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## Beyond Human Understanding: A New Dimension in Art

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## ON THE HILL



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“Like swift, graceful gazelles, they dance and dance around the bird as if performing a ceremonial rite before a symbolic god in a medieval temple.”

# Beyond Human Understanding

## A New Dimension in Art

By Abdulkadir N. Said

Like a legendary creature from outer space, the shadowy frame of the huge bird was visible through the streaks of light which penetrated the darkness of the place. The bird's massive wings stretched horizontally. Its head was slightly downward as if it had just flown in from some mysterious place above. But when the light streaks increased in intensity and gradually illuminated the stage of Ira Aldridge Theater, you then knew what you were seeing was not a creature from outer space. Rather, it was an unusual work of art by Stanley White. It was created from steel, wood and rubber and symbolized the mysticism of a mythical bird with human characteristics. The backdrop which gave the illusion of quiet space was merely a huge screen made to look that way by special lighting.

Soothing music fills the hall. You feel at peace with yourself, with those around you. You relax to the beat but at the same time fix your stare at the bird on stage. You are overwhelmed by its long legs, its massive seven-foot frame, and a serpent-like neck that shines like a silver sword. You are struck by the bird's human face—that of a woman—and its huge wings carved from wood. Simultaneously

two female voices—a vocalist and a narrator—come over the speakers to introduce the bird and to render poetic explanation of its virtues and supernatural powers.

The poetry begins slowly in unison with the mellow music and the soft tone of the vocalist. You hear every word and feel as though you too are in a flight with the bird—just as suggested in the following lines written specially for the production by Clay Goss:

*Within the drums/flight is possible.  
Listen to the wings/of the bird that is/  
flying off to war. Among the living/there  
will be life/or death due to/circum-  
stances beyond all/comprehension/  
Travels like the four/winds blowing  
around the/globe. All things are/pos-  
sible in the end. Listen to the bent/  
inner workings of the/Mother Force/  
Transmigrations, Primal/Images like  
the God/Mercury. A messenger/where/  
all our fathers go/as one Legend to/  
their memories. Like birds as their  
wings/lift them slowly off/into the sky.  
Within the drums/even flight becomes/  
merely possible/within the drums/The  
Beginning as well as the End. Flight!*





PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROY LEWIS

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All of a sudden, two spot lights brighten the aisles in the theater. You sense something is about to happen. But what? You hear foot steps coming from the opposite end of the stage. As you turn to look, a group of masked dancers clad in white and black costumes swish by as if they too were endowed with wings like the bird. Like swift, graceful gazelles, they dance and dance around the bird as if performing a ceremonial rite before a symbolic god in a medieval temple. Indeed, their performance captivates the audience. Even the few fidgety youngsters in the theater find a meaningful diversion in the activity on stage. There is no motion, no sound. And when the dancers finish their ritualistic performance and dash back off stage through the aisles, the audience bursts into applause.

The lights dim once again to allow for the exit of the bird and to make way for the grand entrance of yet another piece of art.

about the production, all are dispelled by the time the first act is ended.

At one point you are shifted from stage to screen through the effective projection of slides superimposed over 16mm. film showing various pieces of White's birds lined up on a field of green grass. Pieces of sculpture are in fact made to hop about like grass-hoppers as if they were gifted with the power of motion.

At another point you are taken back to the roots—Africa—via a powerful on-stage performance by a trio with "talking" drums.

White's production, "Beyond Human Understanding," is hardly that. It is within the realm of understanding, thanks to his artistry. For an hour and 45 minutes, his work, striving for new dimensions in art, casts a spell over an audience who came for a performance and remained for a rite. For White, the sculpture seems only the beginning of his expression.

His interest in art began early as he was growing up in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

It is conceivable that he might have chosen another line of work, but fate steered him to his present profession. His artistic talents were recognized at a crucial point in life by his seventh-grade teachers. Much later, it was nourished and sustained by encouragement from high school instructors. Their collective interest in him and his work inspired White to push on.

