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VICTUALS WITH VITALITY

MARTHA JACKSON-JARVIS'S CORNUCOPIA AT THE CORCORAN

By Jo Ann Lewis

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More than 100 big, beautiful collard green leaves, countless carp and a real live Potomac catfish are the stars of Martha Jackson-Jarvis's new exhibition at the Corcoran. But this is no ordinary down-home feast.

The eye-dazzling bouillabaisse of mixed media focuses on recent sculptural assemblages by this nationally known Washington ceramic artist. Vastly ambitious and bristling with energy, Jackson-Jarvis's first solo museum exhibition here -- appropriately titled "Structuring Energy" -- unveils dramatic changes in her work.

In the '70s, Jackson-Jarvis, just out of Philadelphia's Tyler School of Art, attracted attention with large, birdlike figures that looked like spirits conjured from a distant world. By 1981, mesmerized by prehistory, she focused exclusively on using fired clay fragments for room-size installation art (where the artist creates works designed for a particular site). Since the early 1990s, however, Jackson-Jarvis, now 44, has been seduced by the ancient medium of mosaics and resumed creating discrete sculptural objects.

This show is loosely divided into three series: "Sarcophagi" is made up of elaborately decorated coffins; "Tables" includes Parsons tables laden with fish and other symbols of plenty; the "Boxes" portion features elegant mosaic boxes hanging on the wall. Built from wood, each object is encrusted with a shimmering mosaic of glass, shiny shards of colored tile, upended slivers of slate, stones, coal, metal and various abstract shapes fashioned from clay. These colorful, multifaceted surfaces are anchored with acrylic paste or slathers of pigmented plaster.

The resulting overall surface designs -- many of them displaying a chromatic and textural virtuosity -- are abstract, although they frequently contain festoons of large ceramic collard green leaves and fish. The one exception is an oversize showpiece titled "Divining Rods: Catfish Wish," which features a 13-foot-long trough filled with water and, when last observed, a live catfish.

The highlight is "Table of Plenty," a 600-pound, 9-foot-wide, 4 1/2-foot-high altar with an offering of 100 tumbling ceramic collard greens. Each graceful leaf is individually cast, carved, glazed and fired. This transitional piece -- which is both object and installation -- was inspired by the churches as well as the gustatory abundance of Italy, which Jackson-Jarvis first experienced while on a travel grant to Rome in 1992. While there, she learned to cut her own tesserae (little squares of colored glass) at the mosaic school in Ravenna. This mosaic-clad

"Table of Plenty," created immediately upon her return, was soon followed by a seemingly unstoppable outpouring of smaller tables laden with leaves, fish, serpents, coal, stones, copper and cement.

These small "Tables" are crammed into a gallery here, but they exude none of the magical aura that usually distinguishes Jackson-Jarvis's best work. Instead, they seem merely repetitive.

The same must be said of the earlier series "Sarcophagi: Last Rites," which overstuffs yet another gallery in the manner of a commercial showroom (or in this case, a mortuary.) The colorful, highly textured topography of these works is always fascinating to explore. But this series would have been far better served by zeroing in on the four caskets that allude to the death of the ecosystem and are subtitled "Air," "Earth," "Plants" and "Water." "Water" is the easiest to decipher with its stacks of dead fish. The ecological intent of most of the other sarcophagi, however, would be lost entirely without identifying labels.

It is among the most recent works -- the framed, wall-hung boxes in the first gallery, dating from 1995 -- that we find the most eloquent and fulfilling sculptures in this show. Covered with orderly areas of vibrant, richly colored mosaic (including gold and silver), they are at once the most clearly structured and most unrepentantly decorative works this artist has yet produced.

Yet they are expressive too: "Gone Fishing," for instance, consists of a deep burgundy-colored mosaic surrounded by jumping fish, and centered with a volute that suggests both flowing water and a stop-action wave. Two works titled "Collard Box" (I and II) are even more beautiful in the way they merge curvilinear baroque elegance with contemporary food -- in this case, draped collard leaves and fish. There is even a new formal complexity: "Collard Box II," though covered with hard black tesserae and tiles that shimmer with reflected light, still looks almost velvety and softly wrapped.

Think about it: We're talking about the beauty and expressive power of common collard greens and catfish here. Yet they're no ordinary foods. Hardy staples in the diets of the Southern poor, they also have a special resonance for African Americans. Jackson-Jarvis has managed to pull off a transformation from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the humble to the beautiful. In that sense, her works are metaphors for the joy and survival of African American family life.

After the show closes here Aug. 12, it will move to the Maryland Art Place in Baltimore, where the idea for the exhibition originated. CAPTION: Martha Jackson-Jarvis, above left, with two pieces from her "Sarcophagi: Last Rites" series, has her first solo museum exhibit in Washington at the Corcoran, and it features works such as "Table of Plenty," above, and "Collard Box II," left.