

## Contemporary art exhibit probes African-American identity

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Many people recognize “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” as the title of an 1969 autobiographical novel by Maya Angelou, but Austin artist Deborah Roberts points to the original author of the phrase, poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, as the inspiration for the smart group exhibition she’s organized at the George Washington Carver Museum.

The son of slaves, Dunbar was one of the first African-Americans to gain widespread recognition for his poetry. His 1899 lyric poem, “Sympathy,” centers on a caged bird, symbolizing the oppression of black Americans decades after emancipation.

Roberts places Dunbar’s poem in full on one wall of the exhibit that gathers work by herself and three other artists, all probing how definitions of self and cultural identity can be expressed in different visual styles.

Nydia Blas’ potent and poetic photographic portraits capture young African-American men and women right at the age where adolescence and adulthood is most nebulous. They strike poses simultaneously defiant and innocent.

James Maurelle’s sculptural objects are compelling. Head-like orbs made of wood scraps glued together with globs of resin are mounted on pedestals and then arranged on a platform like the honorific busts of notable men (usually white men) in official displays.

African-American hair and its significance to black culture forms the basis of Austin artist Christina Coleman’s work. She manipulates synthetic hair, real hair, barrettes, combs and even hair gel to create intriguing abstract sculptural objects that function as charged visual metaphors. For this exhibit, a plus sign, a minus sign, a greater-than and a less-than sign — all sculpted from fake hair — are arrayed on the gallery wall, a display of mathematical symbols that are made potent through Coleman’s finesse.

Roberts pulls no punches in her collaged works on paper, confronting otherness and cultural ideals of beauty straight on. She creates new portraits out of multiple images, deliberately using racist caricatures and stereotypes like overly large lips or pickaninny braids. It’s confrontational, and it’s good.

Like the other art Roberts has chosen for this exhibit, this is work that deftly, creatively and smartly challenges.