

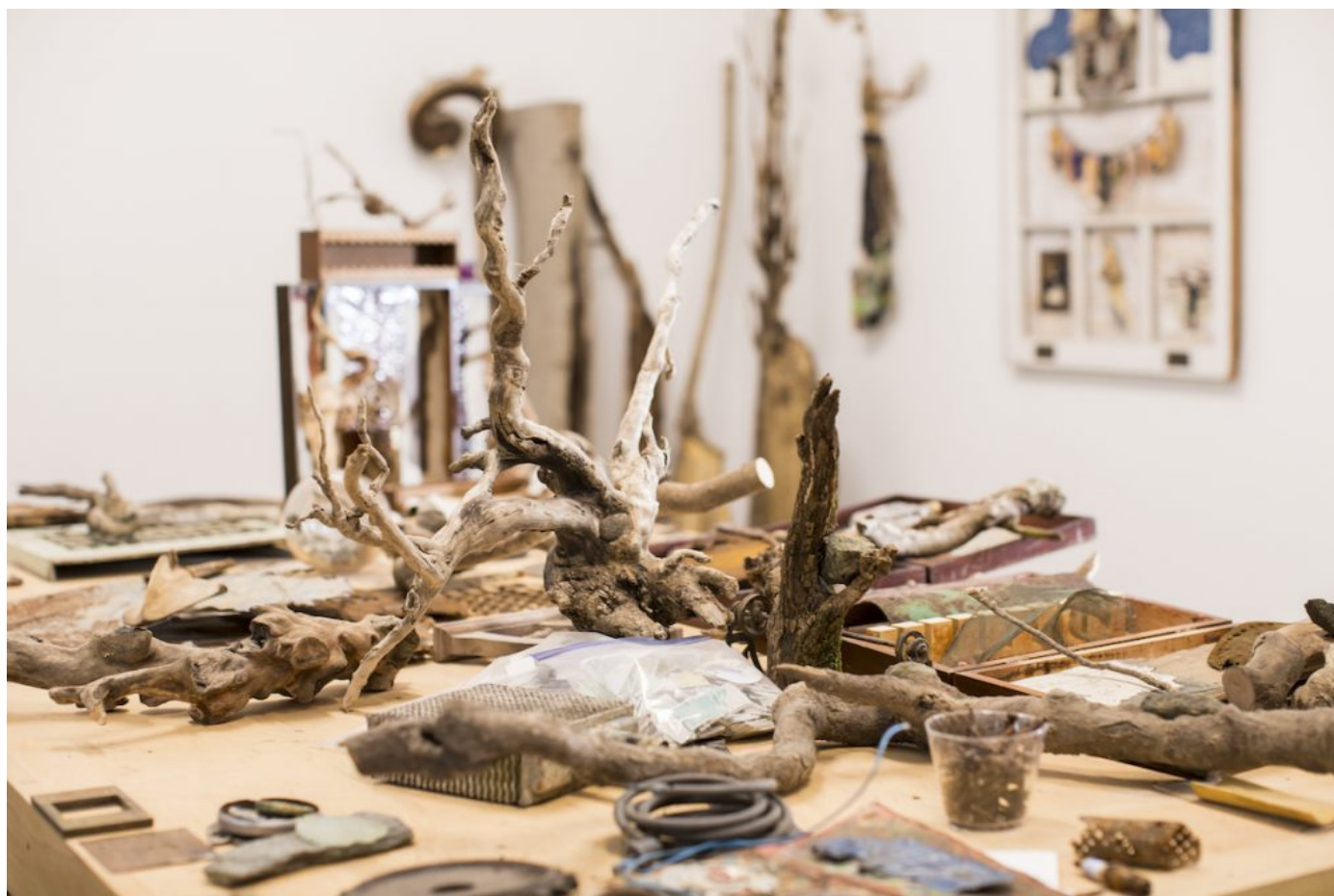
Natural Language: The Art of Jordan Tierney **(<https://bmoreart.com/2022/08/natural-language-the-art-of-jordan-tierney.html>)**

Tierney's mixed-media assemblages link humans and climate

August 24, 2022

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Photography: *Jill Fannon* ([Https://Bmoreart.Com/Contributor/Jill-Fannon](https://bmoreart.com/contributor/jill-fannon))



On daily walks through the woods, Jordan Tierney looks for life amid the discard. With her pit-mutt Stuart, the artist treks creek-side paths, veering occasionally onto trails that the deer have made. She picks up bits of weathered glass, obscure

metal car parts, broken dinnerware, animal bones and feathers, depositing them in her backpack, which also totes a saw and a hatchet in case she encounters a particularly gnarly piece of dead wood. These materials become the components for all of her sculptures, which often resemble tools used in ritual or monumental entities harboring a secret energy or ancient knowledge.

This practice of collecting is like “looking for everything and nothing,” Tierney says, “because then you’re open to surprises, and you’re not disappointed if you don’t find what you thought you were looking for.” It’s hard to put into words what leads her to pluck specific fragmentary treasures out of a stream and lug them back to her North Baltimore studio. “I don’t think anything literal,” Tierney says, picking up a metal cylinder that she suspects is part of a shock absorber. “I feel, does this have juju?”





Though the concept of juju has specific origins in West African spiritual practices, Tierney uses it in the colloquial sense: an ineffable, subjective potential power held by an object. Working with the juju is sort of like starting a painting with a thin wash of color or drawing on toned paper; it's not a completely blank slate. By Tierney's estimation, not every single object has juju—especially in an age of capitalist mass production.

