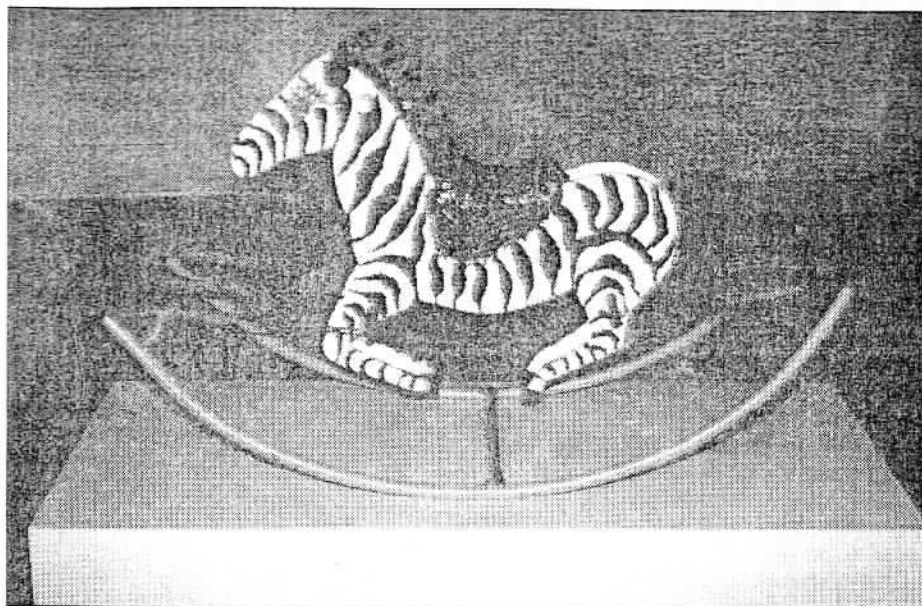


At The Museums

By David Barrows* and Anthony L. Harvey**



Sylvia Snowden, "Untitled (Rocking Zebra)," 1994-98

CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

17th Street & New York Avenue, NW
Tel., 639-1700; www.corcoran.org
Wed.-Mon., 10am-5pm, Thu. to 9pm

A MOVING TRIBUTE TO A SON

Her paint was libation, the dance was her brush across the belongings of her son, ritualizing the archived possessions best capturing his spirit, as in traditional African culture, especially among the Egun of Nigeria, tiny shoes of infancy placed near the large of near adulthood. Toy lizards, marbles stuck into a trunk of a tree analogous to folk medicine cure, saws into another tree trunk like a medicine ritual of the Shopana peoples, screwdrivers into the trunk top like the nail fetishes of the Makonda. This is how Melvin Deal,

Director of African Heritage Dancers and Drummers, explained the painted objects displayed throughout four rooms to me as he saw them. The strongly vibrating colors in surrounding enormous canvasses and brilliantly exploding collage paintings on the walls create the strength for the son's spirit to live on in memory. The greater the vibration between colors the greater preservation for the spirit, he explained.

The last room to tell the story, of a youth dead at 18, is a room too many may miss as it is not expected at the end of three much larger rooms whose very entrance is hidden by a large painting.

Sylvia Snowden, a well-known Washington expressionist artist, does not want to talk of how the police never solved the shooting of her son killed by someone with a Glock handgun, a teenager who was not part of the drug scene; of how the police failed to listen to the "talk of the street," of how although the killer is known to many within the police department, no

