

At birth,
there is a unique wind
placed within each of us.
That wind is energy,
vibration becoming breath,
becoming sound,
becoming word,
becoming song.

– Gregory Cajete

Audible Jewels:

THE DREAMING AND DIALOGUE OF HUMANITY

*By Nicole Patterson / Photography by Bianca Cordova
(unless otherwise noted)*

Gale Jamieson has a close connection to the natural world. She's a backwoods wanderer, a protector of wild places. I'd describe her as a mixture of Thoreau and Annie Dillard, and I would choose those two because she's a peaceful and practiced listener and a delicate observer of the world around her. I am fascinated by her investigation of materials. She's more concerned with culture and the human experience, art and its process. Her sculptures, installations, and pieces come from a deep place, an inner life, an emotion, an openness to share her voice and her experience. She says, "If I listen well, history and memory resonate and relationships emerge. The passage of time leaves tracks in many ways."

I traveled to see Gale at her home in New Park, a borough in York County. Over roads and roads of country, windy paths with homes tucked away here and there, and small stores at lonely intersections. The sun is shining, but the wind is blowing, making me cold and anxious. I know she's accomplished—to say the least. I know she has just returned from a residency in France and that she's had her work displayed in the Smithsonian. I tell myself to be open, to hear her, to try to understand her worldview and appreciate her work.

I pull into her driveway and survey her breathtaking 20-acres of land. The family dog, Diesel, a handsome Border Collie, is willing to play fetch with me until Gale walks up to the barn from her house to greet me. She's beautiful. I immediately notice her deep brown eyes. Very natural, she wears skinny silver hoop earrings on her lobes and a rust-colored scarf around her neck. Her hair looks soft and light, and I'm immediately taken with her. She's let life make her beautiful; she's lived, and it's written all over her face.

Together we enter her studio. It's full of things that invite my attention and ignite my curiosity. It's a mixture of hodgepodge items, found objects, fragments of alluring artifacts. For her they are audible jewels. For me they are invisible links. There's a heaviness (I'll later think of this as a weight of dialogue) inside her studio, a sense that this place is sacred and reverent. I don't know where it comes from, but I feel it enough to respect the unfading impression.

Continued on next page



Continued from previous page

For a few minutes I just look, soak it up, and don't say much. I notice the large and neatly stacked *National Geographic* magazines on a high shelf, below spools of colorful thread, other thick books, and a small fan. Their yellow spines bring back my own childhood memories of paging through photos of foreign places and distant explorations. Beside a stereo hang thick ropes of delicious color. Light and dark purple are braided together—magenta and light pink and brown and yellow all interwoven. And then there's one white rope, no other colors involved. Just white. In the corner there's a clumped and tangled mess of thread. Colorful bits of varied sizes merged into a ball, sit atop a concrete stand. I like its messiness, its defiance to not be undone or separated. A contented clump of color.

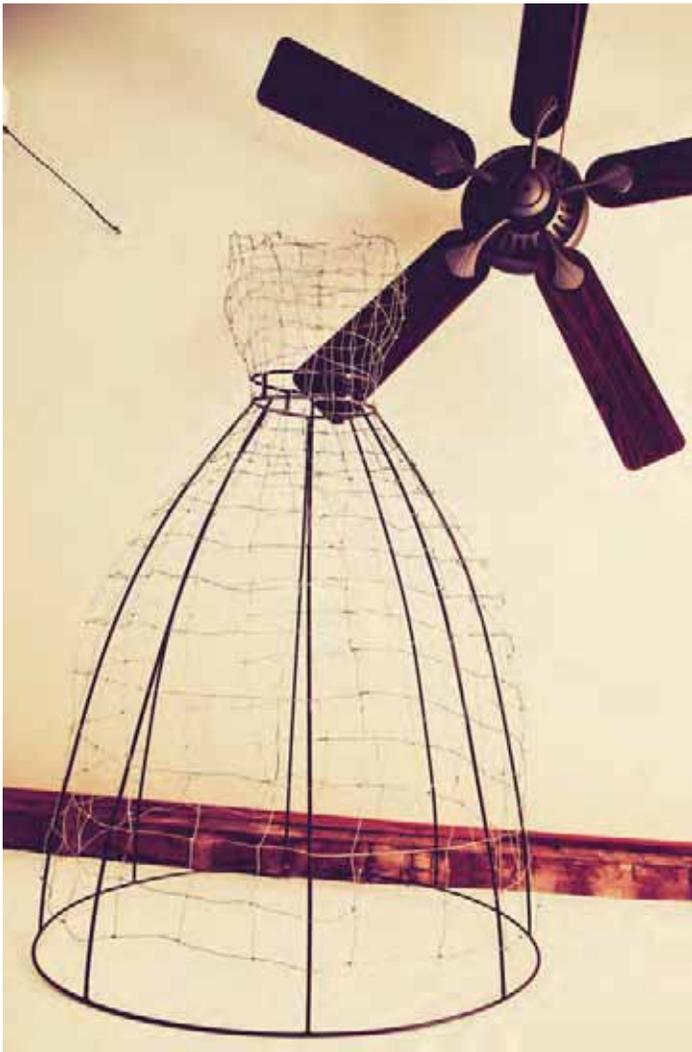
Gale finally breaks the silence and shows me a piece, a masterpiece to me, that she's working on. It's a box made out of old filmstrips, from the film *Pheobe: Story of a Teenage Pregnancy*, that have been woven together. "It's called *Simulation in the Classroom*," she says as she holds it up to the light that streams in through the windows. "Material has memory," she says. I am transported back to elementary school, back row, watching a version of the same thing. Someone cranks the handle after the beep. Next slide.

