



SANDY HUFFAKER / For The Times

Johnny Coleman: "If somebody is able to really talk and we're able to exchange, [it is] dynamic and magical."

This Artist Creates by Word of Mouth

■ **Art:** Working with stories people tell him, Johnny Coleman creates works of inner revelation. His installation is part of inSITE94 at San Diego's Santa Fe Depot.

By LEAH OLLMAN
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Over the summer, Johnny Coleman placed an ad in several California newspapers calling for stories from the railroad, from porters, redcaps and travelers.

It doesn't normally work that way with Coleman—a formal solicitation inviting a specific response. Usually the stories he gathers for his writings, sculptures and installations evolve more organically, with Coleman suddenly falling into the rhythms of a stranger's life, or a new soul mate being drawn in by the artist's mellifluous voice and rapt attention.

"If somebody is able to really talk and we're able to exchange, the conversation is something dynamic and magical," Coleman explains. "There's so much that's happening at the same time. There's all of the ambience that's heard, that's felt, the gestures, the visual things that

are intangible, like an energy that another person can bring to you. You slip into all of that and you're gone."

Coleman, 36, sits in a long-abandoned customer service office of the Santa Fe Depot in downtown San Diego. The train whistle in the background and the occasional rumble of the tracks give the interview just the quality of living theater he's talking about. It's late summer, and he has recently driven into town from Oberlin College in Ohio, where he teaches art. The stories he heard along the way, in coffee shops and salvage yards, are weaving their way into the work he is making in the depot for inSITE94, a festival of installation art organized by the nonprofit Installation Gallery. The five-week event, which opened Friday, involves 30 museums, galleries and public places across San Diego County and Tijuana.

Coleman has spent most of the time in his space sitting, dreaming, absorbing the stories that have soaked into its surfaces. He has also papered sections of the walls with old bills of lading and framed them with subtly glowing strips of copper sheeting. He painted a thick ceramic slip onto the wainscoting and let it follow its viscous course to the floor. In itself, the water-damaged office (vintage 1915), with its evocative, musty scent, provided a fertile setting for the artist's reflections on migration, the passage of time and intersecting lives.

His shoulder-length dreadlocks pulled back in a broad ponytail, Coleman leans forward, chewing

gum vigorously. The softness of his voice surprises, coming from such a large frame, and it is this gentleness coupled with an intensity that gives Coleman such a strong personal presence. It is no wonder that his art stems from the interpersonal, from the most basic form of human exchange—telling stories.

"The things I've been given have always been given by word of mouth," he says.

The installation, "Crossroads/BAGGAGE Building," is getting built out of conversations and the recorded sounds of footsteps in train stations and traffic suggesting the roar of the ocean. The taped material will get "mixed down into a poem" to permeate the 1,200-square-foot space. This, he predicts, will be the most sound-based of his works, although many of his others have also enveloped viewers in stories, spoken with immediacy, richness and nuance.

In "City/Country/City: A Song for David" (shown in San Diego and Long Beach in 1991), Coleman brought together family stories and written narratives of his brother's encounter with a racist teacher and a slave's retreat into a cave. Set in a darkened room carpeted with moist peat moss, the installation spoke of endurance and argued for the importance of keeping such stories alive, of folding their lessons into present experience.

Coleman's next installation, "Ruminations" (presented in 1992 as part of Installation Gallery's first inSITE program), responded to the violence in Los Angeles after the initial acquittal of four police officers charged in the Rodney G.

King beating. The environment of doorways, passages and a single seat was steeped in the smell of burnt wood and punctuated by the sound of broken glass being swept.

"'Ruminations' dealt with something very volatile," says Lynn Schuette, executive director of Sushi Performance and Visual Art, the San Diego nonprofit group sponsoring Coleman's inSITE94 project. "The media dealt with [the situation] in a very aggressive way. Johnny's take on it was very emotional and personal. His work gives a place to think about the complexity instead of the simplicity of things."

