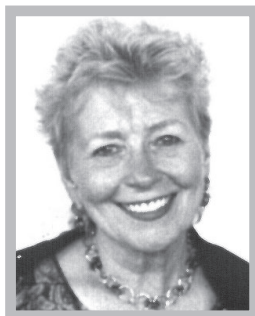


ARTS ALL
AROUND

A!

by Barbara-lyn Morris

*Installation as Art Explored*

To be engaged with contemporary art is to deal with a type of art called "installation." Grasping the essence of installation as a genre has been a focus for me the last couple of years.

"ARTSPEAK: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords" (1990) by Robert Atkins defines installation: "...an entire ensemble or environment... (providing) viewers with the experience of being surrounded by art, as in a mural-decorated public space or an art-enriched cathedral." Atkins says that most installations are "unsalable"; they are "exhibited for a relatively brief period"; and they have about them a "labor-intensiveness." Installation may also refer to permanent, site-specific creations, often commissioned for corporate or public places.

As with other art media, any depth of understanding is well served by first-hand experience. The quest can be exhausting.

In 2003, I spent two long days wandering through the 50th International Art Exhibition in Venice, Italy, popularly known as "La Biennale." The United States pavilion featured Fred Wilson, a Bronx-born (1954) artist best known for his complex installations that critique the role of museums in creating culture.

Using video, computers, life-size mannequins, photography, reproductions of masterpieces, and authentic museum-owned works on loan, Wilson created an installation exploring the appearance of black individuals (Moors) in historical Venetian art. His installation, "Speak of Me as I Am," was a tour de force of art history -- beautifully conceived and technically very sophisticated.

In March 2004, I spent an intensive period of time in New York at The Armory Show: An International Fair of New Art. Spread over two piers in the Hudson River at 12th Avenue and 50th Street, this Herculean show was assembled by nearly 200 art dealers from around the world. Installation art was prominent in this show.

Also, I took in as much as I could absorb of the 2004 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in

New York. There again, installations drew the greatest attention, some laudatory, some bewildering, and a good bit derogatory.

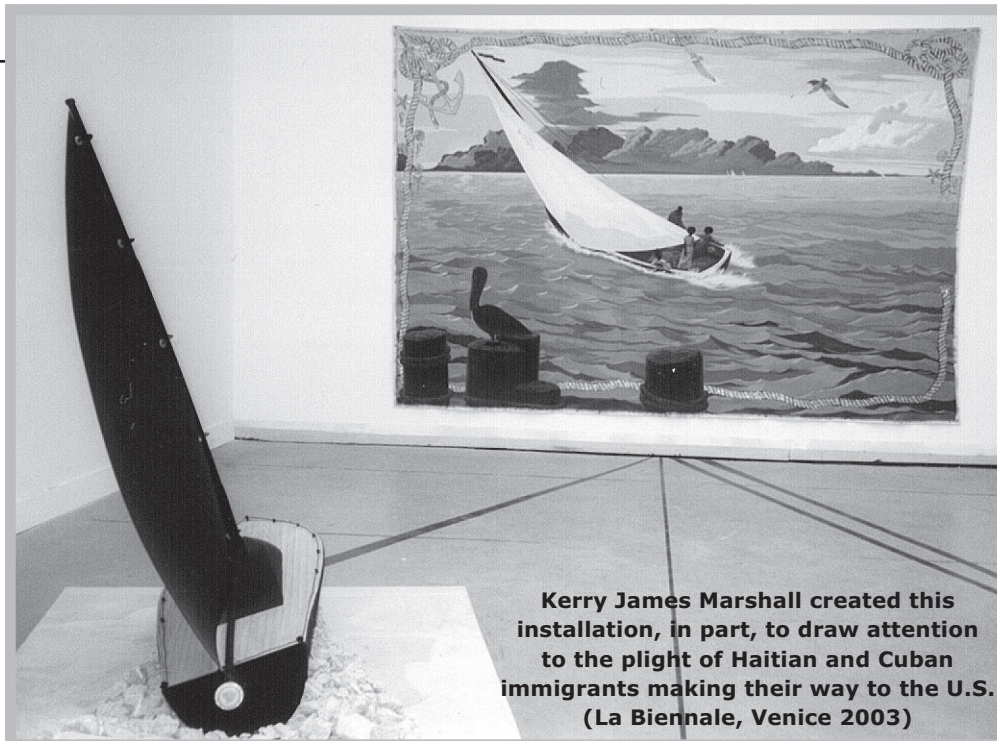
From these three experiences, I dare to add some notes to Atkins' limited definition:

