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Arts

Two Third Ward Exhibitions Show the Importance of Perspective

Third Ward history plays major role in two shows.

By Kelly Klaasmeyer Wednesday, May 14, 2014

On July 26, 1970, 21-year-old Carl Hampton was shot and killed on Dowling Street by members of the Houston Police Department. They fired from the roof of St. John Missionary Baptist Church. The police called it self-defense; the black community called it murder. The story of Carl Hampton, and other Third Ward histories, are a part of two Houston exhibitions, "**Jamal Cyrus: Melizmatik**" at Inman Gallery and "**Monuments: Right Beyond the Site**" a series of installations by the collective Otabenga Jones & Associates.

In "Melizmatik" (the exhibition title is derived from "melismatic," a term for a singer's vocal runs), Cyrus presents a series of works titled *Eroding Witness*. They were created from the front pages of four Houston newspapers reporting the death of Hampton, an activist and the director of the People's Party II, an organization aligned with the Black Panthers. The papers' original text and images have been laser-cut into sheets of papyrus, turning them into ancient artifacts, their contents only partially discernible. Mounted behind glass, the sheets look brittle and fragile, but the headlines are readable. The *Houston Chronicle* headline reads: "Black Militant Slain." *The Forward Times* headline reads: "Exclusive Eyewitness Accounts 'Police Fired first.'" *The Voice of Hope* asked, "Who helped police set up Carl Hampton?"

The range of reporting shows how history differs according to who tells it. The mainstream press reassured white people that police were keeping them safe from "militant" black men while the black press reported on the police brutality that victimized their community. The pages are made to look like relics from a long-dead time — which reminds us that the time wasn't that long ago and isn't long dead.



Eroding Witness by Jamal Cyrus

Over at Project Row Houses, Otabenga Jones & Associates, a collective that includes Jamal Cyrus as well as Dawolu Jabari Anderson, Kenya Evans and Robert A. Pruitt, created a series of row-house installations that commemorate the Third Ward's history. In the row house designated as the education center, there is a photograph taken in front of a building with the sign "People's Party II Community Information Center." The date is July 27, 1970 — the day after Hampton was shot. Houston police officers are lounging in folding chairs in front of the building, smoking cigarettes, with rifles in their hands. It's an image that speaks volumes.

I N M A N G A L L E R Y

One of the most evocative works in "Monuments" is the collective's installation recalling the events that occurred at the Lanier Hall East Men's Dormitory at Texas Southern University on May 17, 1967. The 17th was the third straight day of protests in the Third Ward. On this day, 80 Houston police officers fired, according to various accounts, from 3,000 to 5,000 rounds at the dormitory. A police officer was killed by friendly fire when another officer's bullet ricocheted into him. In the end, 488 students were arrested, and police officers trashed the students' dorm rooms. Five students — Charles Freeman, Douglas Waller, Trazawell Franklin Jr., John Parker and Floyd Nichols — were charged with inciting a riot under a statute that held those charged accountable for any and all crimes that occurred in the course of the riot. The charges were eventually dropped.

Otabenga Jones & Associates have a deft hand with cultural artifacts, pop and otherwise, and walking into their Lanier Hall East installation on a muggy May day, you feel as if you could be walking into a TSU dorm room on another May day nearly 50 years ago. There's an overturned office chair and a typewriter on the floor surrounded by plate shards just inside the door. The sounds of KTSU radio wash over you as you walk into the back room, where your perspective undergoes a 90-degree shift. The far wall becomes a floor strewn with wide-collared dress shirts and old Samsonite suitcases. A worn chenille bedspread is pulled off a metal cot anchored to the wall. A copy of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and a television with a smashed screen are in the pile. (Accounts of the condition of the Lanier dorm after HPD went through it describe, among other things, kicked-in television sets. The police version was that the students had destroyed their own possessions.) Black-and-white photos of pin-up girls are on one wall, while images of Stokely Carmichael and Eldridge Cleaver hang opposite.