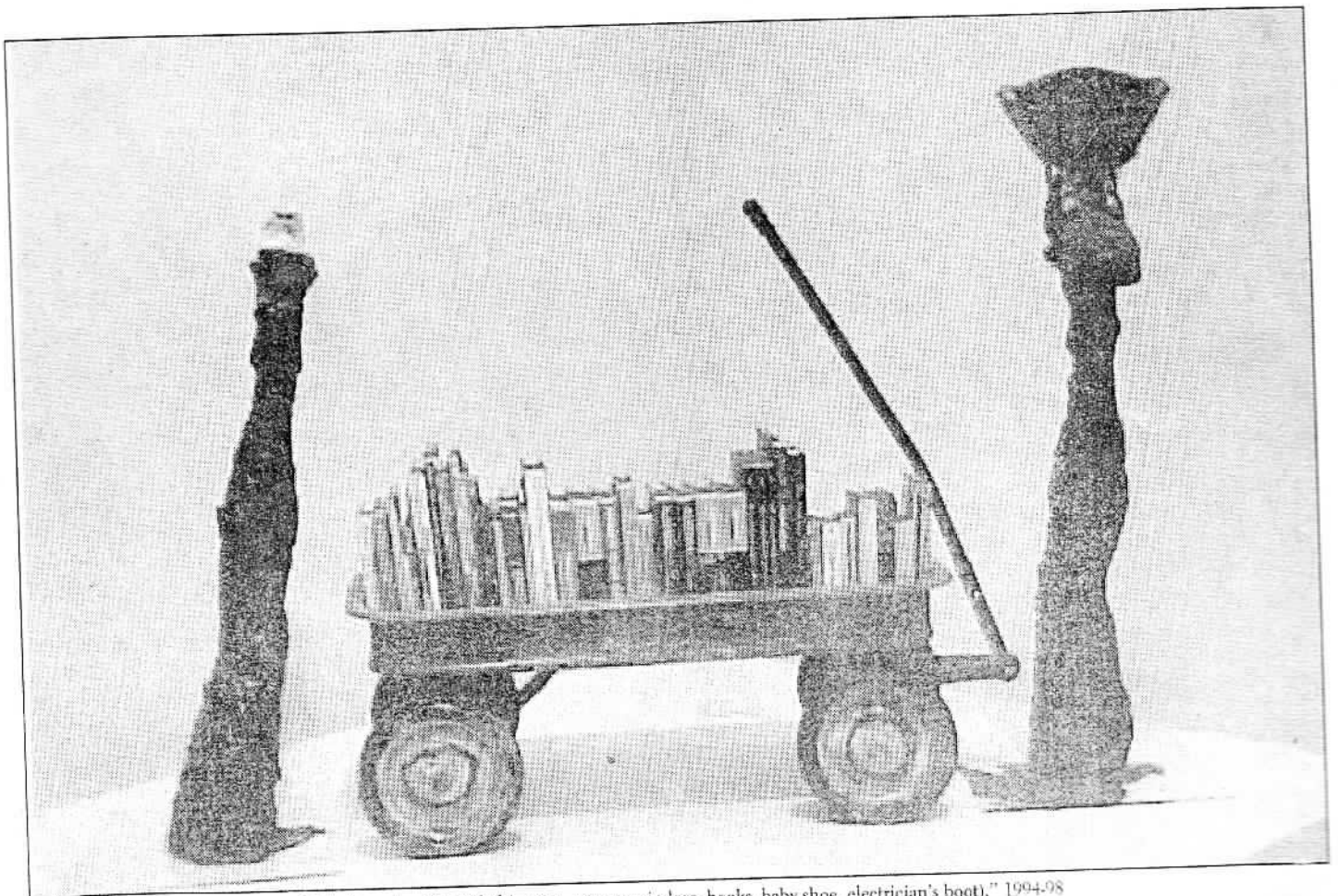
action has been taken for seven years. Her object is to express her love with photographs of her handsome, likeable son juxtaposed with her dazzling paintings of tribute. And these large paintings, especially the paper collage paintings, vibrate like fireworks

But one cannot help but wonder what forces boil together in the paint; sorrow, pride, rage, withdrawal? To lose a son needlessly, a handsome young man of pride, intelligence, kindness, and strength. But her energy stays on to the experiences as she saw him from cradle, to the crutches he needed from falling down the stairs, from his love of chess to enjoyment of fishing, until the hidden last room where we encounter the brutality of his death.

The rest of the story stays unknown. The painting collages rivet. Many of these lined up in the upper atrium on the outside of the show glow in poor museum light. The beginning of the collage painting series is to the right of the entrance to the middle room of the east suite. It has the least appeal and is a silk screen, but is the seminal work from which all the glowing and earth colors miraculously generate. That is why it is included. While some of the installation varies in interest, its intent is reached and the experience translates into a glow and a feeling that one has finally experienced a live artists' true art. The artist worked on this series, starting between one and two years after her son's murder, for a period of about three years. Former curator Jack Cowart got Sylvia the show after it had languished in storage for two years.

The Corcoran should be applauded for going back to its roots, the Washington community, embracing a living artist and viable talent in its own place, the thing the Corcoran was once loved for, a show full of meaningful content as well as valid paint. While The Phillips Collection forgets its founder's promise to seek out and help Washington talent, the Corcoran has again opened the door to a working artist's true, valid insights in paint.

This show needs sponsors and places to travel to after its brief harboring at the Corcoran, a show which regrettably ends too early on October 23. It is a show that all of Washington needs to see.



Sylvia Snowden, "Untitled (wagon, mannequin legs, books, baby shoe, electrician's boot)," 1994-98