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Artist Vanessa German displays her love for Homewood in NYC

Walkabout

Diana Nelson Jones

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Vanessa German at her Art House in Homewood. (Diana Nelson Jones/Post-Gazette)

At first glance, Vanessa German's sculptures appear playful. Festooned with buttons, beads, shells, toys and other objects, each is a personified experience, the persona centered in a head painted black with objects on top of it or shooting from it.

The first of her sculptures I ever saw was "The Queen of Homewood," the focus two years ago of a show called "Home" at the Homewood Coliseum. It was the debut of the Warhol Museum's Homewood Artist Residency project. Her piece was part of a habitat she created with artist Tina Brewer.

The figure riveted my attention. She held a tea cup. Her mouth was a sea shell. She was adorned from head to foot by found objects, those of everyday life including bottle caps, spoons and a lighter. It struck me that the head was painted not the brown of skin but the black of pitch or coal.

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After inspecting 20 of her works during a recent visit to the Pavel Zoubok Gallery at 531 W. 26th St. in New York City, an expression came to me unbidden: "Exuberant sadness."

I tried it out on Ms. German during a visit to the Art House, a studio space where she works with children making art on Hamilton Avenue. She considered the phrase for some time.

"I feel a lot of energy in the word" exuberant, she said. "There's a power in that."

Sadness not so much. Her descriptions of her works list materials that went into them, both tangible and intangible, none passive the way sadness is.

Along with buttons, keys, yarn, cloth, toy guns, doll pieces and figurines, ingredients include "the names of all the dead boys that I know," "the spirit of cleansing out the rage," "the shape of sorrow come down the mountain like a rollin' fog," "tears," "sick and tired of having to act like I'm not outraged when something happens that is so clearly outrageous and some everyday anger."

Two years ago at the Coliseum, she told me that Homewood is "literally in the work" because Homewood is where she lives. Recently she said she would care anywhere about the things she cares about there.

As we talk, just after school has let out, she interacts with and comments on people in the street: "Hi!" she calls, waving at a passing car. Watching two little boys walk toward us on the sidewalk, she says, "My God, they're so little walking home alone."

Pausing, she said, "There are so many things that give reason to my objects."

Ms. German's New York gallery show "Homewood" is up until Saturday. Last weekend, she returned there to perform at the gallery, a chance "to expand on the life of my sculptures," she said.

Pavel Zoubok, who has twice represented Ms. German's work in New York, met her when he came to Pittsburgh for a show at the Andy Warhol Museum. Eric Shiner, director of the Warhol, introduced them.

"I'm thrilled she is showing in New York, where she very much deserves to be -- and certainly beyond," Mr. Shiner said. "She has unbridled talent and an international career ahead of her."

Mr. Zoubok said he was thrilled to exhibit her work and that the show has been a success, with several sales.

Some of her pieces include objects from a bombed-out doll factory in Germany. Old cellphones and toy guns are affixed to other pieces. One has a bird's nest she found in the neighborhood.

A model sailing ship sits on the head of the persona in "Self-portrait of the Artist with Physicalized Soul." On the head of another piece is a porcelain music box of a little girl playing the piano.

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"That is a precious object," she said. "An image of a pretty, precious white girl. I think about how many times during a day [on television] I see happy white families in McDonald's, or playing soccer, and I often feel disappeared from things that are pretty and lovely and easy.

"Using these figures was a way to juxtapose the absence of faces and bodies that look like mine in that same discourse. These pieces reckon with that so that I can have my own regular."

The toy guns in her pieces aren't just weapons, she said. "In my world they are beads. I string them together. But they are not so transformed that they are not recognizable. I take license to make other decisions about things like that."

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