

GARDENING IN THE TROPICS



JASMINE THOMAS-GIRVAN

yartgallery.com

Stepping inside, there's a glint of a metal bird quickly pushed aside for a flash of red, bars of a cage there, bright blue feathers, a perched figure, rough wood, and a painted, shifting sky. And there's silence – the type of silence that seems ever-present in Jasmine's studio, the type of silence usually associated with a sacred space, or perhaps a museum or library where knowledge and its connection to history command a certain reverence.

Eventually, a tiptoed examination around the room, one pause, move on, back two steps, re-examine. Is there more colour here than before? The beauty is undeniable. The forms are crafted, as ever, with skill and care (such detail in the hands, such expression in the faces!). In everything, there is spirituality; in everything, humour and whimsy. Against one wall and on a pedestal, a wood and brass man stands within a cage, a perfect silver circle around one eye, an inhabited birdcage in one hand. Monocle. Jasmine speaks of the “incomplete vision” of men who travel with caged birds, and wonders aloud about the strange cruelty of this phenomenon. She points out, though, that the bird has the last laugh – in its beak there is a tiny cage. In this cage, there is a man.

Tucked into another corner, two more figures, heads bowed towards each other in the most intimate of gestures. “We Dare Be Brave,” Jasmine says. This is a line from a Maya Angelou poem. Against a different wall, on a different perch, there is a similar visual language. A woman with an elaborate hairdo stands, one arm around a hoisted baby, her other arm occupied by a carriage led by a bird. This noble creature is called Amazonia, after an Olive Senior poem of the same name. Jasmine shares with me the lines – “. . . when gardening in the Tropics, every time you lift / your eyes from the ground / you see sights that strain your / credulity – like those strong / Amazon women striding daily across / our lands carrying bundles of wood / on their heads and babies strapped / to their breasts and calabashes of water in both hands.”

The essence of Angelou, Senior, Derek Walcott, Patrick Chamoiseau, and other writers seem to fill Jasmine's studio. She draws from them the beauty and complexity of their musings on place and the sublime, translating, reinterpreting, and shaping their words into her own language. Jasmine reveals that another piece, The Pumpkin Seed, is her own take on a Chamoiseau story, one in which

a “single, simple gesture has ramifications beyond itself.” There is another kind of reveal present today in the studio as Jasmine opens, removes, rotates her sculptural works to demonstrate how a head here or a bird there can be removed and worn as jewellery – a portable, tangible reminder of our greater stories.

Within these works, with their similar scale and message, there is a strong visual connection – one can see the figures having whispered conversations late at night, as among neighbours in an otherworldly, magical village. But here, there are also works born not out of literature – works that speak a somewhat different yet connected language. Through their symbolism, these pieces carry a certain agency regarding current events. We speak about the State of Emergency, violence and guns, but also about the ability to find joy in typically sad situations.

Found objects have a place here, too: Seeds, palm fronds and salvaged Samaan wood from the Savannah have been polished, waxed and painted or adorned with feathers. In some cases, these objects are a part of the works, in other cases, a starting point. All, however, nod to Jasmine’s love of the forms inherent in our natural environment, and the act of looking beyond to the potential of that which is yet unseen.

I know that there are traditional, wearable pieces in the studio, but Jasmine has not yet revealed them. Most prominently on display is a sense of shifting scales and intentions – a move towards an even more holistic and integrated conception of the artist’s larger works. As Jasmine states, gesturing to one of these, “Yes, I love jewellery, but this is where I am happiest.”

Against a dark blue wall, there is a figure in brass I’ve returned to many times since my entry into the studio. Adrift, he dangles a key on a red ribbon over the edge of a wooden boat. His expression (secretive? enlightened?) is captivating and hints at acceptance and belonging. I try to imagine him in a different space, and wonder how he will be read by others who don’t have the benefit of explanation. I understand, though, that, no matter where he travels, and who he encounters, his narrative will remain the same. He is the last thing I look at before stepping outside.

