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Published on *ArtSee*
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(e)merge artist preview: Lavar Munroe

By Roxanne Goldberg
Published: September 6, 2013



“A hero is someone who went into the belly of the beast and survived.”

Artist Lavar Munroe explains, the idea of the hero has the potential to manifest itself in the individuals who we come across by chance and who we choose to surround ourselves with everyday.

Munroe, who recently moved to DC from St. Louis after completing a residency at the famous Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, is introducing (e)merge art fair audiences to an alternative hero, the one Washingtonians are often guilty of ignoring—the homeless.

"I'm becoming his maid or servant," explained Munroe.

Bed Colony, Munroe's long-term project being presented in October at the third annual (e)merge art fair, requires Munroe to regularly replace the old, soiled and dilapidated cardboard of a homeless person downtown, with fresh new cardboard.

The used pieces are tinged with signs of a past life and a sense of a mysterious and personal history. Munroe combines and collages the material that contains what Munroe identifies as "beauty in decay," to create nine 'beds' complete with pillows and personal affects Munroe finds by chance, like hair, bibles, candles and from this particular site downtown, a flask.

"I'm interested in the different uses of [cardboard]. The middle class use it to ship plastic goods and then they excrete it into the world," explained Munroe, "But the people who I take it from use it as a means of survival, as a means of eating off, sleeping on, using for toys, using it for games. It becomes such a precious item."

For an artist whose native home in the Bahamas is riddled with drugs and gang violence, Munroe believes it is important to draw awareness to the discrepancies in the value of cardboard between classes.

"Last time I went there, he wrote 'Cozy 'Corner,'" Munroe said.

With *Bed Colony*, Munroe hopes to challenge audiences to rethink the typically negative manner in which the homeless are viewed, and to instead consider them as brave heroes surviving.

While Munroe's project may appear to have social connotations, the artist does not desire his art be used for social action, but is instead interested in occupying the space of the "trickster."

The artist, who once volunteered at a Juvenile Detention Center in St. Louis with hopes of learning about life on the streets and the stories of convicted criminals, became interested in trickery and related themes such as absence and presence, through a lifelong fascination with mythology.

"I started my own mythology but it was autobiographical for the most part. It seemed so open ended," explained Munroe, "so I thought the best thing was to introduce one character, which was the trickster. And that was me but it also becomes a hero."

In *Bed Colony*, Munroe acts as both the hero and the trickster. The man downtown has never seen Munroe and Munroe has never seen him. However, they are engaging in a very important exchange and dialogue. And through *Bed Colony* at (e)merge, the viewer may also become a hero. One must only challenge herself to think differently about DC's homeless.

Bringing the Art in DC to You,

Roxanne Goldberg

Bed Colony will be on display at (e)merge art fair at the Capitol Skyline Hotel, from October 4 through October 6.