

'Ruminations' sifts through psychic ashes

By NEIL KENDRICKS

There probably isn't a TV viewer in America who hasn't seen the startling footage of Rodney King handcuffed and beaten by L.A. police officers. We remember the violent flash of nightsticks pummeling a human being into the asphalt, and we know there was something deeply wrong with the picture.

These frequently repeated images, combined with the acquittal last April of the officers involved

ART REVIEW

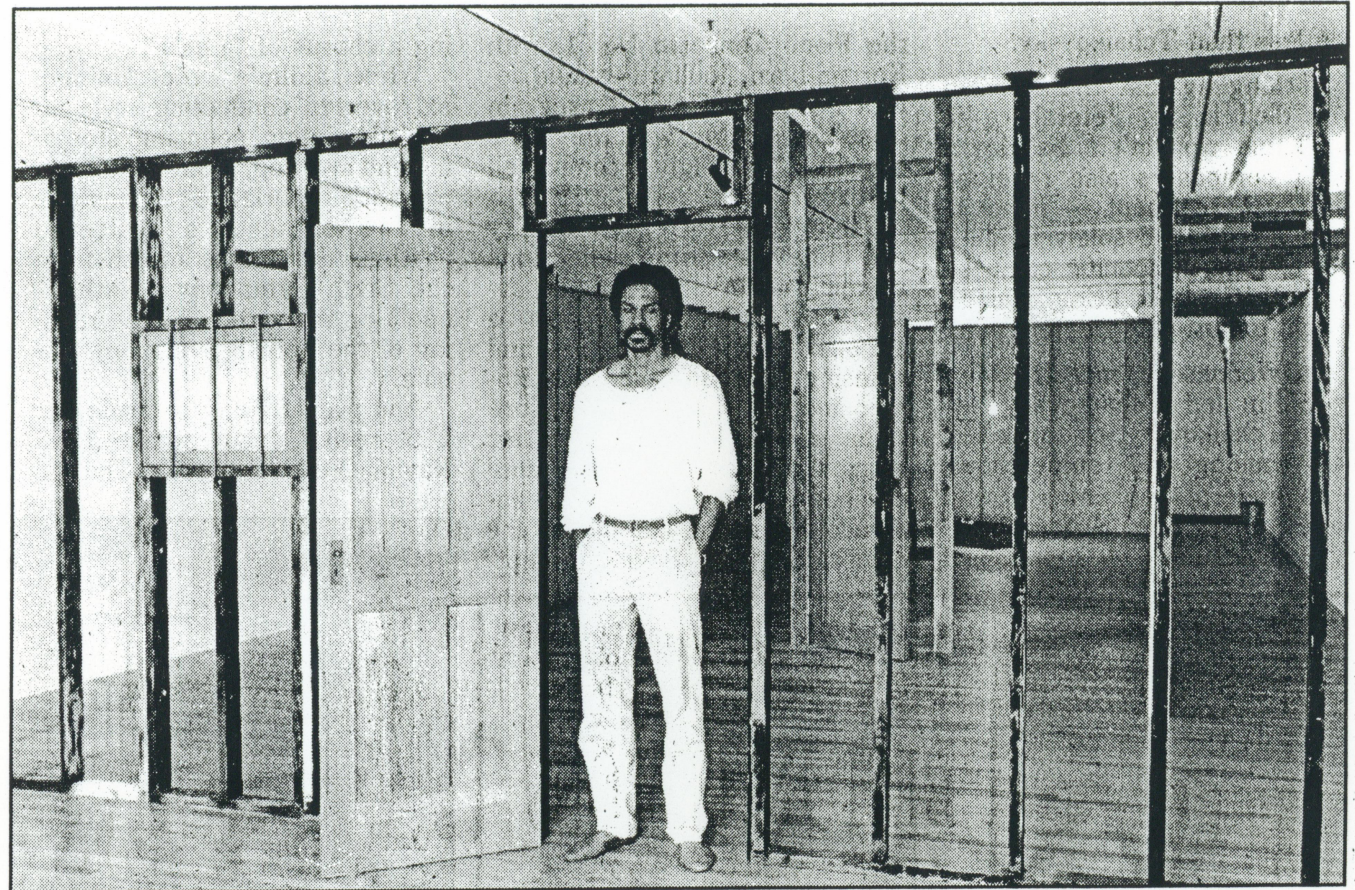
"Ruminations: An Installation," solo exhibition by Johnny Coleman

David Zapf Gallery, 2400 Kettner Blvd., San Diego. Through Sept. 26. Free. 232-5004.

in the beating, sparked more than a wave of violence in Los Angeles and across the nation.

For many blacks outraged over the verdict, the violence was a revolt against the system, a Molotov cocktail of rage exploding in the streets.

Today, Los Angeles is no longer in flames, but the source of the conflict remains. Artist Johnny Coleman sifts through the ashes with his installation, "Ruminations," at the David Zapf Gallery. (The show is one of a series of exhibitions, collectively titled "IN/SITE '92.")



Artist Johnny Coleman: standing with his installation, "Ruminations."

"Ruminations" is a closet narrative that loops in on itself, a recollection of the sort of random images that create the texture of our dream time.

Coleman's piece didn't emerge quickly after events in South Central Los Angeles. The piece had a gradual genesis, the result of watching these harrowing events from a distance, feeling the psychic aftershocks in San Diego.

This '92 UCSD Master of Fine Arts graduate remembers the first days after the verdict. He said his reactions ranged from numbness to overwhelming sorrow. One night, Coleman spent some time alone in a neighborhood park, dealing with his anger and pain over the verdict.

There the concept behind "Ruminations" began to take shape. Coleman described the emotional episode as a crossroads.

"This piece emerged out of that real private space," said Coleman, 34, relaxing in the side gallery adjacent to the installation and wearing a head full of dreadlocks. "And I started dreaming right after that."

His recurring dreams began with the image of a chick struggling to free itself from its shell. But as the dreams continued, the details grew more defined. Soon there was the presence of a man with a turquoise broom whom the artist had seen numerous times outside his studio.

"I started to see him so much, he started to work his way into my dreams," Coleman said.

The images featured in "Ruminations" never try to overwhelm the viewer with details. The curi-

ous Coleman chose are mostly sparse, functional objects: a chair with its legs planted in a small pile of ashes; a chest, littered with burnt wood, that contains the cracked, empty shell of an ostrich egg; a plumb bob that dangles from the ceiling in a perfectly straight line above a compass.

Each of these objects has been carefully arranged in the middle of this makeshift room of charred frames and paper walls. The viewer gradually becomes more attuned to an implicit pattern, a design of unrelated materials bouncing off one another. But it's Coleman's recorded voice, the husky whisper from the speakers, that offers his psychic reaction to the riots and the events surrounding it.

In this sense, "Ruminations" is a closet narrative that loops in on itself, a recollection of the sort of random images that create the texture of our dream time. The installation is best experienced alone, just you and the storytelling environment Coleman has built. The artist hopes participants will view the installation as if it were an open book, the murmur of voices reading short excerpts from a dream diary.

"I needed a kind of space that

was as big as your imagination," Coleman said. "I needed something that you could smell, something that you could touch. Because this piece is not about beating anybody over the head and saying these are the problems, these are the solutions and

this is how you implement them.

"It's not about that. For me, my motivation, my drive was to present this real delicate balance of deep pain and vulnerability."

NEIL KENDRICKS is a free-lance writer.