

Life and Death and 'Malik'

By MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN
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FOR a local artist, it's quite a coup to be granted one, let alone two solo exhibitions at a prestigious Washington museum. Yet D.C. painter Sylvia Snowden, whose work is the subject of a raw and deeply personal installation at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, would not by most standards be considered a fortunate woman: In order to make this twofold exhibit she had to lose her only son.

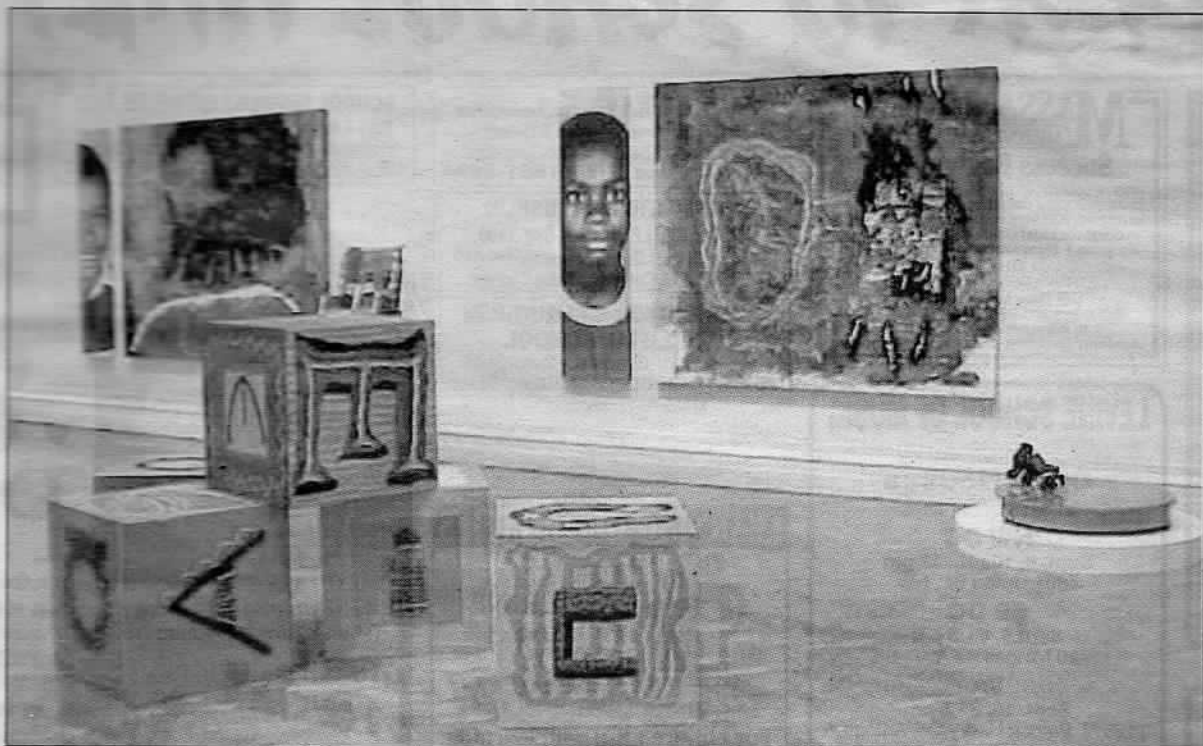
Inspired by the shooting death of her 18-year-old son, Malik Butler, on a Washington street corner in the summer of 1993, "Sylvia Snowden: Malik, Farewell 'Til We Meet Again" should really be addressed as two separate shows. The first is the one you see (correction: the one I saw) at the museum itself. The other is the one that Snowden the artist *wants* you to see. Whether they are one and the same is debatable.

What I saw was four roomfuls of Snowden's trademark bold, impassioned impasto: thickly crusted acrylic paint seemingly troweled onto canvas and paper with largely unblended colors until the deep, rich pigments rush up against one another in the storm of the picture plane. There are also several black-and-white blowups of old photos of Malik, cropped in such a fashion that they seem sliced with an X-acto out of a favorite family album. Mixed in with this is something that's a bit of a departure for Snowden. Around the gallery space are scattered sculptural objects as well—shoes, crutches, tools, children's toys and schoolbooks, a toddler's Big Wheel, a teenager's bicycle, a young man's motor scooter. Some of them belonged to Malik; some were purchased to evoke the stages in the life of a child.

Most are coated with the same fat crust of colorful acrylic paint you see on the wall.

But this is where the two paths of the exhibitions begin to diverge. One of the first images that crossed my mind while looking at "Malik" was that of the bronzed baby shoe and the impulse to preserve the ephemeral. Because of the preponderance of footwear (dozens of athletic shoes, an infant's first shoe, an electrician's boot, pairs of ice and roller skates, many covered with a layer of paint) the allusion made sense.

Not to Snowden, though, who says the notion never crossed her mind. In fact, she seems surprised that it would cross anyone's. Fair enough. Yet the artist also takes exception to the idea itself that a pair of empty shoes or a riderless horse (in this case a rocking horse, or to be more precise, a rocking zebra), particularly in a show about the



CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

One of the rooms in Sylvia Snowden's show at the Corcoran is devoted to her son's childhood years. A rocking zebra, below, could be interpreted as a symbol of loss.

