

# FORT GANSEVOORT

Hartford  Courant

**Wadsworth Atheneum Exhibit Confronts Violence Against African-Americans**

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One of 31 sculptures by Vanessa German on display at the Wadsworth-Atheneum. (Mark Mirko / [mmirko@courant.com](mailto:mmirko@courant.com))

There's an army on the march inside the MATRIX Gallery at Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford. Its mission is "to do a violence to the lie."

Vanessa German created 31 life-size figures of females, dressed and head-dressed in a heavily symbolic, vividly colored array of fabrics and found objects. They have been placed in military-style formation inside the darkened contemporary-art gallery. With one entrance to the room closed off, visitors must enter face-to-face with the women warriors who are poised to confront "the lie": that African-

# FORT GANSEVOORT

Americans are lesser members of the human family and that their trials and tribulations needn't concern people of other races.

"The lie is what I consider the big human lie, that we are not all connected," German said. "For me it's a matter of life and death if I do not do violence to the lie. It's the reason that I have lungs."

German is a warrior herself. She wrote in a poem "I am a cannon I will go in at it with my teeth and I have seen the bodies and I have called out the night sky let loose the military of my soul."



Artist Vanessa German stands reflected in the hand mirror of one of her 31 sculptures. (Mark Mirko / [mmirko@courant.com](mailto:mmirko@courant.com))

She lives in "the hood," the Homewood section of Pittsburgh. The drugs, crime and violence that devastate that neighborhood affects its residents with day-to-day fear and anxiety. "The trauma just accumulates," German said. But the violence is ignored by the world outside, which is more interested in reading about crimes against Caucasians.

"You wouldn't waste wealth. You wouldn't cast pearls out. But you'd do that to people," she says.

German's fierce females are contemporary variations on traditional West African Nkisi "power figures," which are believed to have magical abilities to bestow protection, fertility, forgiveness, etc. Traditional Nkisi are male or female, but German chose women. "I love the power of women, the secret, unlanguageable, deep connection power women have," she said. "Most of the healers I know are women, in a world of men eagerly warring and communicating death."

## Creating Her Warriors

# FORT GANSEVOORT

German begins by coating plaster onto baby-doll heads and then painting them with tar, using cowrie shells for lips. She creates clothes from her own wardrobe and from cast-off fabrics she finds. Each color has meaning. Blue symbolizes literally "the blues" and "the cumulative grief, trauma and despair" of the Middle Passage, the stage of the "triangular trade" shipping routes in which slaves were kidnapped, shipped and sold. White symbolizes ghosts, the presence of ancestors, as well as cotton, which many slaves picked. Red symbolizes blood, desire and rage.

"You ought to be outraged. There is a great disparity. There's asbestos in these kids' school, but not asbestos in the school down the street," she said. "I'm not going to shame your rage."

German covers her figures with found objects in thick layers. One figure is draped with medicine bottles, another with buttons, another with bags of coffee, another with nails, another with keys, another with gold ornaments. "I like the accumulation. They're power figures. As an element accumulates, they accumulate that power," she said.

Food is a recurring theme: flour bags, coffee bags, biscuit boxes and tins, salt shakers. "My grandmother was a domestic," German said. "I think about the things grandma would have touched to make somebody else's life livable." Birds, too, are a recurring theme, symbols of liberty.

The military formation is inspired by the discovery, in 1974, of an army of terracotta figures in China. The dark-painted walls and low lighting create a cavernous atmosphere, accentuated by an echoey audio track playing on a 15-minute continuous loop, of voices of children, flowing water, vehicles and Sam Cooke's "Change is Gonna Come."

At the head of the army a warrior wears a skirt made of leather handbags, her head surrounded by flowers. She carries a baby in one hand and a stop sign in the other, a statement against "the collective cultural shrug against black death. ... She's actively saying the simplest thing: STOP."

"VANESSA GERMAN MATRIX 174: I COME TO DO A VIOLENCE TO THE LIE" *will be in the MATRIX Gallery at Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 600 Main St. in Hartford, until Sept. 4.* [thewadsworth.org](http://thewadsworth.org).