- Installations uniformly challenge visitors' traditional gallery experience. Don't expect isolated pieces of art on a pedestal or wall UNRELATED to the other pieces of art nearby. The WHOLE is the essence of an installation; although the relationship of the parts may be, and often is, puzzling.

- Boundaries of art media are often blurred and sometimes strangely integrated. For example, video and film might imitate painting and drawing; photographs are often cut, folded, and woven to be sculpture-like; the old concept of collage takes on new meaning as startling materials (dung, for example) are used.

- Highly technical computer, video, and sound know-how is central to most installations.

- Installations generally are multi-sensory experiences. "Art is about so much more than the eye," maintains Barry Jones,



Kerry James Marshall created this installation, in part, to draw attention to the plight of Haitian and Cuban immigrants making their way to the U.S. (La Biennale, Venice 2003)

a local installation/digital artist.

- "Interactive" is a watchword of installation. The visitor is almost always invited to be a protagonist in an event. Unfortunately, too often the invitation is not a straight-forward one, leaving the visitor an antagonist.

- Installations not only are time and labor intensive, but they also generally recognize manual skills seldom associated with art, such as carpentry, electrical wiring, and plumbing.

- Extremes of craftsmanship often characterize installations. Some represent perfectionist craft work, while others represent a nonchalant attitude about the finished look.

2005 is the year of the Biennale in Venice (June-November), and The Armory Show is happening again this month in New York (March 10-14 at Hudson River Piers 90 and 92). However, to experience a superb installation, you need only travel to

Knoxville, TN (the University of Tennessee Downtown Gallery at 106 South Gay Street) or to Emory, VA (The 1912 Gallery at Emory & Henry College in the Emory train depot).

In those two venues, installation artist-activist Gregg A. Schlanger, with help from at least 10 assistants, has created two versions of "Holston River Diaries." They are well designed and create a unique visual experience. Barry Jones of Emory & Henry describes them as "landscape paintings made real."

The Holston River installations illustrate many of the points made above (i.e., whole environments created, visitor-as-participant, multi-sensory, labor and technical intensiveness, and thought provoking.) Unfortunately, installations are often unnecessarily puzzling to the uninitiated, and these two are no exception.

Granted, when a visitor to "Holston River Diaries" walks about the water-works environment and sits before the monitors and uses them, he/she becomes part of the creative experience. Simple signs with instructions could make a huge difference. For example, "Please open screen door, have a seat, and press knob to see student art related to this show." Ruth Mullins of Abingdon visited The 1912 Gallery and reported, "I just didn't know what to do. I loved the sound of running water, and I prayed there wouldn't be any leak in the basins holding all that water." Visitors would also benefit from a sign explaining that they may view the companion installation on the computer monitor. (Yes, Knoxville can view Emory, and Emory, Knoxville. Amazing!)

"Holston River Diaries" may challenge visitors' art gallery expectations. The exhibits also may take the visitor quantum leaps forward in understanding and enjoying installation as art. They will help us all appreciate the fragility of the Holston River watershed, essential to all our lives here! Hurry, go to one of these venues before Schlanger and company dismantle their two remarkable installations. A!



"Holston River Diaries" challenges visitors' art gallery expectations.