

Slavery echoes through contemporary works



Yobliche/Sirlin-Taylor has summed up the Southern experience in "Tar Belle" — a decapitated woman, coated with pitch.

What do you do when you can't get mad, you can't get even, you can't even get at the full truth? You have your say through art.

That's the feeling you may get if you wander around "Tragic Wake: The Legacy of Slavery and the African Diaspora in Contemporary American Art." This is the "other" exhibit this autumn at Spirit Square Center for Arts and Education — and, in a less directly disturbing way, perhaps as provocative as "A Slave Ship Speaks."

Carrie Mae Weems' serene photographs depict Goree Island, which might have become a vacation haven — if it hadn't been the launching place for thousands of slave ships leaving Africa. Seen in repose, it suggests eerily peaceful shots of Auschwitz after the Holocaust.

Melvin Edwards' three welded steel pieces could merely be abstract sculptures, full of contained power — if they didn't also remind us that his ancestor, whose prestige as a blacksmith would have

been high in Africa, had his life destroyed when he was snatched away to slavery in the New World.

"Something that just expresses anger puts up barriers," says curator Alan Prokop. "We're trying to communicate, not put up barriers.

"We've split this into two sections: 'Story,' dealing with slavery, and 'Reclamation,' the part about the healing process. A lot of these pieces offer healing and hope."

Prokop had planned other shows based on family histories. But when Spirit Square got the rights to the Henrietta Marie exhibit in February, he immersed himself in the history of slavery and recruited living black artists.

The results range from the painting "Pensive," where Willie Birch mixes Congolese and Yoruba religious objects with the story of Rodney King, to "Tar Belle," a decapitated figure of a Southern woman coated with pitch. (It comes from the Taboo Art Collective in Atlanta.)

"Some of the older artists went

through the civil rights movement and are stepping back, trying to make a larger sense of it all," says Prokop. "The younger ones have a different edge to their work.

"For me, the exhibit was an incredible learning experience. Imagine what it was like to have your family broken up, your name changed, to be pressured to become a Christian. We can't, really."

Lawrence Toppman

IF YOU'RE GOING

"Tragic Wake," through Feb. 8 at Spirit Square, 345 N. College St. Free. Hours: 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, or through intermission on performance nights. Details: 372-9664, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. weekdays.