who was featured in the Whitney Biennial in 2000, produces intricate patterns and swirls. The black material takes on a reflective beauty and is twisted and overlaid to suggest the interconnections of lives. One thick line of rubber parts, accented with more delicate coils and swirls, is called "The Fatality of Hope."

Dyson, 38, a multimedia artist who creates sculpture and installations, was featured in the Whitney Biennial in 2010. Dyson sometimes uses industrial materials but from toys. She has taken a commercial African mask and covered it with parts of model cars. The elongated face of the mask is popping with tiny wheels and windshields, perhaps a commentary on the overwhelming force of consumerism. In the opposite direction, Dyson recreated a solar energy room especially for the "Material Girls" exhibit, pushing visitors to think about how they treat the environment.

Jackson-Jarvis, 59, a leading Washington sculptor who had a retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery in 1996, works in volcanic rock, other types of stone, and glass and wood. Included in this show are pods that

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look as if they are growing. In each, a smaller piece is connected to a larger with a wood vine, symbolizing the mother-and-child relationship.

"Each of these pieces weighs 100 pounds. When we were installing it, I thought we should place it all on the platform. But Martha said the piece could spill over the floor. She said you can't contain the art," Wilkinson said. Outside the building is a special installation by Jackson-Jarvis, called Vortex, rising like the top of a volcano, its shards of glass catching the sun.

Another Washington-based artist, Stout, a sculptor and assemblager, won the Driskell Prize from the High Museum in Atlanta last year. Over the years, Stout, 53, has turned gallery spaces into realms of imagination with found objects from photographs to chairs to medicine pouches. One artifact-packed installation is called "The Thinking Room," and Stout used wire and small shovels and wheels to create "Ogun's Bed," a tribute to the Yoruba god for war and iron and to the men in her family who worked in the steel mills.

Using a lighter approach, Hassinger, 64, a sculptor and a director at the Maryland Institute College of Art, has taken old New York Times newspapers and created round moplike sculptures. But the work actually represents the anklet that a number of African tribes use in ritual dances. In another mood altogether, Hassinger uses pink plastic bags, some with the word "love" inside, to construct a wall hanging. This pink waterfall can start a conversation about commercialism and the consumer's responsibilities.

What to do with those drugstore combs? Clark, 44, a fiber artist who was born in Washington and heads the Department of Craft/Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, turns everyday combs and thread into sculpture that looks like kente cloth.

Scott, 63, one of the country's best-known bead artists and sculptors, who had a solo show at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2000, comments on religion, politics and humor. She tears down culturally insensitive and stereotypic images of African Americans, such as the old Mammy. A delicate statue that negates the usual negative images, "Inkisi: St. John the Conqueror," is a tower of glass beads, strands of coral and glass bottles. "Material Girls" is a robust conversation between viewer and artist about the ordinary memories of place and people and how the artist can shift the ordinary onto the museum pedestal.