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Djam Vivie raises art from the ashes

A cop destroyed a south-side statue in an ugly incident. Now a sculptor pays tribute

by Joe Tarr

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With his sculptures and carvings, Djam Vivie likes to imagine he's giving something a new life.

A native of Ghana, Vivie started carving wood when he was 14, learning the craft from both of his grandfathers. In his east-side home, he carves drums, masks and furniture, all in the style of his native country.

"When I see a tree that is dead," Vivie says, "I try to give him a second chance and turn him into a work of art."

With his latest project, a series of four African-themed chairs, Vivie is trying to give a second life to a piece of art that was destroyed by arsonists 23 years ago on Madison's south side.

The incident was motivated by racism and committed by someone sworn to uphold the law — a Madison police officer.

The largely forgotten episode is an example of how art can inspire both community pride and hatred.

"When we talk about images, and music, we're talking about nonverbal expression of the human spirit," says Connie Kilmark, a member of the Madison Arts Commission. "There is the actual object that the artist has created. But that object is different for every viewer. Every viewer brings their own life experience to that work. The potency is in the intersection of the art and the individual."

Sometimes the individual turns violent.

On Oct. 16, 1986, Madison police officer Robert Balistreri was out drinking with his buddies, David Workman and Steven Eckel. Late in the evening, the three decided to go after a statue that had been a sore spot for Balistreri.

"Bob for a long time wanted to burn the statue — burn or cut it down," Eckel later told police. "I guess the thing stood for black pride and dignity or something."

Called *The Tree of Life*, the wooden statue was carved by Charles Mertes from a catalpa tree that had been struck by lightning in a small park at Bram and Beld streets, across the street from St. Martin's Neighborhood Center. Mertes made a few sketches and let the neighborhood association pick the one it liked best: an African woman, her hair tied up and her head held upward, holds an infant to her breasts. Unnamed at the time, the park is now called Kenneth Newville Park.

Mertes completed the work in 1981 shortly before he moved away, according to a 1995 *Wisconsin State Journal* article. Mertes could not be located for this story.

Chris Wagner, a librarian at the South Madison Public Library, remembers the statue from when she was a graduate student at UW. She doesn't recall many details of the piece, but says, "I thought it was a beautiful representation of a mother and child. It was one of those instances of art in unusual places. You didn't expect to see such beautiful art in a small park."

That October evening in 1986, Balistreri and his friends got a can of gasoline. Eckel dropped Balistreri and Workman off and waited in Workman's van nearby. The two men doused the statue with gasoline and lit it on fire, tossing the gas can in some bushes.

Carol Birkholz, a friend of Balistreri, later told investigators that the officer told her, "We had a hell of a time getting it going." A parks employee later found the face of the statue and took it home.

Birkholz told police that when a month passed before the incident made the paper, Balistreri joked to her about it: "See, it takes those black people a long time to realize their hero is gone."

It wasn't the first time Balistreri had vandalized something, according to police reports. In March 1986, Balistreri and Eckel set out to vandalize ice-fishing shanties near Brittingham Park that had been painted as part of an art project. Balistreri had planned on walking across Monona Bay to get to the shanties near the causeway. But the ice was too thin and the shanties had been removed.

So they instead spray painted "niggers suck" on Mr. P's bar, 1616 Beld St., and Zinger's Bar, 3 N. Park St.

According to police records, they had also once tried and failed to destroy with acid some "gay statues" — George Segal's *Gay Liberation* — at Orton Park on Spaight Street.

The incidents came out during an internal affairs investigation of Balistreri. He later quit the force and was sentenced to two years' probation for the vandalism. For community service, he helped build playground equipment next to the South Madison Neighborhood Center.

"I now realize that the statue was an important symbol and source of pride to the people of the black community," Balistreri wrote in a letter of apology. "I feel remorse and humiliation that I had anything to do with its destruction."

Djam Vivie sold his first carving — a ceremonial stool — when he was 14 for \$10. Though both his grandfathers were woodworkers, Vivie taught himself the trade, watching them and practicing on his own with traditional tools: an adze (which resembles a small hoe and is used to chip away wood), a gouge and chisels.

Vivie first came to the United States in 1995, settling in Manhattan. He had grown up in a rural part of Ghana, a town called Peki. And Manhattan lacked a vital element for any woodworker, Vivie says: "trees to play with."

He had been living there for about seven months when he met Morgan Anderson, the founder of Morgan Drums, which was at the time based in Madison. "He said we have wood here," Vivie remembers. "Lots of trees."

In 1996, Vivie climbed on a bus and headed west. "It took me about three days to get here," he says.

Vivie has lived here ever since, drumming in acts like Tani Diakite & the Malian Blues Band and making a living from his art. For a while, he worked in a factory, but eight years ago he decided, "I have to do my art."

He worries that the craft from his homeland is being lost. On recent trips back to Ghana, he laments that most of the carvers are doing inferior work. "Mostly the craftsmen in Ghana are producing mass quantities because of tourism."

With some other carvers, he hopes to begin teaching a class next year. "This is a traditional craft," he says. "It'll get lost if people don't learn it."

Vivie was leading some classes on drumming at the South Madison Library when he saw a picture of *The Tree of Life*. Vivie recognized the carving style as southern African. He offered to make, not a replica of the piece, but a tribute of sorts, for the library.

"All art is a piece of work, so I appreciate all art," he says. "I don't see why art should be offensive."

The library managed to secure a \$2,500 Madison Arts Commission grant for him to do the work. It evolved from a mantelpiece to a bench, and now to four chairs. The work is due to be available for viewing this coming summer.

He's finished the backs of the four chairs. In the center of each is carved a symbol, "Gimyami," which Vivie says means "accept or believe in God." Perched on either sides of each top are a man and a woman, both topless.

Vivie says he tried to put himself in Mertes' mindset when working on the chairs, but says, "You don't know how the person feels."

In 1982, Debra Klebesadel was a UW student who would commute by the tiny park on Bram Street every day. She was taking a photography class, so she was always on the lookout for subject matter. *The Tree of Life* caught her eye. "I liked the whole Madonna theme, mother and child," she says. "I liked that it was an old tree trunk. It was cool that it became a piece of art."

But there were power lines all over the neighborhood, so Klebesadel had to lie on the ground to get "a nice clean image" of the statue.

Years later, Klebesadel heard that the statue had been burned and become a "symbol of racism, hatred and stupidity." She also realized she had a document of it, but for years "didn't know what to do with it."

Last fall, she brought a copy to the South Madison Library, which happened to be researching the statue and working with Vivie on doing the tribute.

In awarding a grant for Vivie's work, the Madison Arts Commission was trying to fulfill its mission of funding diverse artworks, Kilmark says.

"Public art has to somehow or another feel and behave in that it serves a public good," she says. "That's tricky to document. Some cities will take much bigger risks than Madison with their public art."

Kilmark wasn't familiar with the original statue that was burned.

"I wouldn't call that a risky piece of work," she says. "But you never know what's in the heart and mind of the viewer."



FROM THE ASHES

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Djam Vivie raises art from the ashes Vivie worries that his homeland's craft is being lost.
(Credit: Peter Patau)



Djam Vivie raises art from the ashes
(Credit: Debra Klebesadel)