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"Nappy-Headed Stranger: Niles Wallace" Exhibition Brochure

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NAPPY-HEADED STRANGER Niles Wallace

2008 october 10 through december 10, clough-hanson gallery, rhodes college, memphis, tn



Pencilneck, carpet, metal and stone, 40" x 27" x 10", 2008

Niles Wallace's career as an educator and an artist in Memphis spans over thirty years. After doing his graduate work at the renowned ceramics department at Alfred University in the early 1970's, he worked mostly in clay, making vessels or vessel-based sculptural work. After a brief hiatus in the early 1990's he began to make large wall based sculptures from found wood and other objects. This shift in medium and process grew out of a need to work more directly with materials that would provide faster results. During this transitional period Wallace's work showed a renewed sense of vigor paired with the patience of a mid-career artist. He was making simple, constructed structures built within a systemic framework: one shape leads to the next; one layer leads to the next, etc. The work in question found the artist in an exciting, new creative landscape while at the same time recalling the concentric and stacked forms inherent to his time as a ceramicist. Wallace's working method of producing simple shapes from found materials, then using the forms to build larger, more monumental objects, has taken him on a gradual path towards the new body of work for his show at Clough-Hanson Gallery. *Nappy-Headed Stranger* presents a series of new work that investigates new territories yet maintains strong ties with earlier methods.¹

At the heart of Wallace's practice is the accumulation of simple parts that build or stack together to form these larger archetypal forms. This work is what another abstract sculptor, Martin Puryear, refers to as a "basic activity."² Through days or weeks of the repetitious action of cutting discs of carpet and plywood on a band saw then threading them onto cable or a steel bar, Wallace begins to see where the piece gently leads him. The intuitive nature of his process sometimes leaves the artist a step or two behind the work. His reluctance to over-analyze the *why* and *what* of his impulse allows the pieces to reveal themselves gradually to the viewer and the artist. The thousands of carpet discs are threaded onto cables to form long tubular ropes, intertwining to construct the Herculean tangle in *Dread*. The weighty, unbreakable knot shows the vacillation between Wallace's sense of the profound and his wry sense of humor.

Also essential to Wallace's material-driven working method is the use of a variety of found objects. Ranging from discarded carpet to recycled plywood, these free, raw materials provide the artist with the freedom to take risks, as well as the challenge of working with what at times can be unruly media. Additionally, the broad variety of found materials provides the artist with a peculiar, random assortment of colors with which to build his particular color palette. The nature of the objects allows for speedy alterations with common tools. These readily available materials cut into simple shapes eventually accumulate into objects that become pieces that are at once charmingly unassuming and unquestionably substantial.

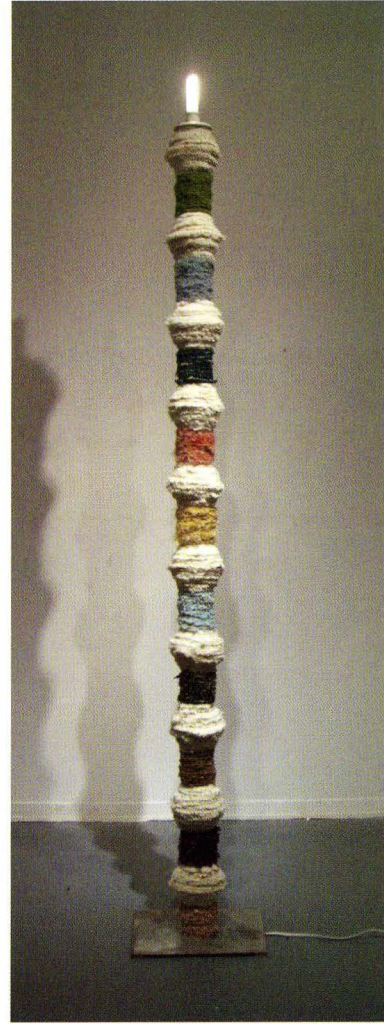
The artist's work from just a few years ago leaned more towards singular, monumental forms built with a straightforward goal in mind. However, his most recent work in *Nappy-Headed Stranger* seems to add another crucial, improvisational step in the late stages of realization. The forms are now feel activated and become a means to an end rather than an end in and of themselves. These twists and turns found in the more linear pieces like *Roller* and *Pencilneck* appear to be the beginnings of a new language, the invention of an alphabet of sorts. In this way, the simple, wonky shapes recall Philip Guston's deceptively simple ink drawings like *Chair*, *Mark*, and *Edge*, all from 1967. The open constructions of *Grapple* and *Blue Heart* feel dramatically more animated than the stacked pieces from just a few years ago.

Through Wallace's manipulation of material, time, and accumulation of parts, the artist is exposing the audience to the metamorphosis of objects and intent. We are at once confronted with something old and something new as well as simple and profound. The elements of the discarded, disheveled, and often pungent materials are transformed literally and metaphorically. There is a quality in Wallace's humble, archetypal forms that is so basic and essential that they are able to stay with the viewer; working themselves out in the viewer's mind, until they feel like they've been with us all along.

Hamlett Dobbins
Director, Clough-Hanson Gallery



Grapple, carpet and metal, 56" x 60" x 44", 2008



Monument, carpet, metal and electric fixture, 96" x 16" x 12", 2008

¹ The title of the exhibition references Wallace's own kinky, sometimes out of control hair, the unkempt texture of the pieces, and the unknown qualities in the new work.

² On page 13 of the catalog for Martin Puryear's 2007 retrospective, author John Elderfield quotes a 1980 lecture at Skowhegan where Puryear talks about a "basic activity." "A very simple activity of what makes it stay together."



Blue Heart, carpet, metal and wood, 46" x 56" x 48", 2008



Roller, carpet, metal and wood, 30" x 31" x 7", 2008



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Cover Image: *Dread*, carpet and metal, 48" x 56" x 56", 2008