After graduation from Walker Grant High School, he won a scholarship to Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. But he transferred to Howard University after one year, to satisfy a deep desire to be among his people. He graduated in 1973, and just this past May was awarded the Master of Fine Arts degree.

At Howard, White developed a lasting attachment to the field of visual art. This deep interest served him as a catalyst in his search for a deeper meaning in his work. The urge to learn more and to discover the unknown led him in the direction of the supernatural in art forms, as found

#### WHO IS STANLEY WHITE?

Stanley White, 23, is an art teacher at Dunbar High School in Washington, D. C. He is an alumnus of Howard University.

**It is all part of a well-orchestrated production** heralding the birth of a new concept in the presentation of visual art. <http://oh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol2/iss3/>





"Back to the roots—Africa—" with on-stage performance of "talking drums."

in West African and Caribbean art. Indeed, this provided the setting for his master's thesis. And to transform theory into living pieces of art, White followed a rigid work schedule that was dictated by strict discipline and a high sense of commitment. He surrounded himself with books, steel, wood, rubber and other wares of his craft. Inevitably, he developed sort of a spiritual closeness to his work. Often when inspired by a particular piece, he would grab pen and paper and celebrate his creation through verse or poetry. Consider this one for D'Glo, a water serpent from Trinidadian folklore:

*Within the realities of Life in an unnatural environment . . . . Existing among demons of darkness . . . . We absorb those qualities we once despised . . . . Lust . . . . once our enemy, now our partner. To take her on is to welcome other members of her family into your home.*

*In the mist of our Radiance and blackness she exists among us.*

*The burning fire for material desires will bring her to you.*

*In disguise she will come to you . . . . her death look . . . hidden behind the false face of beauty . . . . blinding you to the cold terror which is waiting.*

*Hear the sweet voice pulling at you.*

*Luring you into a slippery trance . . . Trance of Darkness.*

*Swirling greenish golden hair. Frozen beauty of the golden comb in the setting sun.*

*Graceful movements of the womanly Snake of death.*

*Beware of the happiness you seek in the valley of Evil.*

*Rave for material desires and she will be your Lover.*

*Sacrifice yourself for the falseness of her warmth and her lips will drain the life from you.*

*Cuddle up in the coziness of her tail and it will shatter your frame like broken icicles from the cave in which she dwells . . .*

*Surfacing in our history like a fish coming up for air . . . . her Ugly head appears among the masses of our people.*

*Surviving through time . . . . existing for all eternity . . . . The modern tragedy for sons and daughters of material Lust. . . . D'glo! . . . D' . . . glo! . . . . D'glo.*

**Two years of hard but rewarding work produced** the pieces of sculpture seen for the first time at the Ira Aldridge Theater. Most of them represented mythological West African birds or aquatic characters found in the folklore of the Shango cult in Trinidad.

The production took six months to plan and produce. But the idea to introduce a new concept in the presentation of visual art was born during a chance conversation the artist had with a few friends: "On a Friday during a ride to the bus terminal, Arthur McGee, Stephanie

Glover and I talked about a new approach toward displaying my sculpture. It was obvious that the traditional method of having an opening for an art exhibit would not enhance or compliment my sculpture. Since my work deals with the supernatural forces which exist both in Black people and the Universe, we agreed the introduction to this sculpture should also reflect these qualities. What has developed from the conversation back in January is a new concept in the presentation of a sculpture exhibition."

Given the uniqueness of his work and the non-traditional route he chose to present it, White needed cash and a place large enough for the exhibition. Howard University, through the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities, and the University-wide Cultural Committee, filled both needs. His friends, such as the musical group NATION and dancers from the Western High School for the arts, provided the rest. And it worked like magic.

It was different, non-traditional, splendid. Instead of a gallery, a theater was used. Instead of a few associates, the whole community was invited. Instead of the traditional wine and cheese, the audience was invited on stage (after the show) and offered fresh fruit—bananas and apples. It was reminiscent of a feast in the African tradition. The carnival atmosphere created a closeness among the audience, the artist and the sculpture.