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## Total Black Theater in Art Exhibition

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## Beyond Human Understanding: Total Black Theater In Art Exhibition

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*Reviewed by Tritobia H. Benjamin*

**“We are a bird people . . .  
multicolored creatures . . .  
gliding in your walk  
bouncing like the movement  
of the swallow riding on a  
rubber breeze.”**

These are the words, interpretations and thoughts of a young, gifted artist. An artist/innovator who utilized each discipline to create a noteworthy production. Stanley White conceived, authored, constructed, produced and directed, “Beyond Human Understanding,” a unique exhibition of sculptural forms “combined with the power and beauty of total Black Theatre.”

These sculpture constructions, created as partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, were complimented with song, dance, poetry, and music.

*SCENE I:* A light of soft red begins to glow on the statue (*Untitled*, mixed media), tall, resembling a crane in appearance. The sounds of NATION, African Liberation Art Ensemble . . . drums (percussion and kuumba), bass fiddle, saxophone, electric piano, and the voice of Kehembe, a talented sister endowed with a very captivating and soothing sound, electrify the atmosphere. Ten young talented dancers enter the scene.

[Choreographers James Exum, Shaka Hudson and Keven Epps, have illustrated



8 the potential of the resources that exist in our community and demonstrated that it can be properly channelled and given the opportunity to blossom, if so desired.] The dancers' movements were incredibly rich in nuance and implication with a mere gesture, a swivel of the body, a motion of the hands or feet, adding a world of emotional and conceptual connotation which complimented the statue.

The poetic explanations recited by Ruth Parkham increases our cogitations of man's relationship with the animal world. The bird, which is the topic at present, is a symbol of freedom and movement, good and evil in many regions of the homeland. Just as in African societies, an artwork is part of a system. It has a physical existence, a general form, a certain style; and it follows a certain canon of representation and system of arrangement. Of great importance are the many ways in which an object is handled and utilized. The music, poems, songs, dances, gestures, costumes are close in context to the different rituals, initiations or cult practices as exercised in African and Caribbean societies. "Beyond Human Understanding," therefore, reaches back to the primary source and examines the multivalents and diverse nature of African art.

*SCENE II:* Visual projections of selected sculpture constructions on screen are introduced. Through the artist Ron Anderson and his various manipulations in film projection, superimposed images of "Yogi," (wood and steel construction) with unidentifiable faces fade in and out. Different angles and views are seen of "Yogi," as she is energized across the screen, moving from one station to another in an open field. This preliminary orientation gives rise to "Yogi" in physical presence on stage. Drums are struck, singing continues and the following praises resound in the theatre:

**"Mystical people . . .  
supernatural people . . .  
gliding through space and  
time carrying the scent of  
struggle on your features.**

**"Bird people . . . moving  
sweetly in your rhythms that  
caress your existence like  
no other creature in the  
universe. Wings sometimes  
cuttled up in a bird statue  
pose, motionless . . . as if  
you've forgotten where u  
from."**

The dancers exit, taking flight, leaping, jumping, simulating "Yogi" as she stands majestically, strong and proud. To the artist, "Yogi is a tribute to the African woman whose qualities are similar to a creature of flight more so than a bird. The head is symbolic of the masculine qualities present in the life of African women more so than in American Black women." Though this is a subjective opinion of White's, he sees it as a "positive characteristic of the African woman, for she is a flexible element of nature, capable of assuming many roles."

The artwork occupies a conceptual niche in the minds of the creator, and those who view it. The statue reflects, but also stimulates and generates thoughts.

"The bird on her head is symbolic of her oneness with nature and her relationship to the bird family for she is capable of physical and spiritual flight and her visual and physical strength is awesome. Her existence is made of the intellectual reasoning of a human plus the knowledge and instincts of the animal world topped with the ability of swift movement contained in her physical structure."

**The Sukuyan**—This welded steel and rubber piece is a bird similar to the vampire, taken from Trinidadian folklore.





**Yogi**— This wood and welded steel sculpture is a tribute to the African women whose qualities are similar to a creature of flight more so than a bird.

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**Venus**— This wood piece reflects quiet and peaceful forms which exist in the Universe.

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**Woman on a Sunday Morning**—Carved from a birch tree and composed of circular negative and positive areas, this sculpture suggests a ladylike stance church women seem to possess.





