



DISTRESSED

SUNNI MERCER AND THE ART OF ASSEMBLAGE

Lost and Found: Assemblage Work from Sunni Mercer is presented in conjunction with *The Living Room*, the Wichita Art Museum's interactive gallery for children and adults, which also features work by Mercer completed with the assistance of the Wichita community. Both exhibitions will be on view at the Museum through May 2004. *Lost and Found* and *The Living Room* are made possible by the Kansas Health Foundation and the S.M. and Laura H. Brown Charitable Trust.

TRASH. CAST-OFFS. JUNK. DISCARDED POSSESSIONS. GARBAGE. Sunni Mercer is inspired by the very things we throw away. They are the genesis for her paintings, sculpture, and installations. She uses these distressed objects, as she calls them, because they tell the stories of their previous owners and bring with them an entire history. Mercer doesn't necessarily know or understand that history, but she intuitively builds on it, weaving her own stories for each object. Her work is enriched and enlivened by everything around her, particularly social issues, spiritual values, and events concerning the state of humanity. That is why it is important to spend time understanding the messages she wishes to impart.

This essay invites you to explore affinities among Sunni Mercer's work in *The Living Room* and *River Lobby* and specially selected sculpture from the Museum's collection on view in the Sam and Rie Bloomfield Gallery.

PICTURED ABOVE: Sunni Mercer (b. 1957), *The Reclamation Throne*, 2003. Mixed media. Wichita Art Museum, *The Living Room*.



H.C. Westerman (1922–1981), *Untitled (Old Hammer Head with a Rosewood Handle)*, 1970. Pine, rosewood, iron clay hammer and suede. Wichita Art Museum, Purchased with fund donated by the Wichita Art Museum Members Foundation, Inc. 1971.7a–c.

Nothing is off limits when Mercer is working in her Bethany, Okla. studio.

Words cut from antique books, furniture, and household instruments are all given new identities under her care. She is attracted to bones, which she labels with letters and numbers, as an anthropologist would do. Mercer also has an appreciation for photographs of unidentified men, women, and children, as well as for the beautiful, rusted patinas found on aging metal tools and machine parts—surfaces that would be nearly impossible to replicate with new materials.

A series of small wall assemblages titled *Metals/Medals* is evidence that Mercer has a keen sensitivity to design. There is usually a strong central focus that provides the framework within a carefully balanced, symmetrical composition. The same tools emphasized by an abstract artist—line, shape, texture—are combined with the solids and voids that arrived with her selected ephemera. Look at the marvelous shapes. At the same time, abstractness is upstaged by figurative elements. This is a blueprint for her work: well-designed art objects with visual clues such as words and pictures leading to deeper meaning.

Mercer's interest in mixed media, found objects, and distressed surfaces has a prestigious lineage in 20th century art history. During that century artistic convention and tradition were thrown out the window. Painters explored surfaces and media other than canvas and oil. Sculptors were no longer confined to carving or modeling, but began constructing—using hammers and nails, welding and glue. In fact, Pablo Picasso, the man who invented collage by gluing simulated chair caning onto a painting, is credited with the first constructed sculpture, *Guitar*, 1912 (Collection Musée Picasso), made out of sheet metal and wire.

Mark di Suvero, Dorothy Dehner and H.C. Westermann also employ scrap industrial metals. Di Suvero's *Untitled (Bird Form)*, 1960, seems to be almost torn from its original form and forced into place. The awkward structure is laden with the burden of its components, in stark contrast to the weightless feathers on the graceful wings of a bird. One is compelled to return to Mercer's *Affirmation Seat*, 2003, which boasts a magical set of wings yet is anchored to the floor with sturdy roots.

Sunni Mercer (b. 1957), *The Legacy of Memories Sofa*, 2003. Mixed media. Wichita Art Museum, *The Living Room*.



Westermann's *Untitled*, 1970, is a meticulously prepared pine box, reminiscent of a poor man's casket, that protects a weathered iron claw hammer with a curvaceous rosewood handle. The artist pays homage to this familiar centuries-old tool by making it precious in the suede-lined box, but is he also commenting on the death of the handmade? Taking the ordinary, rendering it special and transforming it into art is found over and over again in Mercer's work also.

