

“Poetry and Fabrics Speak of the Injustices of Slavery”

Northwest African American Museum

Leschi Community News, February 2013

“Book of the Bound”

Mixed Media Collages by Carletta Carrington Wilson



Carletta Wilson “book of the bound” mixed media, photo by Mark Frey

Paired with the James Baldwin Exhibition “Bearing Witness from Another Place, James Baldwin in Turkey Photographs by Sedat Pakay” at the Northwest African American Museum, Carletta Carrington Wilson’s just-opened exhibition means you must make a visit to this Central area museum treasure over the holidays.

The Baldwin exhibition is going to be on display until next September, but that does not mean you should wait to visit! It is filled with unusually intimate photographs of the fiery writer, a film also by Sedat Pakay, and an area for browsing his books.

In her performance that opened “Book of the Bound” on January 15, Carrington Wilson invoked the connections between Baldwin’s exhibition and her own, separated by a piece of the “Journey” gallery, the permanent historical display at the museum.

The artist is so articulate that I am tempted to simply quote her own poetic words in describing her exhibition, but I will begin with a brief description. The exhibition consists of a series of books that have been constructed or altered by the artist, each of them a memorial to an aspect of the history of slavery. The artist has two sensibilities in these works, the highly decorative and seductively beautiful surfaces of the books consist of fabrics, chains, strings,

bones, jewels, paper and much more, and the deeper meaning of each book which addresses the nightmare of slavery in various ways. Several of the books are accompanied by a longer poem which the artist reads (we listen through headphones).

Carrington Wilson also provides two interactive works. One of her most original approaches to the intersections of text and object is her book title poetry: she creates poems from the sequencing of the titles of books. In this exhibition she has created one work that is fixed in a case, but nearby are books that we can arrange ourselves into a stack that makes a poetry sequence with the titles, a surprisingly easy and provocative act. All of the books we are stacking are sealed shut, which is a major point of the exhibition: the slave has been silenced from history, from speaking, from living life. These works are suggesting voices, experiences, and a means for honoring the losses that occurred through the cruelty of slavery, a topic that Carrington Wilson has intensely researched.

The second interactive piece is a paper chain, to which we can add our own thoughts about slavery, or whatever we wish. The entire exhibition has an intense presence in the gallery which speaks of sorrows, pain, and lives lived under constant duress as well as a deep reverence for these forebears who survived with so much strength.

Now here is Carletta Carrington Wilson's own voice:

"Three vessels, the body, the book and the ship form an intimate connection in the works of 'book of the bound.' An enduring bond, which was further, forged and fastened during the expansion of the 17th century transatlantic trade in slaves. Cloth money was an important medium continuing to transition from domestic raffia to imported fabrics. There, just beyond the roaring sea, some thread-bare body came to be held, nameless, a number among the numbered to be contained in bowels of ships, upon pages of books as whole societies behind them unraveled, were rent through and altered beyond recognition. This series explores cloth's intricate and complex meanings."



Carletta Wilson, "Abduction" mixed media, Photo by Mark Frey

See what I mean! Passionate, articulate, poetic, profound. I am just giving you a brief glimpse of the artist's poetic imagination. The exhibition is beautifully installed in a newly designated and wonderfully intimate gallery at the museum, with extensive poetic labels for the books, as well as articulate wall panels written by Chieko Phillips, the talented young curatorial assistant who worked on the exhibition with the artist.

Go see the show and immerse yourself in fabrics, books, poetry, and history.