

VISUAL ARTS

Walker's MOCA works revealing, yet secretive

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REVIEW

Larry Walker: "Surface, Spirit Voices and Other Secrets: The Wall Series in Transition"

Through July 26. 10 a.m.—5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays.

The Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Tula Art Center, 75 Bennett St., Atlanta. 404-367-8700; www.mocaga.org.

Bottom line: In the first exhibition of MOCA GA's Working Artist Project, Larry Walker builds on themes he began exploring in the 1980s, with new works that form a significant departure in his familiar Wall Series.

Larry Walker inaugurates the new galleries of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia with an expansive exhibition that takes the Atlanta artist's familiar themes in a welcome new direction. Running the gamut from large mixed-media paintings to small collages, the show — "Surface, Spirit Voices and Other Secrets: The Wall Series in Transition" — also debuts the fruits of MOCA GA's Working Artist Project.

The two-year pilot program has a \$200,000 price tag, funded in 2007 by the Charles Loridans Foundation. Providing for stipends, salaries for studio assistants, exhibitions, catalogs and promotion, the award enabled each of three recipients to pursue new work for an extended period.

Walker, whose career spans more than four decades (as both artist and educator), is the first exhibitor in the project. With established artist Michael Scofield and emerging artist Yanique Norman as assistants, Walker notes that their exchange of ideas added to the enjoyment of the experience.



Enigmatic Spirit Wall II

The 32 artworks on view build on themes of cultural, social and historical divides that the artist began exploring in the 1980s. Walker simplifies and diversifies his signature walls, a move that showcases a broader range stylistically and thematically. This work offers something new in color palette and use of abstraction, yielding a varied viewing experience.

"Enigmatic Spirit Wall II," dotted with vibrant rose and tropical blue, is more upbeat than usual, while "Secret III (With Animal Spirit)" is an elegant, minimalist diptych in soft creams, tans and light-filled grays.

Beautifully worked color fields and large regions of abstraction shine in paintings like "Wall Spirits and Other Secrets: Believe 01.20.09." In his series of "Secret" diptychs, Walker eliminates representational complexity altogether, to wonderful effect.

Walker likes mixing assemblage with painting. He affixes earphones and microphones to canvases, as if to say that whatever we make of culture on its surface, we must invite a dialogue. Imbedding the word "secret," stamped and stenciled throughout the paintings — and punctuating the exhibit with installations of boxes marked "secret," adds to the sense that interiors are never fully revealed.

Moving further still from the traditional wall format is "Amazing Grace Through Time," a moody diptych that stacks figures in a checkerboard framework, set within semi-circular form. The bodies are multiplied, abstracted, transformed into corpses, spirits and then fish — conjuring the symbol of Christianity. Leg irons are suspended between the two halves of this painting, a pronounced reference to our history of slavery.

In these more interpretive and ambiguous spaces, Walker moves forward into new and welcome territory. The wall metaphor remains intact, while opening up, letting down and letting go. It is a hopeful message.