Like his installations, Coleman's sculptural works engage viewers in far-reaching narratives by addressing life on an intimate scale, through stories, letters and memories. Since his first installation as an undergraduate, the chalkboard, a prime metaphor for the human memory, has become nearly a constant in Coleman's work.

"For me it's like a site, a very concrete site that shows history, because every mark that's been put on it is there, very subtly," he says. "It's like ghost-writing. It's a visual history as well as being a narrative document. It's a symbol of authority, and yet anything that's written on it can be wiped off, so it's also empowering."

Several of Coleman's richly textual sculptures were shown at the Havana Biennial earlier this year, and a small selection is now on view at the David Zapf Gallery in San Diego through Oct. 30. Favoring "things that indicate the hand,"

Coleman brings together gloves, oars and wrenches, as well as peanuts, eggshells, burlap, dried flowers and small nylon sacks of rice and black-eyed peas. The ingredients that go into the sculptures are common, but the associations they carry can be charged. The foodstuffs recall crops picked or eaten by black slaves, and the bundled objects hint of fetishes, power objects familiar in African and Native American ritual traditions.

Coleman's sculptures also bring to mind the work of an older generation of African-American artists, such as John Outterbridge, who fuse personal and cultural history and who reveal the spiritual potential in everyday objects.

"In the African-American community, young artists honor the older generation a great deal," says curator and writer Josine Ianco-Starrels. "I think it's very difficult to be an artist in that community or any other community that's ghettoized. Those that emerge and prevail derive a great deal of strength from others who have emerged and prevailed."

It was the work of African-American writers and musicians, as much as visual artists, that prompted Coleman to become an artist himself. A class on black literature struck the most resonant chord with him, even as he was studying pre-law at UC Santa Barbara. After a year, Coleman had no more money for tuition, and he left the university to manage a Thrifty drug store. What he thought would

be a short hiatus from his education turned into an eight-year break that proved, ultimately, highly instructive.

It was a prolific time artistically, he remembers. Sometimes he would come home from work and draw all night. Finally, a good friend insisted he visit San Francisco for a few days, long enough for him to gain a little perspective on his life and his priorities. When he returned, he promptly gave notice at Thrifty and began assembling a portfolio.

He enrolled at Otis Art Institute, where he received his bachelor of fine arts degree in 1989, then continued on at UC San Diego, earning his master's in fine arts in 1992. Last year he and his wife, artist Nanette Yannuzzi Macias, were both hired at Oberlin. He introduces his students to such writers as the searingly honest Wanda Coleman and to such soulful, socially concerned artists as Betye Saar and David Hammons. He encourages them to approach art as a personal reflection of their lives—not a terribly radical idea, but one that hard-core postmodernists all but abandoned in the last decade by searching for themselves in the mass media and in popular culture, rather than looking within.

Coleman takes his role as mentor and guide for a younger generation

of artists with characteristic earnestness.

"Education is a contemporary underground railroad," he says, referring particularly to Oberlin's large African American student body. "Someone has to be there as conductor or at least signalman or very few people will get through."

The railroad metaphor frequently slips into Coleman's own story, partly because of his preoccupation with the Santa Fe Depot installation but also because he tends to view things in terms of passages, thresholds, journeys. His recent proposal for a public memorial in San Diego to Martin Luther King, Jr. took the form of an actual locomotive and passenger car emerging from a burial mound. Coleman was one of three finalists in the King Promenade competition. (The commission was granted to sculptor Melvin Edwards.)

Not long after the interview, Coleman took off again, to ride the rails to Chicago, to sit for long stretches in stations, to listen to footsteps, to gather more tales. With a fisherman's combination of focus and ease, he trawls across the country for stories. He says he gets "lost" in conversations, but what he really does is keep finding—his past, his family, his own life. He laughs recalling what a friend once told him: "Man," he said, "you're looking for your tribe."