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Nari Ward : The Inside of a Sunshower

By Alessandra Pace

Alessandra Pace: *When did you come to the United States, and why did you move to Harlem?*

Nari Ward: I came to the US from Jamaica when I was 12 years old, first to Brooklyn, then to New Jersey, and finally to Harlem. I really loved Harlem. It reminded me a lot of Jamaica, in that it has its own third world and so many communities together -- like African and Caribbean. I felt a little bit less like an outsider.

AP: *As a Jamaican and as an artist, did you find your own niche in New York, or did you feel pressured to blend it?*

NW: I am always more interested in the things that don't fall into place, the fall outside you are supposed to follow. I think this is happening for me. I don't know what being a Jamaican artist means. I know a little bit about what being a black artist means. Certain information that comes out in my work is specific to this experience.

I notice this when I go back to Jamaica. There is a way of using materials over there with which I feel a kinship. People use available things, and they make them function as their form dictates. It does not matter what they are. You may not have everything, but you make do with what you have, so it works. You know, visually it doesn't make sense, but on some deeper level it really hits. Somehow the results are logical, and when looking at they you say, "Yes, sure" Why didn't I think about that?" This is especially typical of people who sells things. They build certain structures for selling their wares that are really pretty fascinating, much more so than the things they sell. It is the way they present them that is really important.

I think this is why I am really trying to do traditional sculpture, using non-traditional objects and materials, and a non-traditional set of information -- my own set of information, which isn't necessarily Jamaican, black, or mainstream. I am most successful, I think, when I am able to tie all these things together.

AP: *Fire is a very important element in your work. Do you see burning as an act of destruction, cleansing, or transformation?*

NW: Growing up on Jamaica, we never had a garbage man coming by, and so we would burn our rubbish in the backyard. My father would pull us aside, and we'd watch him burn it, and then when it all was dry and extinguished we would play around and pull things out, and he would tell us to go away. I think that my fascination with fire is not necessarily linked to destruction but rather

transformation. I was fascinated by the changing of things -- you put in a big object and it turned into a little thing, almost like magic, as if spirits took it somewhere.

AP: *From fire, to fire hoses…*

NW: It is quite logical. Apart from water, a fire hose brings in life, which is really what I am talking about in my piece with fire hoses. It also stands for conduits, passageways, information that passes from one thing to the next.

Fire hose always fascinated me as a material, because it is industrial, but can be made organic by working on it. For instance, there are shanty houses on the hillsides of Jamaica, and I remember looking at them against the green foliage of the tropics. I always thought of their dissonance was like a visual poem : this rigid, industrial material against the tropical landscape. The way the houses became rusted and work down looked almost natural and organic. This transformation came probably from form alone.

AP: Birdhouse, *the installation you recently made for "Dialogues of Peace" at the United Nations in Geneva, was a commission for a theme exhibition. How did you juggle the social issues behind it?*

NW: I wanted it to be a light-hearted piece. I did not want *Birdhouse* to be perceived as a social commentary, although one didn't need too much information to understand that I was talking about everybody. I used old mufflers, because I thought that mufflers were great metaphors for a system that filters, which restricts people's passions and lives -- or even oppresses -- in that they suppress noise. Governments function in a similar way. It is not necessary at some point.

This wasn't a piece about the environment, so I started stuffing clothes in between the mufflers as if I was constructing walls, because that would bring it back to habitation and people. At that point I really started to talk about building behind it, the UN headquarters, because Birdhouse looked a little shanty. The more you looked at it, the more you were overwhelmed by what was behind it, and you felt almost oppressed. But I did not want it to be a negative piece, because I do no think there is a need for the U.N.

The bird symbolized flight, freedom, and by extensions, social issues. So I thought I should have functioning birdhouses, but they should also be made out of car mufflers. I made forty of them, but only ten were meant to work, because I wanted to talk about the efficiency of the building standing in the background.

AP: *Your installations are often imbued with personal narrative. What do you see as being the function of a more intimate discourse in art?*

NW: Art has been able to touch people without words. It talks about what is underneath, about intangible things. I am really only laying down information to give the viewer space to pack up his or her own experience things that cannot be verbalized. Language is really primitive in that sense, because emotions are much more complex. If we can deal with images or materials that tap into

emotions, the result is much more powerful. I believe there is room for this to be developed, and I don't think it is developed, and I don't think it is developed much at all for a lot of people. We have grown accustomed to not thinking, and sit in front of our TVs to have images shot straight at us instead of looking instead ourselves.

AP: Exodus, *the installation you made for the 1993 Venice Biennale was supposedly about cultural and national transition…*

NW: *Exodus* was a lot of things. It was my reaction to what I was seeing in my neighborhood in Harlem, and it was a sort of catharsis piece.

I was finding things in empty lots which I didn't see as garbage because there were in such proximity to people's lives. Somehow they became much more important, they became charged. All this information was connected in a weird way, like a collage.

But this was reality. So I decided that I wanted people to experience this somehow. The only way to do it was to take those things out, but then they would change, they wouldn't be the same anymore. So I decided I wanted to recreate a similar landscape. *Exodus* became that landscape.

AP: *Weren't many of the elements like parcels filled with cloths? Isn't there a reference to travel, emigration, immigration, flight?*

NW: And transformation. These things were to be taken -- maybe spiritually somewhere else, creating the context for something to happen inside the viewer.

AP*: Do you consider your work to be evocative and/or symbolic?*

NW: I did a series of works coated in sugar. There was a piece called *Trophy*. For a long time I watched this old woman pushing around her stuff in a baby stroller. I don't think she was homeless. She was probably doing what I do : picking up things. The only thing is, she would leave whatever she has accumulated and go on and pick up the next thing.

It was fascinating to watch her. She reminded me a little bit of myself. Once I watched her for a couple of weeks, and picked up her stroller before the trash people did, and that was *Trophy*. I took it to my studio, mixed up all this thick sugar caramel and coated the whole thing, glazing it beautifully, so I had this huge lump with wheels.

What I really loved about what the sugar did was that everything became like one. It slowed down the eye to look at all this stuff, and the visual information contained in the piece started to be perceived in a different way. That's what I am looking for: seeing what is there, but then seeing it as something else

AP: *How did* Amazing Grace *come about?*

NW: I wanted to use things in close contact with people's lives that were not appliances. So I started looking at baby strollers. Strollers have life too. Usually

a stroller is thrown out because the child has outgrown it, and then a homeless person may pick it up to push his or her stuff around. Then it is just left in an empty lot.

For me strollers speak so much about things that are neglected. I thought that the best way to show this was to have many of them. Then I realized that I wanted to have a sound element to the work, and that would be a song I grew up with, that my father played quite frequently -- *Amazing Grace*, sung by Mahalia Jackson.

I would have liked to present the piece in a church, but I couldn't find one, so I found a firehouse next to the church. *Amazing Grace* is about a redemption and transformation. The song goes: "I once was lost, but now I'm found…" In a way, the lyrics are ideas about change.