Honoring vows
Coco Fusco explores religious devotion

BY CATHY BIRD

Cuban-born and New York-based Coco Fusco is an artist, writer and curator, best known for her performance of "The Couple in the Cage". Created in collaboration with Guillermo Gomez-Peña, the startlingly realistic presentation featuring the two "undiscovered Americans" exposed the relationship between racism and ethno-regional display.

Georgia State University's Visiting Artists program brings Fusco to town Jan. 29 when she will present her newest performance, "Vow/Voyage" at Nexus Contemporary Art Center.

Vow/Voyage, first presented at the third annual Performance Festival in Odense, Denmark, last September, is described as an intimate performance that examines the artist's attraction to religious devotion. A recent interview with Fusco revealed how her work has evolved.

Q1: What drew you to performance art in the first place?

A: I like the energy of being around people and the specificity of dealing with live bodies in space. Performance is an area where I have something unique to say.

Q2: How does Vow/Voyage materialize what you see as the corporeal language of Latin Catholicism?

A: Corpus Delecti: Performance of the Americas, the book I just edited, talks about the centrality of Catholic ritual in developing performance language for Latin American contemporary artists. Without that vocabulary, we would be nowhere.

A particular concept that I work with is the importance of the body for women. There is a history of representing Christ as woman and mother and stereotyping them as all flesh. I keep researching and learning about contemporary Latin American women and the specificity of their role in the 17th century. One, Saint Teresa of Avila of Spain, was a devotional artist from the early Renaissance. She wrote amazing essays about her visions of making love with Christ. She had visions in a cataleptic state. I was interested in phenomena like that. I was also drawn to the idea because I was raised a Catholic. My cousin is a bishop, and my father's sister was a nun.

A: How does your performance relate to the performance of early Judeo artists?

A: There's something very pure about that work. It was very rooted in a commercial context. It was ceremonial and dedicated to exploring ideas. The more I read about mystics, the more they seem a reincarnation — there's a retreat from commercialism and consumerism in that work. Some people think, "Oh, I'll draw a nail through my hand and be Christ burdened." It doesn't work that way.

Your work often explores myths connected with the Latin American culture. In the past, your focus shifted in recent work?

I'm part of a generation where cultural issues were the dominant paradigm. There's a performance of people of color that was influenced by the politics of the 80s. Consciousness raising was a kind of overshadowing. The dominant cultural institutions expected that they would want artists of color to come and solve problems.

At this point I'm interested in work that stimulates me in a lot of ways and is not so simple. The lesson that America is a racist country is not news to us. There's always a part of art that opens someone up, but my message is not prescriptive or didactic. Ultimately, it doesn't work or satisfy a sophisticated audience; they are more open to experiences that are not a part of everyday life.

You present a contrast to the performance of more theatrical artists like Karen Finley and Laurie Anderson. What is your relationship with the audience?

My work is intimate and interactive. I feel like there was a push in the 80s to make audiences be more like theater. I'm not so sure that was a great thing to happen to performance. First, it was too much pressure to sell tickets. Then, theater builds an expectation in the audience for a bigger spectacle. I don't want to be an astroturf. I don't want to force myself. My performance strength lies in the specificity of the viewer's relationship with other live encounters that are more revealing and less predictable.

I'm not saying that the NFA should fund what I do. I'm not even applying anymore. I don't want to have anything to do with it. What I do is valid, even if it doesn't sell.

Coco Fusco presents "Vow/Voyage Jan. 29 at 7 p.m. at Nexus Contemporary Art Center, 175 Mount St., S.E. general admission, $5. Nexus members, students and CSI faculty. Fusco presents a lecture Jan. 27 at 2 p.m. at Georgia State University Student Center at the corner of Spring St. and Courtland Street. 315-2000.