In another room, the floor has become the ceiling and a desk and table hang overhead, as do a textbook, *Modern Mathematical Analysis*, and an official James Brown record player with an assortment of old 45s. Throughout the house, pieces of red metal rebar project into the rooms. They're like the red of laser sights or the rods used to mark bullet trajectories. They're a striking graphic addition to the space that also drives home the violence.

Those red rods pass out of the wall of the row house and extend into the one next door. Inside is a large banner with the words "Carl Hampton Free Health Medical Clinic" and a painted image of Hampton. The rods extend like shots through the large banner for a clinic that never opened due to funding issues and police harassment. The bright, shiny optimism of the banner makes it all the more tragic.

The installations in "Monuments" also focus on iconic Third Ward institutions. A house dedicated to the Reverend Ray Martin's Progressive Amateur Boxing Association is filled with white boxing bags that make it highly interactive. Founded in 1968, the PABA has an educational, juvenile crime-prevention and self-defense focus. Martin was dubbed "Houston's First Fighting Preacher"; his slogan: "You can't open a knife or fire a gun with a boxing glove on."

Next door, a row house looks at the Blue Triangle Branch YWCA that has served the community since 1918. Archival photos of women and young ladies in a gym or painting china hang on the walls, and educational books are gathered on shelves. The photos are interesting, but it's one of the weaker installations. The guys of Otabenga Jones seem a little at a loss for inspiration when dealing with the ladies' organization.

Another house is dedicated to Unity National Bank. Opened in 1963, it served customers in black neighborhoods redlined by other banks. Today, in 2014, it is the only black-owned bank in Texas. The Unity National Bank row house contains what has to be the world's largest *boli* figure.

I N M A N G A L L E R Y

Traditionally, a boli is crafted from a ritual accretion of various organic materials around a wood and white-cloth armature over time. The boli is a complex spiritual object in the Bamana culture of Mali. It's a power object linked to the secret men's associations that create them, and its viewing is usually restricted to inducted members. OJ&A's bison-size object has the abstracted bovine form of many boli. There is an opening at the top of their sculpture that makes it appear almost like a giant, Afrocentric version of a piggy bank. It's placed at the back of the all-white room, and the viewer approaches it by walking through the kind of stanchions and ropes you see in bank lines, while audio track intones various synonyms and slang for money. There is a sense of approaching a shrine.

But visually the papier-mâché object looks sort of like a stage prop; that can work conceptually, but I wonder if a patina that was less painted and aspired to more of the lumpy earthen gravitas of a real boli object would work better?

The visual culture of the Third Ward is commemorated in a row house that honors the work of prolific sign painters Israel McCloud, Bobby Ray and Walter Stanciell. Inside, building facades and their signs and imagery are reproduced — the Sportsmans' Lodge is next to the Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church, while across the way are Nolan's Lodge and Miss Bessie's. These kinds of hand-painted signs are disappearing, as are many of the neighborhood places they identified.

Back at his Inman Gallery show, Cyrus pays homage to these signs as well. Using panels covered with faux brick and painted white to look like the walls of buildings, Cyrus had Walter Stanciell paint text from a Jean-Michel Basquiat painting (*I Won't Even Mention Gold*) and the title of a Blind Lemon Jefferson song ("Lemon's New World Blues") on the panels. Stanciell's block letters use a radiant gold aura in the center of the former and lemon yellow in the latter. His lettering is off just enough to give the text -personality.

These shows focusing on the history and culture of the Third Ward are particularly timely. Freedman's Town in the Fourth Ward, the neighborhood settled by freed slaves, its streets paved with their own handmade bricks, was -essentially razed and replaced with synthetic stucco "Tuscan" townhomes. The Third Ward is differently situated, much larger and more populous. Maybe it can avoid a similar fate. -Anderson, Cyrus, Evans and Pruitt hope so.

"Monuments" includes a variety of related events. The installations opened with a community market and talent showcase. The next event is a May 24 workshop led by Jamal Cyrus and M'kina Tapscott in which participants will create their own neighborhood monuments. See [-projectrowhouses.org](http://projectrowhouses.org) for -details.

<http://www.houstonpress.com/2014-05-15/culture/jamal-cyrus-monuments-third-ward/>