Gale works on multiple pieces at once. "Usually I'll have about six pieces going at one time. I'll have an idea, but if I force that idea onto a material, it is static. It is not alive anymore. It evolves as I go; the material is source. I look at it as a conversation, so I need to listen. I have to pause. That's why I have so many pieces in process. While working on one piece, I'll look across the room at another and see it in a new way. I'll begin to hear something. It has a life of its own. If I impose my will on it, it loses that."

So part of the life-giving nature of her art is that she waits for it, and listens. Waiting on the muse. You can't rush it. Where do her ideas come from? As I look around I see honeycomb sitting in a tray near the door. "That's difficult to answer," she says. "I'm not sure where the ideas come from sometimes. It's an impulse and if I follow that impulse it usually takes me somewhere." As she leads me to another room, off from her studio workspace, she continues, "A lot of times the ideas are rolling around in my head for a while. Then there's that day, when it's the day; just do it. Get started. I'll have an idea or an image in advance, but I'm willing to stray away from that because it's a live conversation." That's a telling statement, and then she shows me her most fascinating piece yet. I'm now standing in a room with the open door, at the epicenter of that sacred feeling.

"It was the loss of a really dear friend who was like a sister to me. Her name was Mary Alice," she says. She has titled it *the dreaming*, and it's what evolved after the loss. "After she passed I came back to the studio and started wrapping wire and it became a head, then a torso," Gale says. Made from wire, thread, cloth, and covered in beeswax, this chrysalis makes me feel lots and lots of connections. I think about the emphasis on life cycles, sacred places, the process of letting go, and the vulnerability of the body. I can hardly look at the encased figure. If what Gale tells me about her art is true, if it really does speak to those who listen, I can hear it loud and clear, and it makes me uncomfortable.

Weeks later I will look up how Native Americans deal with death, because Gale tells me she aligns her beliefs with a more earth-based spirituality. I learn that the ability to deal with death can only be understood in a larger context, one where through death the bodies contribute to the earth, to plants, and animals. Death is simply a transition. Some tribes made bundles containing bits of hair or flesh or claws of animals related to their family or other intimate things. This bundle was kept close for a year and treated as if the person were still present. As Vine Deloria Jr. writes in *God is Red*, "In that way the trauma of losing the person was extended over a period of time and people could be comforted that, while the deceased was not visibly present, he or she was spiritually and emotionally present."





As we leave that space and walk back into her studio she tells me a little about her residency in France. It was a juried fellowship hosting four to five residents at a time. “I had a beautiful studio. The buildings are about 400 years old. They really usher you into the community by introducing you and having dinners. I, right off, looked for a tutor to help me with French and that integrated me into the community too,” she says.

It helps when you speak the right language, even the language of Things. While there she was inspired by a lace curtain she found in a Red Cross thrift shop. She smiles as she recounts, “The lace was my stepping off point. It threw shadows on the desk and floor and I started drawing them. It has a story, a history.” Again she tells me that the point of going there was not to impose her ideas on the residency, but to work with a sense of place and history, to respond to what resonates. “An idea seeks its own form,” she says. “A mentor and sculptor, David Nash, told me that once in a residency and that summed it up beautifully for me.”

When I ask her about her childhood memories, she recounts days and dusks of being a tom girl and spending a lot of time in the woods. “As long as I can remember I was always putting things together and making things—whatever it was—folding and gluing paper, or playing with orange peels and eggshells. I always knew making art was what I wanted to do, but in my family, it wasn’t considered a practical way to make a living. I pushed it aside but it never left me alone,” she says as she brushes away some strands of hair from her forehead. With a pursing of her lips she continues, “If you know what your passion is, it’s like a double-edged sword. It’s wonderful in that you know what you want to do...but it never leaves you alone. I have to do it.”

