

'Wake' a potent look at slavery's legacy

"Tragic Wake: The Legacy of Slavery and the African Diaspora in Contemporary American Art" at Spirit Square Center for Arts and Education is a companion art exhibit to "A Slave Ship Speaks: The Wreck of the Henrietta Marie," and is an impressive group of works by 22 artists.

A number of them contributed works referring directly to American slavery and related issues



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raised in "Henrietta Marie."

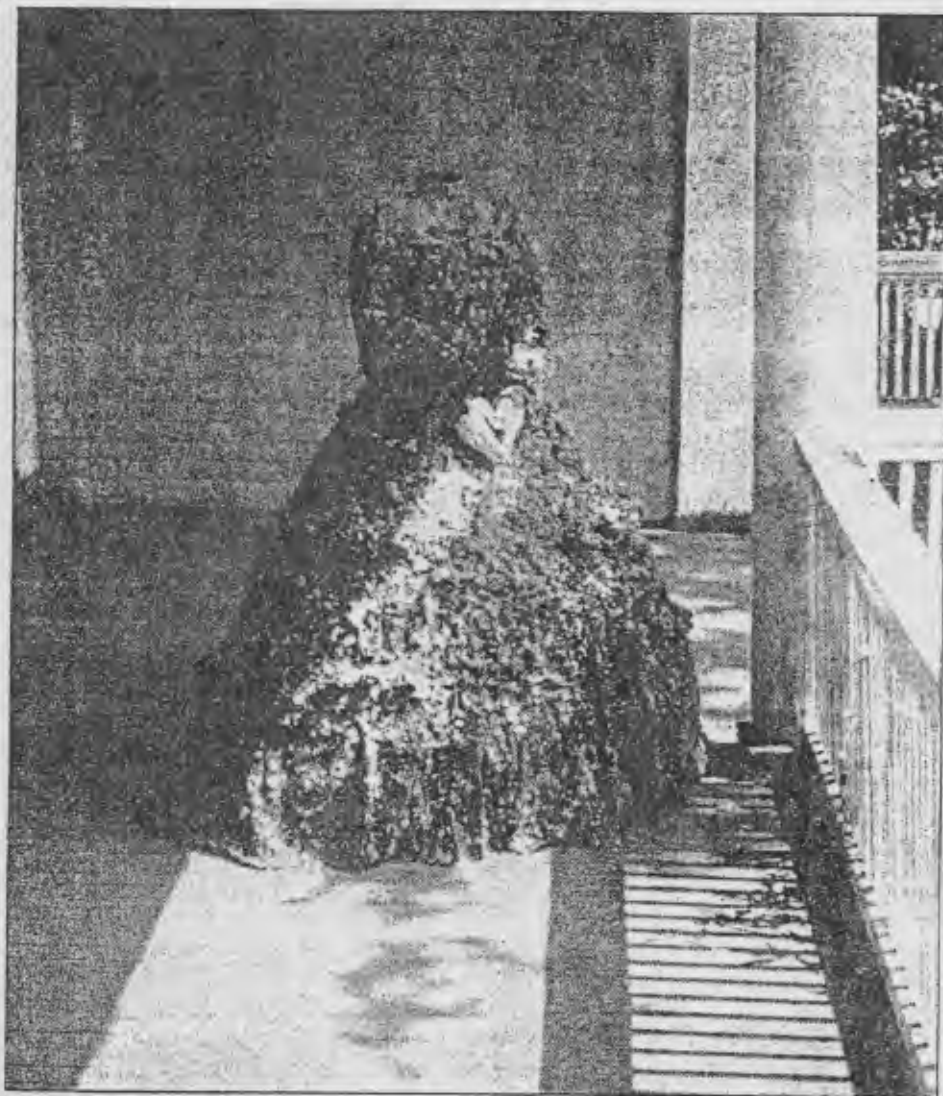
Prominent among these is Willie Birch's "My Holocaust," a wood and papier-mâché model of a slave ship's skeleton that is

covered and surrounded by dark figures representing slaves and textual information about the American slave trade. In his use of "holocaust," Birch reminds us that American slavery resulted in a level of death and suffering among Africans that is comparable to that experienced by Jews in Nazi Germany during our own century.

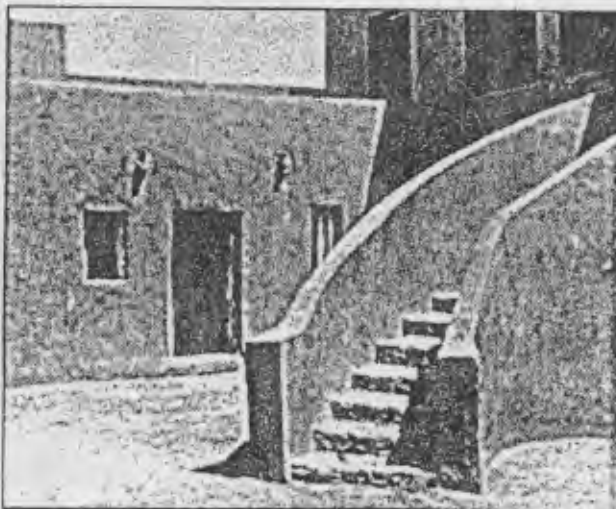
Carole Byard employs metal chains and shackles — universally recognizable emblems of slavery — to good effect in her installation "Flesh and Blood." She has hung several rusted chains, shackles and steel-jawed animal traps on a wall above a row of seven equally rusted buckets whose interiors are painted red to suggest they're filled with blood. Not only does this aspect of the piece refer to the blood of those Africans and African Americans who suffered and died, but it also serves as a more positive emblem of the endurance of African physical traits and cultural traditions in the Americas despite centuries of oppression.

Chains are also the dominant image in Howardena Findell's "Slavery Memorial," a canvas that depicts a dark seascape with a bridge of photocopied chains stretching from one side to the other. The stenciled names of several dozen people documented as having lived as slaves appear in the stormy-looking sky, while the sea below contains the names of slave ports on both sides of the Atlantic and the shocking statistic "130 MILLION DROWNED."

Among the other artists who employ chain imagery are Lynn Marshall-Linnemeir, Angie N'Kele, Melvin Edwards and John Outterbridge. N'Kele's small sculptural tabloux — made of wire, wire screen, sheet metal and other metal scraps — are of particular interest because they refer to specific circumstances in the Atlantic slave trade's history. These animal-figural assemblages depict a slave auction and the "Kidnapping of Oludab," an African boy who grew up to become a free man and the first former slave to publish his autobiography in English.



"Tar Belle," by Yobicha, combines two regional images, the "Southern belle" ideal of white femininity and the tar baby from African mythology.



Carrie Mae Weems photographed a former slave trade port in Senegal, used for that purpose until the end of the 18th century.

the accompanying caption only as Mitchell's "maid, Bessie," as if she had no family name.

The other image hits closer to home; it's a Charlotte Observer photo of a 93-year-old African American church building engulfed in the flames of an arson fire that destroyed it earlier this year. By juxtaposing these images with a 19th-century bill of sale for an African slave (reproduced on a transparent glass panel), Tuttle concisely illustrates slavery's continuing legacy of racism in the so-called "New South."

While "Tragic Wake" continues into February, the Afro-American Cultural Center has a related exhibit closing next Sunday. It is also worth seeing. "The Middle Passage: White Ships, Black Cargo" features 50 extraordinary drawings and a three-dimensional piece by Columbia artist Tom Feelings from his book of the same title, vividly illustrating the experiences of slaves transported from Africa to the New World.