

Arts and Entertainment

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ART / Joanna Shaw-Eagle

SECTION D

Images of shattered youth Artist remembers son in 'Malik' at Corcoran

A highchair, a crib, a "rocking zebra," roller skates, a bicycle, a tire, a motorcycle and sports shoes help fill the second-floor exhibition space of the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

D.C. artist Sylvia Snowden painted the objects with brilliantly colored, thickly loaded pigment. They are part of her exhibition "Sylvia Snowden: Malik, Farewell 'Til We Meet Again," a tribute to her late son, Malik.

"This is my way of remembering and celebrating my son," Ms. Snowden says. Her exhibition opens today at the Corcoran.

John Malik Butler was 18 when he was shot July 2, 1993, four blocks from his home on M Street NW in the Shaw neighborhood.

No arrest has been made.

"Malik was not just another black body found

lying on a street corner. He was my son," she says.

Ms. Snowden, regarded by some as one of the best painters in the city, could not paint for months after Malik's death.

"It was only in November that I could go back to art," she says. "I didn't return to painting, but to sculpture and the 'Malik' series."

By reconstructing things Malik used, or could have used, and making them into art objects, she elevated the issues of one person's life to the universal. Although we may not have lost our children the way Ms. Snowden did, we may have lost them in other ways, such as their growing up and leaving home.

Ms. Snowden's work always has been emotionally charged and disturbs and demands reactions

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Malik's childhood things. Ms. Snowden mounted "First Hard Shoes" and "Last Hard Shoe" on two carved black stands. She filled a child's wagon with Malik's favorite books. Among them were "Good Night Moon" and algebra and other texts.

The artist, dressed in a fashionable white linen suit and her hair swirled in her signature silvered layers, points to a rocking zebra much like the one Malik treasured. She says black Americans prefer rocking zebras to rocking horses. She carefully braided the neck hairs and tied them with ribbons.

Ms. Snowden also made the highchair, crib and three-wheeled bike. "He liked big wheels and round shapes so I enlarged the wheels," she says.

Enormous learning blocks of purples, oranges, greens and reds, stacked precariously against one another, dominate the gallery's center. More photos, linked to paintings, also follow.

Some of the most moving pictures are delicately collaged mixed-media works of paint, paper, oil pastel and acrylic. They continue with a series of 43 hung on the wall outside the galleries.

Mementos, paintings and sculptures connected with Malik's middle years — 9 to 14 — occupy the second gallery. A huge tractor tire takes the stage, surrounded by rusty oil barrels. The artist says

Malik and his friends liked to roll down hills in them.

A platform holds some of his most precious treasures, such as 18 pairs of shoes, a boombox, a radio and a net for crabbing.

Nearby hangs a sled the artist painted purple, with three round lavender saucers attached beneath it. "He liked things that turned, like tires, bicycles and motorcycles," she says.

Miss Snowden taught Malik and Shell chess and says Malik grew to love the game. The artist created a purple chess set and placed two tiny red pairs of shoes on each side.

The third gallery, featuring activities from when Malik was 16 to 18, is the most masculine and physical. With a ladder and partly unlaced high-topped sneakers, Ms. Snowden recalls when Malik tripped on the laces and fell down a flight of stairs. Crutches stand nearby.

She shows his love of sports with his motorcycle — also with crutches — golf clubs, and roller and ice skates. She emphasizes, however, that her reconstruction of Malik's life is not just about him. "It's about all boys," she says.

The flavor of the last gallery changes from the elegiac spirit of the prior display to the horrific, reflecting her belief in society's inequities. "The situation for young black males is shocking and has to change. Every mother should see

this show," Ms. Snowden says.

Visitors proceed from a white chalk outline that indicates a crime scene, to a practice target filled with bullets, to a group of guns taking aim at imaginary people, to a double-hung mirror smeared with the names of guns in blood red.

There is a hopeful note, however. The one form that connects many of the works is the circle. It's in the tire, the bicycle wheels, the oil cans and the mixed-media works and paintings.

Symbolic of life, the circle becomes the celebration of Malik's existence in the exhibit's many forms and figures. "This is an appreciation of him. I'm not dwelling on his death. I'd rather have had him for those 18 years than not at all," Ms. Snowden says.

The show is partly titled "Malik, Farewell 'Til We Meet Again" because Ms. Snowden and her family believe in what she calls "the cycle of life."

"We have faith that death is not the end," she says.

WHAT: "Sylvia Snowden: Malik, Farewell 'Til We Meet Again"
WHERE: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 500

17th St.
WHEN: 10
Tuesday
through
TICKETS
and stud
PHONE:



"Untitled (Rocking Chair)" by Sylvia Snowden is part of her exhibition "Sylvia Snowden: Malik, Farewell 'Til We Meet Again," a tribute at the Corcoran to her late son, Malik.