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Martha Jackson-Jarvis Trailblazing Organic Artist

"One experiences the magic of a mythic transformation in Jackson-Jarvis' work. The ancient mysteries of clay becoming solid rock take place before one's eyes, and new universal forms are born emanating from that wellspring of magic and myth where imagination and belief blend into one level of reality." - Dr. David C. Driskell

Martha Jackson-Jarvis may be petite, but her artistic vision and courage are gargantuan. She creates sculptures, site specific installations, and corporate/public art projects that would leave most of us exhausted at the thought. Born in 1952, Jackson-Jarvis credits her early years, living on a farm in Lynchburg, Virginia at the foot hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, for instilling her with a great love for nature, a natural affinity for working with clay, and a fascination for how things grow and change through time. Growing up in a family of skilled craftsmen heightened her awareness and appreciation for how things are built and how making things with your hands is directly connected to mind and spirit.

Jackson-Jarvis received a MFA in Sculpture/Ceramics from Antioch University, a BFA from the Tyler School of Art, Temple University, and she's studied mosaic techniques in Italy. Throughout her career she has worked as a teacher and artist-in-residence at many institutions. In 1989, she was artist-designer for the film *Daughters of the Dust* and in June 2008, she traveled to Tajikistan as a Cultural Envoy Artist for the U.S. State Department.

Some of the awards she's received are a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Creative Capital Grant, a Virginia Groot Fellowship, The Penny McCall Foundation Grant, a Lila Wallace Arts International Travel Grant, and a grant from the Pilchuck Glass School. She is featured in many publications, including *Contemporary Visual Expressions: The Art of Sam Gilliam, Martha Jackson-Jarvis, Keith Morrison, William T. Williams* by David C. Driskell; *African American Art and Artists* by Samella S. Lewis; and *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists* by Lisa E. Farrington.

Jackson-Jarvis says the 2 years she studied at Howard University helped her realize art was a serious life adventure and prepared her to be competitive. Dialoguing with some of the best young minds from around the world made her feel linked to something greater than herself. And, it was a blessing to study with extraordinarily talented professors — Elizabeth Catlett, Lois Mailou Jones, Skunder Boghossian, James Porter, Charles White, and Ed Love. They advised her to take her craft seriously and to ensure her vision and research were stellar.

Producing a solid body of progressive work for over three decades has resulted in many solo and group exhibitions in galleries and museums throughout the United States and abroad, including the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Anacostia Museum, Washington, DC; Addison/Ripley Fine Art, Washington, DC; the Studio Museum of Harlem, NY; Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Gardens, Staten Island, NY; Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC; the University of Delaware University Museums; and The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russian Federation.

When I arrived at her studio in Mt. Rainier, MD, she and her youngest daughter, Njena, were busy adhering mosaic stones on one of the 12 boards compiling her latest corporate art project called "Moon Dance," each board is 7'x50". This project, commissioned by The Galaxy, will be installed in a new condo complex in downtown Silver Spring, Maryland. If all goes well she hopes to install the project before it gets too cold.

Jackson-Jarvis is attracted to the scale and landscape of public art projects because it's seen and experienced at a distance and creates a dialog with the viewer as they get closer to it. In order to do this work she had to retrain herself to think like an architect. She researches for site specific requirements to determine what the site will bear, what are the climate and weather conditions, how will materials react within the natural environment, what kinds of adhesives can be used, and what's the best way to install. Her designs are executed with permanent materials including glass, stone, clay, wood, cement, tiles, steel, and mortar. Her sculptures may also incorporate plants, animal forms, and pieces of possessions of family and friends.

When a prospectus is announced for a permanent public art project, Jackson-Jarvis begins developing a broad perspective on the design. She begins researching for historical references because she believes a historical context provides an interesting narrative, keeps the work alive and vibrant, and links it to the community. After designing and submitting her concept, if selected as a finalist, she will sell her vision in the board room to the financiers, developers, architects, engineers, and community members who want to hear details on her vision and how she will execute the project.

Some of the public and corporate art commissions she's completed are with the North Carolina Museum of Art; South Carolina Botanical Gardens, Clemson, SC; Spoleto Festival, Charleston, SC; Prince George's County Courthouse, Upper Marlboro, MD; MS/HS 368, Bronx, NY; Merck Company, Pennsylvania; Fannie Mae, Washington, DC; Washington Metro Transit Authority, Anacostia Station; and New York Transit Authority, Mount Vernon Station.

Jackson-Jarvis' **Crossroads/Tricksters** is made from bricks hand-made by prisoners housed in the Polk Youth Correctional Facility in the beginning of the 20th century. When the prison was demolished Jackson-Jarvis brought truckloads of the bricks to her studio where she broke open each brick to reconfigure into her creation. It is installed at the North Carolina Museum of Art Park, the site of the former prison.

She describes several breakthrough moments in her career, one was deciding to transfer to the Tyler School of Art because they had the latest technology for creating ceramics and there she would study with master ceramist Rudolf Staffel. She recalls his gem of wisdom was to learn it to forget it and pull it out when you need it. Another important development was committing to work for 2 years in her clay studio. When she emerged, her collection of work was exhibited at the African American Museum in Philadelphia. The other major events in her life were having children.

Her creative process begins with a concept, riding it out, and tackling changes along the way. She isolates what's good about an idea, determines the intent and meaning the concept is addressing, and then decides how she will make it. She believes the work leads her and the hardest part is starting and finishing it. Jackson-Jarvis also creates colorful works on paper which keep her fresh, provide an immediate release from working on a large project, and help her find spontaneity she can transfer to her work with hard materials.

She says there are no short cuts and all projects are challenging whether it's determining the approach or working through an obstacle. When things are difficult she calls on her inner strength, or does more studying. It is tedious work constructing a design one stone at a time; or sorting materials by size, color, and texture, but she is committed to the process and end result. Jackson-Jarvis believes an artist work is isolated, but there's an intimacy with the materials and a futuristic dynamic that keeps her going.

Her advice to aspiring artists is to keep working and don't give up exploring. See what your competition is doing and stay in touch with the larger field. Being current, relevant and confident is critical because artists are working in a very competitive environment. Find your place, be willing to change, and determine what you want to contribute. Once you do the work, claim your authority. And, remember your reputation is all you have, stand for what you say and whatever you do, do it well.

Currently, Jackson-Jarvis' work is featured in *Material Girls: Contemporary Black Women Artists* at the Reginald Lewis Museum through October 16, 2011, Baltimore, MD; and in *Sculpture on the Grounds: The Kreeger Museum and Washington Sculptors Group Collaborate, 2011 Invitational*, through July 2013 in Washington, DC. She is scheduled to return to the University of Delaware University Museums to exhibit in 2012.