**D'Glo**—This rubber and welded steel sculpture represents a water serpent from Trinidadian folklore. She has the face of a very beautiful woman and long hair which is actually seaweed that she strokes with a golden comb. Men are attracted by her sweet singing and the obvious value of the comb. In pursuit of the comb, they follow her below the surface of the water where they drown. She then returns to the surface for another lustful victim.



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Technically the reviewer's attention is drawn to many aspects of this statue. The general form of the object and its component parts; its smooth, metallic qualities; the contrast of wood; its association and resemblance to human and animal parts; and the name of the object. In one context the statue is no longer seen as welded bumpers from a steel graveyard of an affluent society, but as an object/being that has assumed anatomical organizations, with identifiable parts. In another context, it symbolically represents male, female and bird-like attributes—the simplicity and complexity of their forms, and the consummate articulation of non-living structures. In still another context, the sculpture is no longer an object, but a concept: the creation of an 'icon,' a plastic symbol of the artist's inner most feelings and thoughts, and finally, the generic appellation of the construction becomes the name of a personage—no longer a mirage or apparition—but an effective image.

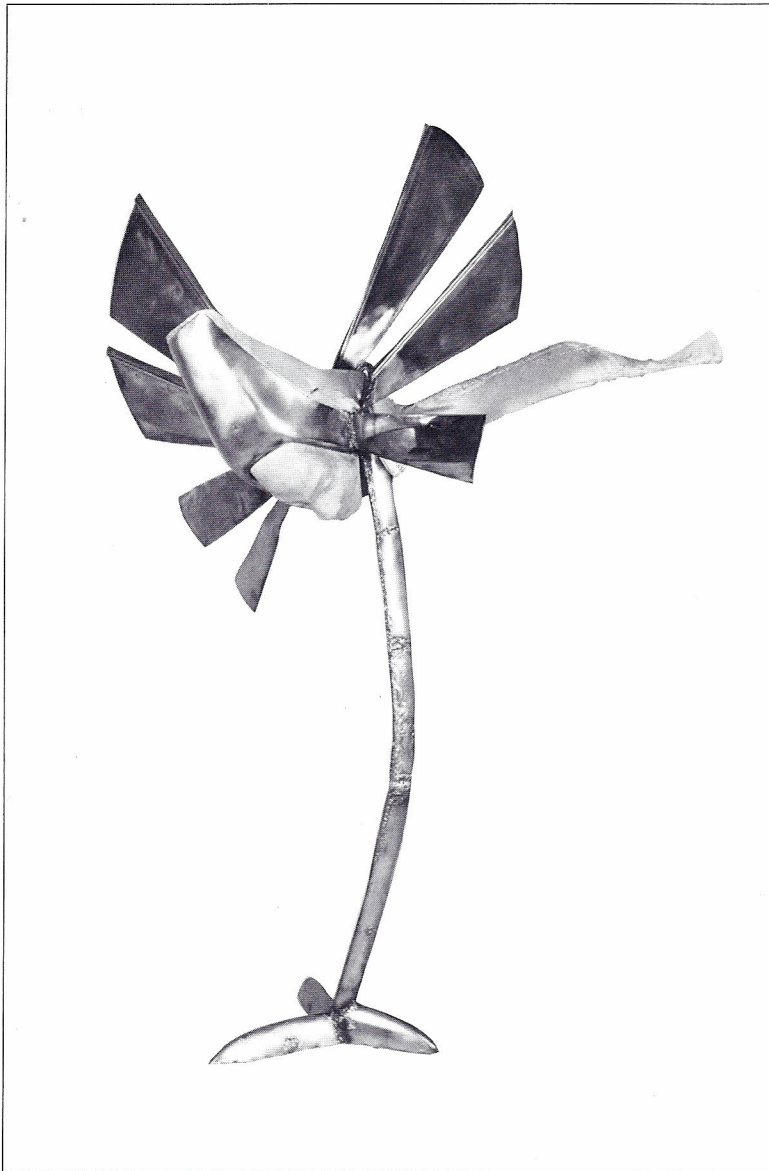
The elegant vignette superbly tailored to the gifts of Stephanie Glover, confirmed the flexible element of "Yogi," capable of assuming many roles. The superlative artistry looked smart, stylish, effervescent, and altogether worthy of attention in the future. Her choreography mirrored a look of ultimate "distillation of dance stripped to the barest essentials of form and meaning."

Drummers Tony and Michael Duncanson and Thomas Mosley furnished the audience with captivating sounds from their instruments as a range of acknowledgements were showered upon them.