Wendell Castle is a modern artist with a traditional respect for his materials and the history of fine craft. In some ways, the immaculate surfaces of *Cavalcade*, 1989, are the antithesis of the aging and rugged patinas on Mercer's work. Like the objects in *The Living Room*, Castle's sculpture is also furniture. Yet unlike those objects, it is also practical. *Cavalcade* can be used as a foyer stand where a visitor might have placed a calling card in the previous century. He has packaged mahogany, lacewood, poplar, copper, and gold leaf into a harmonious work of art. Mercer echoes Castle's interest in balance and geometry in her assemblages in the *River Lobby*.

A native of Emporia and graduate of the University of Kansas, Castle works with a studio of skilled craftsmen to produce work that is functional and sculptural. His work is infused with the ideas and talents of those he employs in the same way Mercer appropriates the images, language, and histories of others. Most artists prefer working alone, undisturbed, in their studios. Many more fear contact with the public might lead to rejection or being misunderstood. Not Mercer. The *Living Room* was furnished after her lengthy collaboration with selected Wichita-area organizations and agencies. Mercer's *A Legacy of Memories Sofa*, 2003, is covered with photographs donated by local senior citizens that trusted her to share their stories by transferring the photos onto cloth. The cloth was then used to upholster the sofa. This method of working with other people adds yet another layer to Mercer's work and is proof of her eagerness to inform her sculpture with thoughts and ideas from outside herself.



Wendell Castle (b. 1912), *Cavalcade*, 1989. Mahogany, lacewood, poplar, copper and gold leaf. Wichita Art Museum, Museum Purchase, Burnetta Adair Endowment Fund, 1991-4.

Sunni Mercer (b. 1957), *The Two-Squared Coffee Table*, 2003. Mixed media. Wichita Art Museum, The Living Room.



Mercer extends her collaborative approach to include viewers, connecting with them by integrating language and interactive elements. This is found in the wings on *Affirmation Seat*. Similarly, *Alphabet Spire V*, 1973, is William Crutchfield's tribute to the building blocks of Western language. He monumentalized them into one of the world's most recognized structures, the Eiffel Tower. Cranks at its base remind us that the alphabet is manmade, but the handles only hint at movement. They are nonfunctioning, teasing us into thinking that we have control over words and language. Works of art in the Museum's collection that boast true kinetic elements are Don Gauthier's *Bell*, 1981, and Harry Bertioia's *Sounding Sculpture*, 1978. In Bertioia's work the vertical tines set off a melodic notes with even the softest touch.

Mercer is a contemporary of Louise Nevelson, whose work, including *Night Sun III*, 1959-68, was constructed from unrelated social debris or architectural remnants. Nevelson collected various shapes and textures from junkyards and architectural antique stores and magically transformed them by cutting, stacking, and combining. A monochromatic coat of paint unites the entire composition. Unlike most sculpture, Nevelson's work is not fully three-dimensional. It rests on the floor and against the wall. It exists somewhere between the worlds of painting and sculpture, just as Castle's work straddles the realms of sculpture and furniture. Nevelson was never apologetic about her choice of materials. She once said, "I see no reason why I should tickle stones or waste time on polishing bronze."

Like Mercer, Nevelson was interested in the previous lives of her materials and in giving them a new dignity in her art. Like Nevelson, Mercer scrounges for the effects she uses to make art. One of Mercer's most important discoveries was the former Taloga, Oklahoma residence of a recluse named Tag Ray. The artist was given permission to excavate Ray's home after his death. She talked to people about him, studied what little was known of his life, and began incorporating bits and pieces of his history in her art. The *Salvaged Angels* series in the *River Lobby* are abstract portraits of homeless individuals in New York City and fittingly contain remnants found in Ray's home. "I wanted to create a symbolic connection to Tag Ray, my way of saying that the effects of homelessness are universal," wrote the artist to this author.

As *Reclamation Throne* and other objects in *The Living Room* testify, Mercer has tried to honor the homeless and other disenfranchised members of society. Her desire is to give them a voice without exploiting their situation for the sake of her art. This distinction is paramount to understanding her motivation for including social commentary and to appreciating her choices of materials and methodology.

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Sunni Mercer (b. 1957), *Untitled (Metals/Medals series)*, 1993-94. Assemblage. Collection, Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, 1999.003.001c.