

Artist's 'Expressions of Life' unfolds in many forms

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As a student at Florida A&M University, artist Earl Washington felt the loving support of his mentors Curtis and Yvonne Tucker. They first met when Washington was a student at Rickards High School and the couple continued to encourage his interests in ceramics well into his academic trajectory.

Washington had his family's support as well — his father's trade in building and construction taught him the same discipline and fortitude that he received from the Tuckers. He recalls one day in the studio wanting to throw a larger ceramic pot like the ones his mentors were making.

"One day I threw one and Curtis came over and said, 'I see you've got it.' Then he knocked it down," remembers Washington. "He reminded me that if you did it one time you can always do it again and build it better the next time. I took that as encouragement, and anything I've tried to do since, I accomplish it."

A Tallahassee native, Washington grew up near FAMU where he pursued art. Though he made a career from construction, he's now returning to making art full-time in his retirement.

As a student he dabbled in a variety of mediums including photography, macramé and collage — all which will be showcased in his exhibition "Unlimited



Earl Washington says, "In every Raku firing you will never get the same effect because you're dealing with different atmospheric environments." AJA ROACHE

Expressions of Life" at the Foster-Tanner Fine Arts Gallery. The show will be on display through March 29 and features 60 works.

Washington first got a taste of the art industry from the Tuckers. He traveled with them to shows, selling his hand built and thrown ceramics as early as 10th grade. They also introduced him to the Afro-Raku style

If you go

What: Earl Washington: Unlimited Expressions of Life

When: 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Monday-Friday through March 29

Where: FAMU Foster-Tanner Fine Arts Gallery, 1630 Pinder St.

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information, call 850-599-8755.

of firing clay. This approach carbonizes the material by burning it in sawdust, leaves or paper to bring about gradients of gray and black finishes.

"In every Raku firing you will never get the same effect because you're dealing with different atmospheric environments," says Washington. "The glaze reacts to different temperatures."

First a pot is glazed and placed in a kiln before Washington removes it with his tongs. He then puts it into a container filled with natural materials and leaves it to burn for twenty minutes. The longer the burn, the darker the clay will get. He

fondly remembers his early Raku firings in high school when they would run out of the art room to avoid setting off the smoke alarm.

Nowadays, Washington has more freedom to experiment with his work, and even has ceramics blended with his macramé, or intricate knot tying work. His

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'Unlimited Expressions of Life' features 60 works by Earl Washington.

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collages speak to larger themes of time, decay and justice — some are narrative depicting Barack Obama's inauguration day, while others remain more abstract. Regardless of medium, his creative process remains relatively the same.

"When I'm producing a piece of artwork it's like a birth," says Washington. "I get this piece of clay and put in my experience and how I feel, then the characteristics of the piece come out and it grows into a piece of artwork."

Washington molds his work to highlight its inherent features, which he relates to raising and rearing a child. He gathers wood for sculptures and similarly will let the medium reveal what it wants to become. In his photography, nature is a constant. He wakes up early to capture lilies in full bloom and loves to catch a sunset.

Any given piece takes a few days to weeks to complete, with the most difficult part of the process being able to produce exactly what he visualizes in his mind's eye. Washington's patience is tested as he takes the time necessary to create, step back and continue shaping a piece to his satisfaction.

"Sometimes I get up late at night with inspiration as I gain a new insight," says Washington, who adds that due to the varying nature of his Raku firings, he can never create the same piece twice. "If you get a piece of my artwork, you have a truly original piece."

Washington is excited to share his most recent creative period that explores so many different mediums and techniques.

He says it's a testament to his time at FAMU and how his instructors empha-



Earl Washington: Unlimited Expressions of Life is on display at the Foster-Tanner Fine Arts Gallery through March 29. PHOTOS BY AJA ROACHE

sized being a well-rounded artist. Most of all, he is interested in how his artwork impacts others, and finds that more rewarding than seeing his vision come to fruition.

During one traveling art show, he recounts a woman who passed by one of his pots several times, each time remarking on how much she loved it. By her fourth go-round, he asked why she didn't just buy it. She replied that it was out of her budget. Washington finally asked why she was so fascinated with it.

"She said 'I love all this texture, the style,' and that she could see it as an urn for the remains of one of her loved ones," explains Washington, who sold it to her for the price she pitched. "I did it because that's what gives me inspiration...when I create something that someone really loves."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).