– *Melanie Archer, November, 2011*



Journeying to True Home • Aluminum, Brass, Sterling silver, Fresh water pearl, Rutilated Quartz, ribbon, recycled bicycle wheel and antique child’s shoe form. 26”H

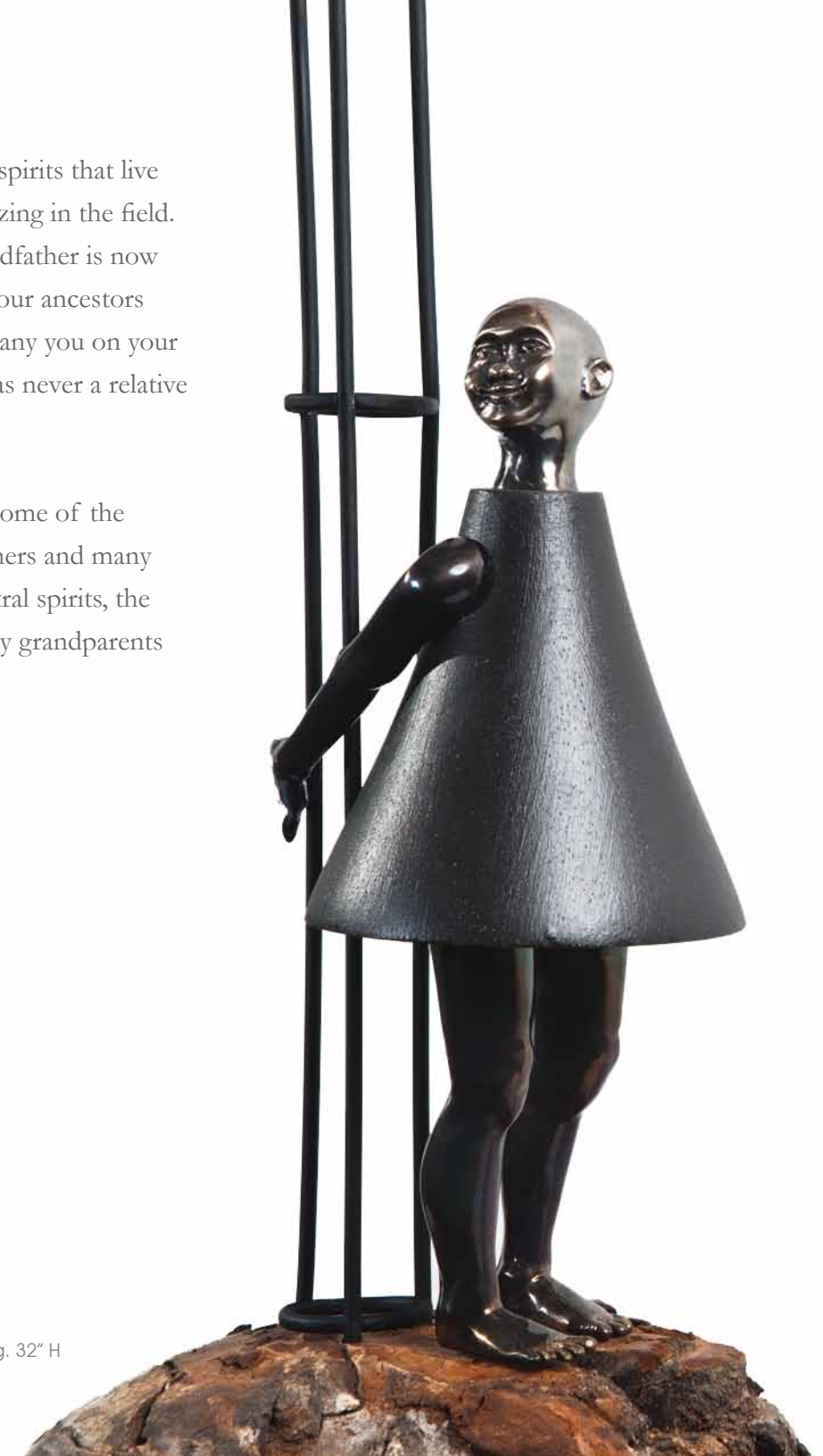
Photo by Michele Jorsling



For many peoples of Africa, ancestors are the spirits that live in the tree beside your house or in the cow grazing in the field. The great-grandfather or your great-great-grandfather is now that stream snaking down the mountainside. Your ancestors could also be any spirit that decides to accompany you on your voyage through the world, even if he or she was never a relative or acquaintance.

The family has no borders, explains Soboufu Some of the Dagara people: “Our children have many mothers and many fathers. As many as they wish”. And the ancestral spirits, the ones that help you make your way, are the many grandparents that each of you has. As many as you wish.

– *Eduardo Galeano*



Tree Spirit • Mahogany stump, brass, bronze and Ostrich Egg. 32" H



New World Mariners - Voyage • Mahogany and Brass. 8"H X 48" L

Gardening in the Tropics, sometimes you come across these strong Amazon women striding across our lands- like Toeyza who founded the Worishiana nation of female warriors in the mountains of Parima...

