

Weaver, A.M. "Martha Jackson Jarvis," *ArtNews*, 23 December 2012.

Art in America

Martha Jackson Jarvis

By *A.M. Weaver* December 23, 2012 9:21am



A dark, womblike atmosphere pervaded Martha Jackson Jarvis's "Ancestors' Bones," an exhibition of recent work at the University of Delaware's Mechanical Hall Gallery. More than a group of individual pieces, the show offered a complete staged environment.

The sculpture *Nest Stones* (2010-11) straddled most of the central space. A tangled web of cured wisteria- and grapevines, anchored by large pod shapes made of petrified pine bark (pressurized bark found below the earth's crust) and mortar, rested on the oak floor. A digital enlargement of the artist's *Ancestors' Bones* #1 (2010-11, mixed mediums on paper) covered one wall. The 20-by-26¼-inch drawing was also on view. It is a sepia-toned group portrait of African-Americans assembled in front of a one-room wooden schoolhouse. Hovering above them in the area of the sky are large monochromatic photo transfers of coral clusters. Intrigued by the engravings of Albertus Seda, an 18th-century pharmacologist, zoologist and collector of plant and animal specimens, Jackson Jarvis used images of coral in most of the two-dimensional works in the exhibition.

A series of photo-collages lined other walls. These feature shots of Southern vernacular architecture, some inhabited and some not, as well as renderings of skeletal pears, leaves and maple seeds. The photos were taken from a discarded family album of vintage images, picturing blacks from the turn of the 20th century.

The exhibition's title speaks volumes in relationship to the works displayed. Jackson Jarvis, who is based in Washington, D.C., and has been making artwork for more three decades, intends to evoke ancestral visitors, and always pays homage to the spirit realm in her work. The installations, sculptures and works on paper in this show reflect her interest in spirituality.

as well as her love of nature, both flora and fauna. Like the ancients, Jackson Jarvis believes everything animate and inanimate possesses a life force.

Of note, in two adjacent rooms, were additional mural-size details of her photomontages, along with 35 abstract mixed-medium ink drawings that spin off of Seda's coral engravings. The most compelling of these are from the "Free Spirit" series, in particular *Free Spirit* /and *IV* (both 2011, 42½ by 60 inches). They are lyrical abstraction at its best and enliven the sepia tones, predominant in smaller drawings created between 2010 and '11, with splashes of yellow ocher, blue and red.

In one section of the show, Jackson Jarvis juxtaposed a mural featuring a detail from one of her gestural drawings and a 76-inch-wide sculpture, *Umbilicus* (2008). The latter consists of a giant version of a spherical sycamore pod, made of volcanic stone and glass, attached by a wooden vine to a long, narrow pod shape. The metaphor of birthing is evident here and coincides with Jackson Jarvis's use of symbols of life and living.

One was left with a sense of mystery, enhanced by the dramatic low lighting. With this exhibition, Jackson Jarvis brought together works reflective of a sensibility that she has nurtured for years, establishing her process and theme as a cyclical evolution. The term "environment" truly encapsulates the spirit of this exhibition.