That compulsion to create is instigated by uneasiness. “I don’t think life is about being comfortable. When you’re uncomfortable that’s when you’re growing and stretching into new territory,” she says. Her advice for people who want to learn is to be quiet and open, and to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. “Stay with the process. Trust the process. That’s what works for me anyway,” she tells

me. Her ideas are varied and mostly come through all different experiences, some more painful than others. But, as I feel her moving outward, expanding, she says, “I think my story is wrapped up in all my work. I don’t think it is separate. The work is also about our culture and society. My experience in this lifetime is as a female, but I believe the issues in the work are universal.”

And with that, she unpacks a piece called *Pangea*. The continuity of thought and flow is absolutely stunning. “I like it when, as you’re approaching a piece with an assumption, there’s a certain point when those perceptions suddenly change. That’s the space that interests me the most...the space in between. This piece is an example of that,” she says. From a distance it looks like it’s a brocade. It’s actually *National Geographic* maps. Gale explains, “I reconstructed the Eastern Hemisphere and the Western Hemisphere into two sheets, cut them into strips, and I wove them together. The kimono is a pictorial format; it’s like a quilt.” She makes many references to time and space, and I’m beginning to feel as if that is at the heart of what makes her work speak. There’s a space that is felt and it simultaneously gives credence to silence and to chatter.

“There’s a certain point when you realize it’s something else. I feel like that’s the space where change happens, where our minds are completely open to see anew—let go of all our beliefs. I think of it as seeing the ordinary in a non-ordinary way.” Immediately I recall Annie Dillard’s words and think to myself: *The secret of seeing, is then, the pearl of great price*. And I think about Gale’s friend Mary Alice resting on that pearl. Whether the connections are correct or not, Gale’s art is alive. And like the tangled clump of colorful threads, my brain connections are lighted—my hemispheres glow.

That’s my goal with a piece, for it to be open enough so that people can come to it and have their own experience. Titling a piece is always difficult in that way. I would like to get more of my work into public collections. I feel like it’s meant to be shared,” she says.

Continued on next page



Continued from previous page

I go back to asking about her childhood and her parents. She doesn't tell me much about them, but what she says is close to her core. "My father was a master plumber, an electrician, and a mason. There were always things being repaired and built. And sometimes I think what I do most is to move things around." And then, as if she's saying it for the first time, she adds, "I'm not sure we create as much as we design." She recounts her mother being kind to her by allowing her to go into the kitchen and work out her own formulas and mixes without fear. "She was actually quite talented, but never pursued it. From her I started to learn how to draw. I think it was more about observation, looking."

I ask Gale about her religious beliefs. She says she's more aligned with an earth-based, native belief system, but thinks there's space for all religions. "I think we're losing our connection to the natural world. So that's very much a part of my work—to reconnect, to look at our culture and where we're going. We're living in a pretty amazing time of the evolution of the earth and humanity. I think my work has been about finding my voice too," she says. She points to the kimono and tells me that there's an edge to most of her pieces and that it's a part of her not being comfortable. "This piece has a lot to do with our world environmentally and culturally. I don't know that it's dark but it's pretty disturbing what is happening to this beautiful planet—but it's the truth. This is a shroud," she says quietly.

Maybe we all see through a glass darkly. Maybe the covering is not just a guarded darkness, but a light voice, waiting to be heard. Maybe what I feel as heaviness is the space in between what I expect and what I see and feel. "There are enough negative, depressing things out there. I don't want to dwell on it. I'm trying to look at things the way they are, and hold a vision or dream for what they can become. This Earth is in a process of re-dreaming itself right now," she says with hope. Her cadence a well-read poem, a life-giving song, a visible breath of material.

As I get ready to leave, we walk outside and look at our feet. We roll our shoes over the stones in her driveway. In the distance, behind her barn, the sun is casting shadows. I notice a peace sign hanging near the barn entrance that I hadn't recognized on my way in. Gale has blessed my entire afternoon. I think what she has to say is incredibly worthwhile. I believe the work she does reconnects and reaffirms her value and uniqueness to the world, and the acceptance she's earned from prestigious institutions or no-named writers signifies her influence that is meditative on themes of what it means to be human. It's difficult to put into words because, much like poetry, art is able to speak to us in ways that are intensely private. But I am convinced that if we are willing to listen closely and endure reflection, we can see and hear the secrets of the universe—visible and invisible, audible and inaudible—in all their mysterious splendor. 🐝



EDUCATION:

1994 Bachelor of Arts, Towson University, MD

1972 Associate of Arts, Anne Arundel Community College, MD

1969 Undergraduate Studies, Maryland Institute of Art, MD

www.galejamieson.com

