



DON BOOMER / Los Angeles Times

In "Ruminations" at the David Zapf Gallery, viewers pass through a charred, wood-framed wall, where they hear voices and the sound of broken glass being swept.

AT THE GALLERIES / LEAH OLLMAN

View of a Riot-Scarred L.A.

■ **Art:** Johnny Coleman's 'Ruminations' reminds us that we are still in the smoky aftermath of April's events.

SAN DIEGO—The pungent smell of a burning city remains in Johnny Coleman's memory, months after the violence that erupted in Los Angeles following the acquittal of four police officers accused of beating motorist Rodney King. It is this smell, this musty, mournful odor that first sobers the visitor to Coleman's new installation at the David Zapf Gallery.

"Ruminations," as the installation is titled, reminds us that we are still in the smoky aftermath of those late-April

SAN DIEGO COUNTY

events. The wounds are still fresh, the anger still sharp. As Coleman writes in his artist's statement for the show, "The fire ain't out."

Coleman, who received his master of fine arts degree this year from UC San Diego, has created a remarkably powerful, poignant environment in which to meditate on the post-verdict state of things. Not a single element is facile or gratuitous in this spare space. The sounds, smells and sights resonate with one another to evoke a pounding pressure in the soul that feels like it won't abate until a higher level of humanity is restored to our culture.

Rather than focus on the facts of the case to spin yet another sociopolitical analysis of

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GALLERIES: View of Riot-Scarred L.A.

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the "rebellion"—as he calls it—Coleman has conjured a metaphoric space, a richly poetic layering of words, memories and visual associations rooted in the real, but not bound to it.

The installation begins with a wall, but a permeable one, setting up at once a marvelous interplay of opaque and transparent surfaces, concrete and amorphous thoughts, that continues throughout the show. A door in the middle of the charred, wood-framed wall stands open, leading to an inner room defined by three framed walls covered with brown paper. It's dark, and voices can be heard along with the sound of broken glass being swept.

Beyond a second, free-standing open door stands a comfortable wooden chair where the viewer can sit amid a pool of gritty ashes. At the foot of the chair rests a low crate filled with charred wooden beams and broken ostrich eggshells. One of the shells contains a compass, sitting in fine, pale-gray ash. A plumb line hangs directly over it, and a light bulb and two audio speakers hang nearby.

On tape, Coleman tells the story of a man "who has worked his way into my dreams," a one-toothed "brother" who always carries a broom, sometimes wearing it on his back like a weapon. In Coleman's anecdote, the man is crouching on the sidewalk, watching as a bird "the size of a large man's fist" struggles to peck its way out of its shell. The nascent creature must destroy its own shelter to survive. This notion of new life emerging from ruins, rising Phoenix-like from the ashes, has clear parallels with the rebuilding efforts in Los Angeles. The compass and plumb line, both instruments for determining direction, are offered as symbols of assistance in setting a new course.

A narrow path runs around the outside perimeter of this room within a room, and along the gallery's back wall appear the words, "All the Kings (sic)—All the Kings horses and all the Kings men—All," written in charcoal. The familiar Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme instantly sparks connections and allusions with the rest of the installation (the broken eggshells) and with the events in Los Angeles. Coleman deftly works a double-entendre with Rodney King's name, letting it signify not only the victim of the beating—and

all such victims: "All the Kings"—but the authorities who, as in the nursery rhyme, cannot put what's broken back together again.

On the floor below sits strewn, burned debris—wooden beams, bent nails and more ashes. A speaker plays a tape of Coleman describing an encounter with another African-American man. Their contact brings tears of solidarity and reassurance.

In his brief gallery statement, Coleman describes "Ruminations" as a "dreamscape," an exploration of thresholds. Indeed, an acute sense of ambiguity permeates the space: the cataclysm has past, but the future is uncertain. Thresholds, he notes in a journal that is also part of this show, are beginnings, but they are also breaking points. Fires destroy, but they also clear the ground for new growth.

Several equally evocative sculptural works by Coleman accompany the installation in a side gallery. Together with "Ruminations," they attest to the artist's deep emotional connection with the pain of historical and contemporary racial oppression felt in the African-American community. They demonstrate, more than amply, Coleman's ability to make that pain palpable through a fugue-like arrangement of images, sounds and smells, and to approach that pain not as a scourge but as an opportunity.

■ *David Zapf Gallery, 2400 Kettner Blvd., through Sept. 26. Open noon-5 p.m. Friday-Saturday and by appointment (232-5004).*

ART NOTES

Tina Yapelli, director of the San Diego State University Art Gallery for the last seven years, leaves next week to become curator of exhibitions at the Madison Art Center in Wisconsin.

Yapelli received a layoff notice in June when university officials made campus-wide reductions in staff and courses in the face of major budget cuts. After Yapelli applied for and accepted the job in Madison, her layoff and more than 100 others at the university were postponed.

She has applied for a leave of absence from SDSU in order to fulfill her commitment to the Madison Art Center, a private, non-profit museum of modern and contemporary art, and may return to San Diego next year.