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PRESTIGIOUS EXHIBIT SPOTLIGHTS PRESSLEY'S WORK

WHEN NIKKI PRESSLEY '04 got word that her work would be included in the 2010 California Biennial — the Orange County Museum of Art's signature program spotlighting young and emerging artists from across the Golden State — one of the first people she contacted was Terri Bright, associate professor of art at Furman. Bright noted that many of the 45 artists chosen for the exhibition had major gallery representation — to which Pressley replied, "I don't know why I'm here."

Pressley was among the last artists that curator Sarah Bancroft saw in putting together the California Biennial. "Nikki came recommended from a couple of different people — a curatorial colleague and an artist," Bancroft says. After visiting Pressley's Los Angeles studio, Bancroft was eager to introduce the Furman alum's work to a larger audience (more than 4,200 patrons in the first three weeks of the exhibit, which opened in October and runs through March 13).

"Nikki is fresh out of graduate school," Bancroft says. "I don't think she even realizes how strong her practice is."

To be certain, contemporary art is a long way from biology, Pressley's intended major when she enrolled at Furman. "I wanted to do orthopedic surgery, and that was mostly borne of the fact that I had torn my ACL twice," says Pressley, a Greenville native who sustained the injuries while playing basketball at Mauldin High School.

She had also demonstrated an aptitude for art at an early age, and her mother encouraged her talent by sending her to classes at Greenville Tech. During her sophomore year at Furman, Pressley took her first art class, and by the end of the year she had changed her major with an eye toward a career in graphic design.

Pressley cites professors Ross McClain (design) and Bright (photography) as being "instrumental in their encouragement with the more conceptual ideas that I was trying to develop at the time." But prior to her senior year, she says, "I didn't know anything about contemporary art or the art world."

For the senior art show at Furman, Pressley exhibited three pieces — one each in sculpture, design and photography. All three addressed the concept of cultural identity, a subject that continues to inform her work. "I felt like it was the first time that I had

successfully created something that manifested these ideas," she says.

Bright recalls, "I got the impression that Nikki never stopped thinking about these things. Her mind was constantly on trying to figure out where she fit into black culture as a black female. I remember her work being incredibly layered and complex."

Since graduate school, Bright adds, "Nikki's process and her skill level have caught up to her ideas. I had her come back and speak to my senior seminar this year, and she was very honest" about the challenges of an art career.

After graduating from Furman, Pressley moved to Chicago, where she spent eight months working for a non-profit organization, the American Friends Service Committee, on a traveling exhibition designed to educate college students about debt. While there, she also began studying Capoeira, a centuries-old, Brazilian-born mix of music, martial arts and dance. It informs her art to this day. Once she finished her work on the exhibit, she returned to Greenville and took a job with an advertising firm, all the while living at home, building her portfolio and saving for graduate school.

In the fall of 2006 Pressley enrolled at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, where she pursued a Master of Fine Arts degree in sculpture and installation. "CalArts opened me up to a lot of different things," she says. "There's no real curriculum or grades — you chart your own course. I know plenty of students who went through the whole two years and didn't make an object. Their art was conceptual, so they constantly talked about their work."

During her final year at CalArts, Pressley took part in a couple of group shows. In 2009 she had her first solo exhibit, "Actions and Contemplations," at Las Cienega Projects in Culver City. "That was a big deal for me because I had never filled an entire space



MARC CAMPOS

with just my work," she says. Not long thereafter, she got the call from Bancroft and the OCMA.

The three pieces by Pressley in the Biennial explore issues of race, identity and religion. Her largest work, "Word," juxtaposes a Gullah translation of John 1:1-3 ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God . . .") with the West African folk tale of Anansi, the spider. A second, untitled piece combines gold leaf, ash and dirt in a commentary on the malleability of her belief systems. The last and most personal piece, titled "Requiem," depicts Pressley digging through a "weird floating mound" of earth, at the bottom of which is a mirror image of her — or what she calls "the ambiguous face of identity."

Pressley, who works as a graphic designer for a real estate company, is pouring herself into research for her next project, "which is the way that I tend to work," she says. "I'd like to stay active in the contemporary art dialogue and keep working out my ideas through future exhibits."

— DICK ANDERSON

Visit www.nikkipressley.com to learn more. The author is a freelance writer in Los Angeles and publications editor for Occidental College.