I wanted to tell of noble women like Nanny the Maroon queen Mother or fair Anacaona, Taino chieftainess who was brutally slain by the colonists, or of The carib women whom they said Colon relied on for navigation through the islands...

When gardening in the Tropics, every time you lift your eyes from the ground you see sights that strain your credulity- like those strong Amazon women striding daily across our lands carrying bundles of wood on their heads and babies strapped to their breasts and calabashes of water in both hands.

— adapted from *Amazon Women Gardening in the Tropics*
By Olive Senior



Amazonia • Bronze and Mahogany. 15" H



The Illuminated Heart • Mahogany and Bronze. 10" H X 1/2" W



The Illuminated Heart (Pendant Detail) • 5 1/2" H x 1 1/2" W

The Tower Of Victory - Breathtaking vistas only if you are willing to climb.

Gardening in the tropics,
we are constantly seduced by spectacular views,
gaze this way ,
before you are mountains making happy with sky.
soon iguanas come visiting on the backs of clouds,
sultry sunsets taste of pink grapefruit
the air is perfumed with hummingbird flight.
But truly,
to gaze upon the most marvelous landscape on the Planet,
one must climb to the uppermost story of the Tower of Victory.
The Quest begins with a single step.
At the foot of the stairs, awaits courage.
It lives upon the first step in a state of lethargy and comes to life
only when you begin to climb.
On each step, souls colour becomes more intense,
its form becomes more perfect
the light that emanates from it shines ever brighter...
only when it reaches the topmost step,
can one truly view this spectacular landscape.
This marvelous quest is made possible through
humility, courage and pure Love.
At the topmost step
at the pinnacle of the tower,
fear vanquished
radiating a clear blue light
one views this awesome landscape...
and here
through closed lids
one rests gently
on a heartbeat...
victorious.

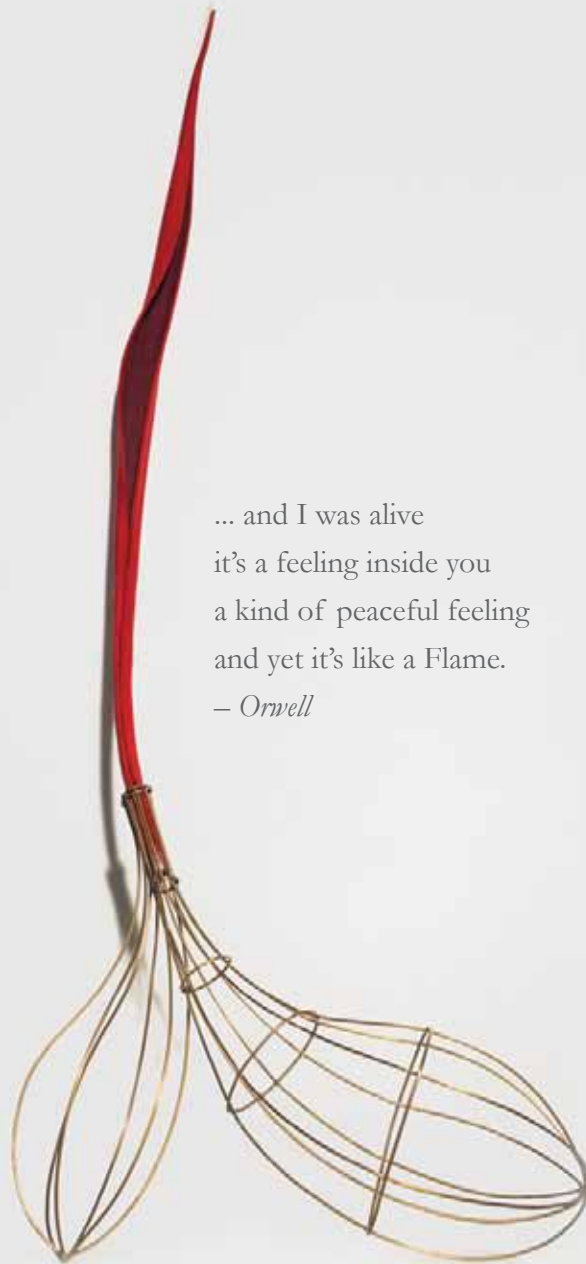
—J



The Tower of Victory - Mahogany and Bronze, Height 15"



Hybrid • Bronze, sterling silver and red coral branches. 8"H X 6 1/2" W



... and I was alive
it's a feeling inside you
a kind of peaceful feeling
and yet it's like a Flame.
– *Orwell*

Flame • Palm frond and Brass. 8' H