

# Contemporary Artwork

## "Tragic Wake" Exhibit Links Slavery's History To The Present

By Susan Mhille  
Feature Writer

### At Spirit Square

There can be nothing more wrenching than to be forcibly taken from your home, your family and your country without warning, without knowing where you are going or whether you will even survive. Such was the experience of those Africans who were captured and sold to European slave traders and who were victims of one of the largest involuntary migrations in modern history.

Fueled by high profits, the transatlantic slave trade practiced not only physical brutality and emotional degradation, but also a merciless devastation of the cultural language of the people it exploited. West and central Africa, where most of the enslaved Africans came from, was made up of people with highly complex societies, politically, socially and economically; these were peoples who possessed distinct cultural attributes. Transplanted to the Americas, and subjected to the rigors of the plantation system and racial repression, these Africans were forbidden to practice their traditions and much was lost or suppressed. Still, fragments remained and persisted which today many African American artists are re-exploring. By repossessing their ancestry and re-examine their history, these artists are in the process of coming to a fuller understanding of the present; by reclaiming images and symbols they are forging a new cultural identity, a new language with which to express themselves.

*Tragic Wake: The Legacy of Slavery and the African Diaspora in Contemporary American Art* is being presented in conjunction with the

the exhibition use the iconography of slavery. He continues, "If we ask ourselves whether slavery is one of the great American themes we must answer 'yes.'" Many issues are addressed in these works. The artists come from many backgrounds and work in different traditions and media. Aesthetically, the works reflect a range of idioms from the vernacular to post Modernism. However, the unifying element of all their works is a need and commitment to reexamine the historical, cultural and moral significance of slavery.

Many of the images are alluring, many are stark, while others are mysterious, but all are evocative. Carrie Mae Weems, for instance, in her *Africa Series* shows us images of the buildings on the African coast where millions of Africans were imprisoned prior to deportation. They are simple but elegant structures. Very seductive and beautiful on the surface, seemingly epitomizing freedom and wealth, yet by contrast inside, they housed the dungeons of the dispossessed and were in fact, places of abuse and degradation.

*Lynch Fragments* which represent a series of symbolic masks by Melvin Edwards uses several West African elements — many of which are considered to have magical powers. Edwards also uses forms that suggest male and female genitalia, and these — along with a pervasive sense of death and oppression — refer to the idea that those who practice genocide do so to ensure that their victims will not procreate and thus will cease to

*Wreck of the Henrietta Marie* at Spirit Square and it features the work of many seminal African American artists. The exhibition according to Curator Alan Prokop falls into two main categories which he defines as *The Story* and *Reclamation*.

Works which tell *The Story* explore the experiences of slavery and its legacy, using motifs and themes inspired by historical event situations. Those works which examine *Reclamation* recreate values, traditions and cultural languages that have been fragmented into a new system of symbols.

Prokop points out that many of the works in



### "Tar Belle"

A most provocative work by the artist team Yobiche, *Tar Belle* is an ante-bellum ball gown covered with tar and feathers — representing the punishment that is only one step removed from lynching. On display as part of the *Tragic Wake* exhibit at Spirit Square.

exist. One of the most provocative works is by the artist team Yobiche. Entitled *Tar Belle*, an ante-bellum ball gown is covered with tar and feathers. Ironically, this passive symbol of ideal woman-

hood — the refined, the chaste and the beautiful — is given the punishment that is only one step removed from lynching. The image suggests See "Tragic" on page 10

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## Spirit Square's Last Major Show

Uptown's Arts Center To Be Disbanded Next Spring

It is a tribute to Spirit Square to present such a comprehensive and engaging historical, artistic and educational event as *Tragic Wake* and *The Wreck of the Henrietta Marie*. It is exactly what this institution is uniquely set up to do. In the spring of 1997, Spirit Square will be disbanded. Where will we find the multi-disciplinary artistic activities that this organization has brought to Charlotte for so many years? Let us hope that an event of this magnitude and significance will give us pause to reflect on what we are losing.

-- Susan Mhille