

Transcript

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 Trans. Title: INTERVIEW: ARTIST SYLVIA SNOWDEN TALKS ABOUT ART EXHIBIT SHE'S CREATED TO COMMEMORATE THE DEATH OF HER SON AND COUNTLESS OTHER YOUNG BLACK MALES MURDERED IN WASHINGTON, DC
 Cat. Title: ART EXHIBIT IS MOTHER'S TRIBUTE TO HER MURDERED SON

JACKI LYDEN, host:

Nothing begs our understanding essentially as the death of our children, and nothing perhaps defies our understanding so utterly. In July of 1993, painter Sylvia Snowden's 18-year-old son was shot dead four blocks from his home in Washington, a city that has made headlines for the high murder rate of young black males. Like countless others, John Malik Butler's case remains unsolved. In many ways though, the spirit of Malik Butler lives on in the exhibit his mother has created at Washington's Corcoran Gallery of Art.

SOUNDBITE OF GALLERY PATRONS

LYDEN: Patrons are constantly coming up to Ms. Snowden and making connections. She's both the artist and mother. Her exhibit is called, "Sylvia Snowden: Malik, Farewell Until We Meet Again." In it, dozens of objects are covered in thick vibrant acrylic paint and trace the young man's life from infancy to young adulthood. There's the suitcase which took him from Berlin to Amsterdam. A golf bag coated with orange paint, yellow for his clubs. There are athletic shoes in neon hues, and even a painted-over electric weed cutter, next to the basketball he opted to play instead of doing his chores. We meet Sylvia Snowden in the first gallery of the exhibit.

Ms. SYLVIA SNOWDEN (Artist): The first gallery really deals with Malik from a young child, very young child, from the crib all the way through six years old. So you see the crib, you see the high chair, you also see the Big Wheel and these large blocks that are designed with the vowels, A-E-I-O-U, on them. And you also see skates. And this skate goes around, these skates actually turn.

LYDEN: These are little child's skates with red paint on them and purple shoelaces, and they're very, very sweet. They're on their own pedestal circling.

Ms. SNOWDEN: All of this really, particularly in this first room, is to remind people that how precious our children are. And how maybe these things don't look so important when the child is actually using them, but they actually are steps that a child's taken towards adulthood.

LYDEN: How many years did you spend making these objects?

Ms. SNOWDEN: Well, about five years, but it's off and on. Because after Malik died, I stopped painting. And for me that's odd. I paint every day. So I mean, I had just stopped. And then I started, I would work sometimes, and sometimes I wouldn't, you know, depending on how I felt inside.

LYDEN: You didn't paint for a while after your son died. Did putting this exhibit together present a different kind of opportunity for you as an artist to either have a dialog with him or do something different with your painting?

Ms. SNOWDEN: No. No. Not at all. Malik and I had talked about doing--me doing an exhibition on the number of black boys who had died with gunshots before he died. And it had a different tilt to it. It was very angry, very angry. But after my child died and I didn't see the reason to paint something angry. The reason really was to paint life and what's good about life.

And though I only had Malik for 18 years, I would have rather have him for 18 years than not at all. And I still think about funny things and I still laugh, you know, the silly things. My kids and I had a lot of fun. I did. I had a lot of fun.

LYDEN: In this room, this is the room of passage, this is the room in which Malik is lost to us. It's the room that you would call his room of death. And it's a very high-ceilinged room. There's a photograph of Malik in here, an outline on the floor, it looks like it's made out of paper, the chalk outline that's drawn around a fallen body by the police. A huge mural made out of police tape, it's very moving--'Do not cross.' And guns painted an almost sickening blood red, painted and aimed at a target. And behind that, a tableau on a mirror of the types of guns that are used in these murders, Colt, Smith & Wesson, Beretta.

Ms. SNOWDEN: This room is somewhat different from the other three galleries. It's about Malik dying, it's about peer pressure, it's about the availability of handguns. And here you see those are guns there and they're pointing to this target. And this target has--it's fleshy on the inside. And then on the outside it's painted black, simply because there are so many black boys who are dying from guns. And the reason is--nobody can understand the reason.

And then this is a picture of Malik with a fish. This really is a statement about the peer pressure. Now this, of course, like in the Testament, this offering the fish as peace, you know, as 'I'll forgive you.' But at the same time, so many youngsters in their teens suffer from peer pressure, I mean, suffer. And 'No matter what you do to me, let me be a part of you. Let me be a part of you.' And this is saying--though now Malik would not say this, of course, this is still--I'm trying to say, 'I want to be a part of you. I forgive you. Please let me still be a part of you--even though I'm dead, even though you killed me. I know you didn't mean it.'

LYDEN: Artist Sylvia Snowden's exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery of Art is called "Sylvia Snowden: Malik, Farewell Until We Meet Again." It's up until October 24th.

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