

Charlotte Observer

Sunday "Arts"

December 29, 1996

Found objects

Like N'Kele. Edwards, Otterbridge and several others, Lonnie Holley combines evocative found objects to create assemblages that carry symbolic messages about racial oppression and the struggle to overcome it. His piece is ostensibly about the legacy of racism in South Africa, but it reminds us that racial oppression is essentially the same no matter where it occurs.

"Digging for My Child, South Africa" is an old shovel transformed into a totemic figural sculpture crowned by a black halo, and it refers symbolically to funerary traditions, agriculture and systematic racism's destructive impact on parent-child relationships among the oppressed group.

Among the barbaric practices historically employed by white racists against blacks in the United States are lynching and covering a victim with tar and feathers. Terry

Hardy refers to the former practice in a piece on lynching, while the two-artist team known as Yobiche makes reference to the latter practice in "Tar Belle."

Hardy's piece consists of a noose suspended above a plaque on which is inscribed the account of a mentally unbalanced black man who was executed for murder two years ago in Alabama. Yobiche's "Tar Belle" is a headless dummy wearing an antebellum-style hoop-skirt dress coated with tar and feathers. The title of this cleverly ironic piece alludes to the "Southern belle" ideal of white femininity and to the tar baby legend that Atlanta journalist Joel Chandler Harris appropriated from African mythology and used in his popular Uncle Remus stories.

Among several photo-based works are three straightforward documentary images by Chester

Higgins Jr. Of particular interest are his two photos of a 17th-century African American burial ground discovered only a few years ago in New York City. In one of these images, a modern-day Yoruba priestess and a Khamite priest perform a traditional libation ceremony over one of the skeletons uncovered in the excavation of the site. This image effectively highlights the endurance of ancient African traditions in the white-dominated Americas.

Other photographic works

Two newspaper photographs are the centerpieces of Lisa Tuttle's "M.M. & Bessie." One of these is a World War II-era photo of "Gone With the Wind" author Margaret Mitchell, the writer most closely associated with a romanticized view of slavery in the Old South, with a black woman identified in

IF YOU'RE GOING

"Tragic Wake: The Legacy of Slavery and the African Diaspora in Contemporary American Art" at Spirit Square Galleries, 345 N. College St., through Feb. 8. Free admission. Hours: noon-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. Details: 372-9664, gallery hours.

"The Middle Passage," illustrations by Tom Feelings, at the Afro-American Cultural Center Gallery, 401 N. Myers St., through next Sunday. Free admission. Hours: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 1-5 p.m. Sundays. Details: 374-1565, gallery hours.