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

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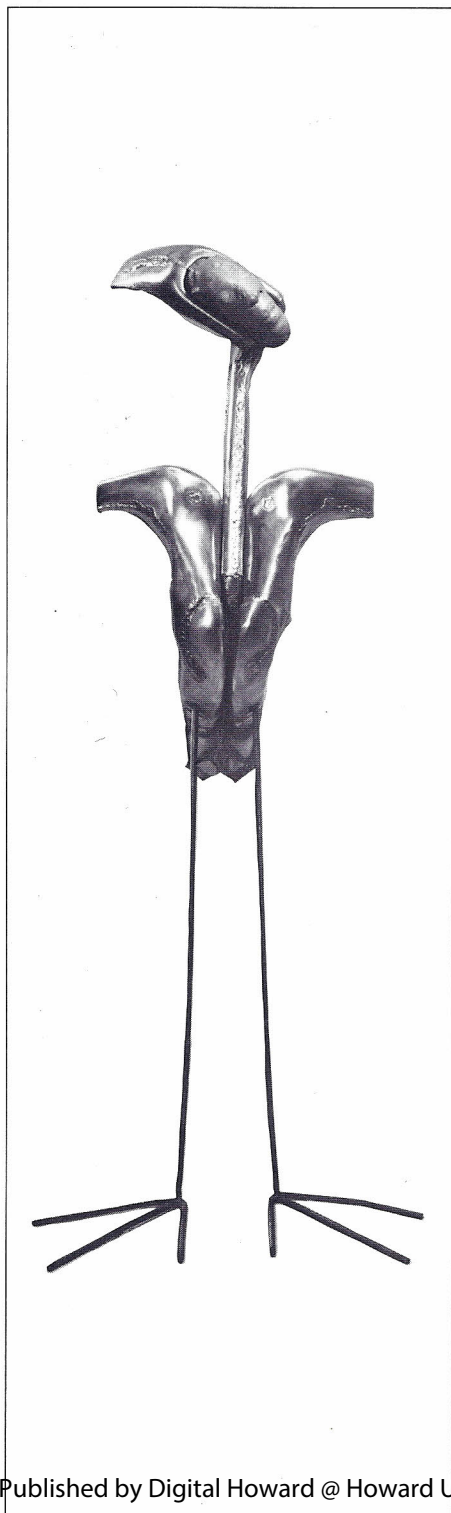
Untitled—Rubber and welded steel.



Untitled—Rubber and welded steel.



**Bird Woman**—This welded steel and rubber sculpture is the product of the artist's desire to find information about the bird in its relationship to African mythology. In Africa and the Caribbean, the bird is symbolic of different societies. It is a symbol of physical and spiritual freedom, and a symbol for a new day or better days.



**time . . . existing for all eternity . . . The modern tragedy for sons and daughters of material lust. . . D'Glo! . . . D'Glo! . . . D'Glo!**

So speaks Judy Howell, a "cultural catalyst" of the Washington Metropolitan area, as she dramatically introduces "D'Glo," a sculpture construction of rubber and welded steel. In "D'Glo" a synthetic product is incorporated, representing the face and upper torso of the sculpture. Certain forms and materials, when brought into conjunction and activated in appropriate technical procedures, have the capacity to organize and concentrate the readability of an experience as we perceive it. The quality of a work (as in D'Glo) is determined by a subtle interrelationship between purity of perception and the essence of things. In this construction the articulation of rubber with a metal affords the opportunity to exploit the sensuous quality of the synthetic with the virtues of steel. Recognition of the qualities of these things; their hardness and softness, heaviness and lightness, similarities and differences, advances the sense of mystery in "D'Glo," a symbol of lust.

*FINALE:* The artist comes on stage to be with selected pieces of sculpture constructions, other participants in the production and the audience in close communion with the works and with each other.

It was a handsome and enjoyable production, a marriage of the arts for an understanding of and significance in continuing Black cultural heritage. In this context, White manifested an exquisite sensitivity to objects and experiences, structures and relationships, (in this initial production) but primarily as means to ends rather than

as ends in themselves, contrary to conventional attitudes. The evolution of a work of art did not cease when it left the artist's studio, but was embraced by the sister disciplines and the community to extend the "exalted manifestations of the human spirit."

Such an attempt to implement distinctions between ends and means and of continuous cultural stock-taking in his products, is the ultimate goal of today's Black artist. □

*The reviewer is an assistant professor of art at Howard University.*