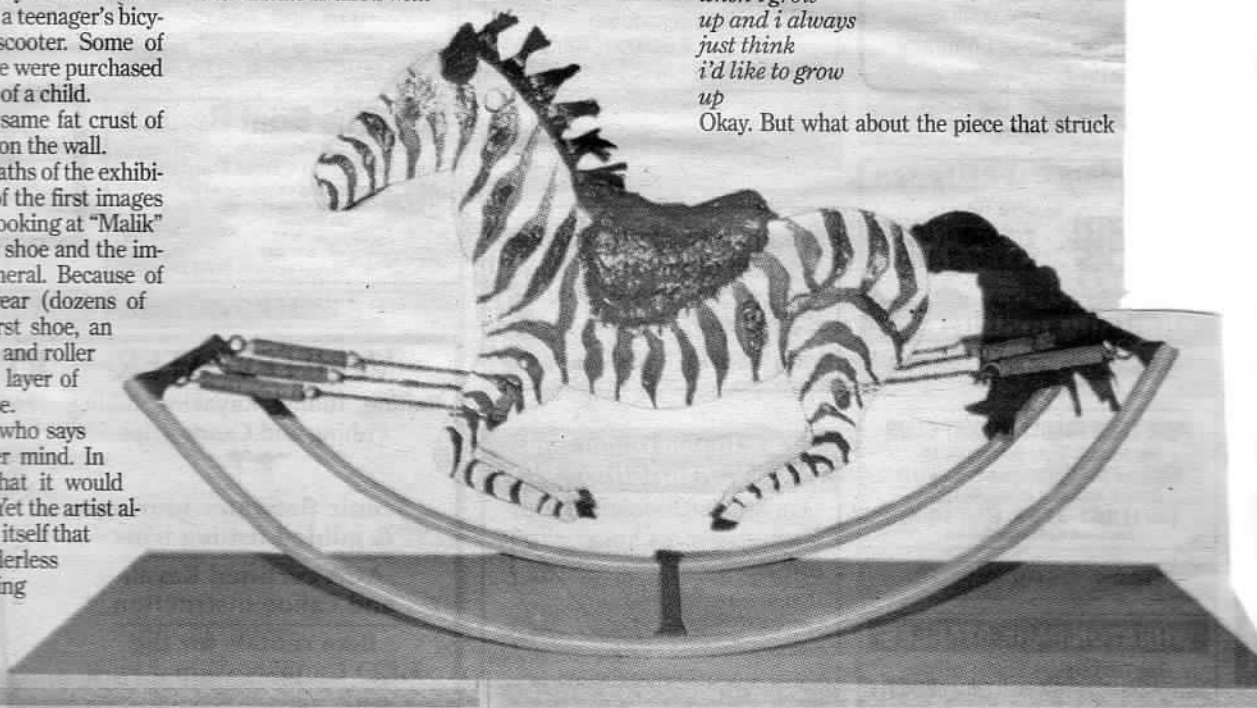
death of a loved one, could possibly be interpreted as a sign of loss or absence. According to southern lore, the press kit tells us, a rocking chair that rocks when no one is sitting in it is said to be occupied by a spirit. Yet the rocking chair at the Corcoran is still.

In the first place, Snowden points out, this is not a show about the death of a loved one at all, but about the *life* of a loved one. It is, she says, all about "the joy of life, the joy of a boy." Until you get to the last room, which even Snowden admits is filled with

unequivocal death (a body outline, toy guns, police tape and, says Snowden, "the biggest bullets I could find"), there is no shadow of mourning in the first three rooms devoted to childhood, early adolescence and teen years. Never mind the give-away title. "Malik, Farewell" could mean he went on a trip," says Snowden, although the posted text of Nikki Giovanni's "Poem for Rodney" implies otherwise:

*people always ask what
am i going to be
when i grow
up and i always
just think
i'd like to grow
up*

Okay. But what about the piece that struck



On Exhibit

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me (and others at the preview) as almost heart-rendingly sad? What about the gold-colored child's walker that sits above gold-colored bricks interred beneath a clod of dirt, and what about the rusty shovel blade that hangs above them? That's *not* about burial, about placing something precious in the ground?

"No," insists Snowden. "It's about planting a good seed. It has nothing to do with death. I don't know why white people can't get this. Black people get this without any problem."

So it's Eurocentric morbidity and Western art-historical baggage that makes parts of Snowden's art feel mournful or angry or funereal when it's really just a celebration of being alive? "Yes," she says, "I do believe it is."

The red paint is not blood. It was merely Malik's favorite color. The torso-sized tree trunk pierced with screwdrivers and saw blades does not allude to martyrdom. Malik was simply fond of tools. And the car seat, wooden security gate and gum ball dispenser full of condoms

are not evidence of a parent's sometimes futile attempts to protect her child, especially in the face of bullets. No, no and no.

It is unwise to take everything an artist says about her work without a large grain of salt. As Marcel Duchamp said, the artist only makes half the art; the rest is up to the audience. Still, listening to Snowden's denials is frustrating, to say the least, because it is this very tension between Malik's presense and absence, between the colors of the living and the shroud of the dead, between the burn of rage and the rush of joy, that lends "Malik" its stirring sense of drama. Without it—if the show were only about the promise and exuberance of youth, only about looking forward with hope and optimism and never admitting the possibility of despair when a candle has been snuffed out early—the show would have far less impact than it does, far less poignancy and visceral punch.

"Now you write that," she commands, seeming to concede the point that a bewildered reviewer had been trying to make all along.

Sylvia, consider it written.

Let it also be written that the art, much like Malik's murder, remains unsolved, but in this case, that is the source of its strength.

SYLVIA SNOWDEN: MALIK, FAREWELL 'TIL WE MEET AGAIN — Through Oct. 23 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 500 17th St. NW (Metro: Farragut West). 202/639-1700. Web site: www.corcoran.org. Open 10 to 5 daily except Tuesdays; Thursdays to 9.

Admission is by suggested donation of \$3; \$1 for seniors and students; \$5 for family groups.