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## SMC Museum of Art opens two new exhibits

By Vera Kochan



Mid-20th Century "spirit spouse" from Republic of Cote d'Ivoire "Blolo Bian" Photo Vera Kochan

exhibit that uses not only words, but popular symbolism to represent corporate influence, all disguised as various medieval coats of arms. As is typical of most modern art, the intended meaning of this exhibit's pieces may not be overtly obvious, but they are fun once you get the gist of where he's headed.

The other exhibit in the art museum is "Power & Purpose: Reflections on the African Art Collection," the artifacts of which are part of SMC's permanent collection and displayed in honor of Black History Month. It is guest curated by Kathy Littles, Ph.D., provost with California Institute of Integral Studies.

The installation is meant to highlight "the nearly 40 objects that speak to notions of beauty, hierarchy, motherhood, masculinity, spirituality, sustainability, rites of passage and diversity that permeates the continent in both its traditions and cultural practices."

Seventeen tribes are represented through the 18th, 19th and 20th century artifacts in the exhibit, and while they can be considered works of art, the original intent of many of the pieces was to serve a spiritual or medicinal purpose. One such piece from mid-20th century Ghana is a fertility statue ("Akua Ba" meaning Akua's Child) made of wood, glass and beads. Royer explained that it was commissioned by an infertile woman who was instructed by a priest to carry it on her back the way one would carry a baby. Even though Akua was mocked by fellow villagers, eventually the woman did conceive a child. Other women of the tribe began to adopt the practice.

Another piece, from the Republic of Cote d'Ivoire is a wooden Blolo Bian (Male Figure), also from the mid-20th century. The Baule people believed in a "spirit spouse," a likeness that stood in for a deceased spouse. Anyone experiencing physical or emotional distress sought the advice of a diviner who might make a determination that a deceased partner is jealous of the living spouse. As such, a wooden replica of the deceased would be commissioned and offerings must be given to the spiritual partner with instructions that the figure must be cared for regularly.

There's also an interactive room with a large map of Africa that displays the tribal locations where each of the artifacts came from. Included in the room is some information on Restitution and the opportunity for patrons to post their views about the topic on a wall. The opposite wall has an "ancestral altar" dedicated to the memory of ancestors with mementos or meaningful tokens from their lives. The exhibit explains that many cultures have such altars where the grieving can take a moment to remember their loved ones with peace and love.

"Stock" closes May 8; "Power & Purpose" closes June 19.

"Stock" and "Power & Purpose" are two new exhibits currently featured in the Saint Mary's College Museum of Art. Both installations are poles apart from each other in content, but like-minded in their thought provoking natures.

Artist Andrew Mount is an SMC faculty professor whose works make up the "Stock" exhibit. According to the museum, "The word 'stock' could be a product, an amount of something, or a constituent part of a corporation." Wordplay is a big part of this exhibit's running theme, and if words are not visible in the art itself, then symbols are scattered within it that subliminally remind the viewer of contemporary monetary institutions. If all of this sounds puzzling, keep in mind that aspects of the exhibit are meant to be analyzed and prove thought provoking.

"Stock is a solo exhibit about wealth and debt that invites the viewer to participate in how these symbols are cycled through time," Academic & Engagement Curator Britt Royer stated. Many of the hidden messages are obvious, as in the very first work, which is titled "Stocks," where words such as "default," "punish" and "debt" are allowed to be ink-stamped onto a wall by patrons through interactive methods.

"Real Property" is another "hidden meaning" type of



Mid-20th Century fertility figure from Ghana "Akua Ba" Photo Vera Kochan

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