At an Area 405 show last year, Tierney exhibited a series of assemblages called *Spiritual Devices from the 3rd Millennium CE* and another called *Invocations*, which features sculptures made of found tree limbs, wire, light fixtures, beads, stuffed animals, and furniture parts, among other items. One sculpture vaguely resembles a tall figure with a slender wooden body, a lampshade head, and a skirt made of glass bottles with messages tucked in. "I collected all those in the woods off the ground. People toss them out their car windows," Tierney says. "But I've noticed lately, most things aren't even glass anymore. And to me, plastic does not have juju. It doesn't have any weight. It's not embossed with the name of the company or some special slogan they used to have, so there's not as much investment in this thing's existence."

Seeking both patterns and anomalies in the detritus, Tierney is deliberate in her gleaning. "Your eyes really do see everything, it's just a matter of which things stick out to you," she says. "It's almost like you're looking at a tapestry. On one day, some things are going to speak louder than others."



in, becoming more and more potent the more you sit with it.” She spent most of her 20 years in DC building exhibits, framing art, making object mounts for installations in Smithsonian museums, and maintaining her studio practice, before coming back to Baltimore.

The sculpture *Rough Spot*, from the *Spiritual Devices* series, takes the shape of an improvised banjo, its round body made of an orange plastic traffic reflector, its neck a table or chair leg that morphs into a piece of driftwood; the head blooms like a wood ear mushroom. Stuck into both sides of the old, dry neck, however, are about a dozen trapezoids of broken china that stir up a palpable sense of danger and injury.

Tierney’s work also sparks the viewer’s sense of wonder, like the intricate *Invocations* sculpture that features an ornamental display of grappling hooks, wire, and colorful nylon knots from lobster traps. Tierney collected the knots from a Maine beach about 25 years ago, and she found that not only are the colors delightful, they’re purposeful too, corresponding to different lobstermen. The knots can thus signify labor and history, waste and discard, joy and curiosity all at once.



“I’ve always gotten a certain glee from valuing things that other people have cast off,” Tierney says. She sorts her objects by type of shape and material, filing them into card catalog cabinets that she picked up from a junk shop off Route 1. Labels on the many-dozen drawers include: clock faces, found metal hardware, glass tubing, mouse traps, chains, gears, washers, hourglasses, dominoes, superhero parts, glitz, marbles.

“Useless things start to have a different value” on the excursions, Tierney says. And in the studio, the materials sharpen her intuition and resourcefulness. After years of collecting, it’s rare that Tierney has to purchase anything to assemble her sculptures; even fasteners, metal fittings, and other connecting bits that might be necessary to attach a lightbulb to the narrow end of a soft piece of wood are readily available. Sometimes joiners are functional, sometimes they’re sentimental or metaphorical; ultimately they are all part of a lexicon.



Jordan Tierney's sculptures in 'A Wake' at Area 405, December 2021



Jordan Tierney's sculptures in 'A Wake' at Area 405, December 2021



"Acknowledging the gifts that surround us creates a sense of satisfaction, a feeling of enoughness which is an antidote to the societal messages that drill into our spirits telling us we must have more." –Robin Wall Kimmerer, detail, 2021, tree limb, plywood, chandelier, copper wire, glass, lobster trap knots, bathtub clawfoot, garden cultivator head, grappling hooks, wheels, paint



Jordan Tierney's sculpture in 'A Wake' at Area 405, December 2021

The moves Tierney makes in her sculptures can appear organic rather than invented, collaborative rather than individualistic. A 2019 wood-carved sculpture titled *Truce* looks like it could function as a candelabra; the two arms meet right in the middle where the tree grew around a rock. The collaborations among the rocks, trees, storms, and pollution are occasionally too perfect for Tierney to intervene. Once, on a walk through Herring Run, Tierney noticed a tree that was knocked over, its root ball exposed along the rocky bank, yet it had continued to grow around the stones. She took out her saw and trimmed a fragment of the wood adjoining the rock and keeps it on a shelf in her studio as a reminder. "To me, this is such a symbol of resilience and of an ability to live in a difficult

situation,” Tierney says. “It’s almost like musculature, the way the bark is holding that. These just have amazing power to me.”

Some of what Tierney learns from her practice of daily walking and collecting is phenomenological, like when a familiar path floods after heavy rains, becoming impassable. “You see the power the water has, what it does to the banks,” Tierney says. “You think, well, last week, I could cross right there. But now it’s deep, it shifts the sands around.”

In her lifetime, Tierney has noticed an increase in consumerism and its consequent degradation of our planet, something her creative reuse combats in small but effective ways. Literature and research about the environment are therefore critical supplements to her art practice. In her Area 405 exhibition, each piece was titled using quotes from writers, scientists, and activists such as the environmentalist Rachel Carson, ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer, journalist Ida B. Wells, and the poet Joy Harjo.

For Tierney, life is a constant experience of learning — from her own environment, but also from thinkers who are likewise concerned about the planet’s future, and whose expertise and perspective create pathways through uncertainty. The simple efforts of reconnecting to nature and seeking others’ knowledge are a refusal of the egoistic drives that are destroying the planet. Nothing is truly isolated or individual, despite what messages we are sold. Tierney’s art reminds us: the Earth, and everything on it, feels all of our wounds.





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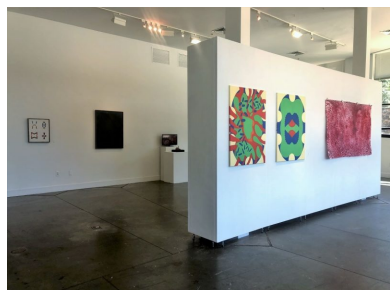
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By recontextualizing personal and universal experiences and focusing on artists who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color, the show presents an opportunity for other BIPOC artists to continue breaking the mold of what abstraction can look like: a fundamentally multifaceted form of expression.

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No longer an athlete, or even a die-hard sports fan, Donahue is more concerned with the storytelling aspects of sports.

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