

Jan Wade  
MEMORY JUG

**Jan Wade's Memory Jugs**

BY DENISE RYNER

**Artist's Statement (2020)**

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Jan Wade's multidisciplinary work often starts with "hunt and gather" outings. She visits thrift shops, dollar stores, or other outlets selling overstock of vintage commercial, manufacturing items, or display apparatus to gather material for works she may

Jan Wade  
*Memory Jug*, 2016

Mixed media assemblage  
with found objects  
(73 x 41.1 cm)  
SAG 2020.01.01

Photograph by Dennis Ha

already be thinking of, or store the spoils of her hunt to incorporate into an object sometime in the future.

In this way, Wade contracts time and collective experience, using nostalgia such as classic board game pieces and toys to comment on historic and contemporary Black political realities, the endurance of African culture and instances of anti-Black violence, murder, and loss.

The work *Memory Jug*, 2016, was commissioned as part of a Day of the Dead festival held by the Granville Island Cultural Society. Originating in Mexico and celebrated at the start of November, the Day of the Dead is a time for remembrance of, and offerings to, loved ones who have died. Wade and other artists were given a traditional Day of the Dead calavera or skull with which to create their work.

Wade, a prolific researcher and traveller with a vast knowledge of international cultural traditions and stories, merged the skull, symbolizing memorials for the deceased in Mexico and Latin America, with the memory jug. The latter form was used as a grave marker and memorial by Americans in the Southern regions of the United States at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and likely earlier, then in subsequent revivals in 1950s and 60s Appalachia and Southern states.<sup>1</sup> They were associated with burials of Black Americans and even assumed to be carried over by enslaved descendants of the Bakongo peoples in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than a tribute to a single family member, Wade's *Memory Jug* memorializes the birth of a movement and multiple people. The work was made in 2016, a few years after the shooting deaths by police of Black teenagers Trayvon Martin (2013) and Michael Brown (2014); the choking death, also by police, of Eric Garner (2014); and the suspicious 2015 death in police custody of Sandra Bland, which

Wade says was particularly difficult to hear about.<sup>3</sup> This work was also made a few years after the emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in 2013, and Wade dedicates her work to the activists and victims: "I am dedicating mine to ... BLACK LIVES MATTER ... and all those through the ages who have suffered and died at the hands of injustice ... only the cameras are new ..."<sup>4</sup>

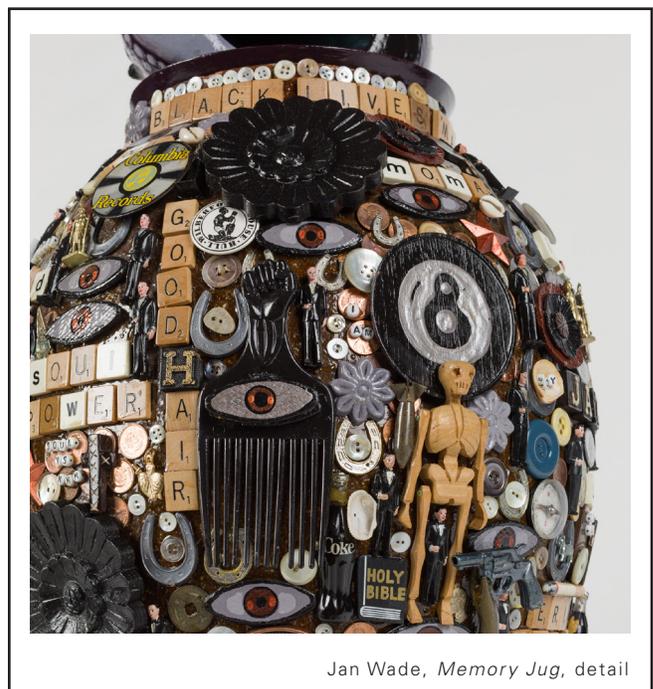
The familiar wooden tiles from Scrabble sets are used to spell out "BLACK LIVES MATTER," Garner's, and Bland's names. Additional type-blocks or stamps spell out the name of the avant-garde musician Sun Ra, who came to prominence in the 1960s. Elsewhere the contemporary slogan "Stay Woke" appears near the 60s/70s Black Power imperative to "Be Real." These phrases, alongside other words such as "Hope," "Deep South," "Holy Ghosts," "Jazz," and "Remember Me," can each be associated with general but also very specific references to Black American culture. They are all embedded in a layer of other found remnants of popular culture such as cartoonish eyes, an Afro-pick, miniature horseshoes, Coke bottles, a globe, airplanes, and coins. A small Bible, a portrait of Jesus, and the moulded gold phrase, "Remember to Pray" connect to the complicated relationship between Christianity and Black Americans, whose ancestors were forbidden from worshipping lest they think themselves as humans with souls rather than the property of their owners, making prayer a radical and subversive act. These small objects are not unlike those that would be pressed into the wet concrete or mud of early memory jugs to illustrate a person's life through their material associations—often among the very few belongings of communities that didn't have the right to possessions while alive, or were possessions themselves.

Near letter-blocks that spell “DAD,” tiny lettered beads also spell out “Hamilton,” Wade’s hometown, and “Kerry,” the name of Wade’s sister. Elsewhere, “Mother” appears near the name “Jeff.” The jug itself is the supporting structure for these objects, but hardly any of its surface is visible through the layer of the many adhered pieces. The painted skull rests on the mouth of the vessel and is topped by a glossy, chocolate brown hand giving the gesture for peace. This hybrid personal and public monument to both the living and the dead, uplift and oppression, pieces together a visual representation of solidarity between Black Canadian and American struggles, as well as past and contemporary expressions of Black Life—points that are also bridged by Wade’s own lifetime and life events.

Wade was born in Hamilton, Ontario, but her paternal great-grandmother and grandmother—who were integral in her formative years—came to Canada from Danville, Virginia at the turn of the century as part of what is known as “The Great Migration,” a large-scale relocation of Black Americans from the Southern United States northwards. This migration was an attempt to escape racially motivated violence and systemic oppression in the American South and a response to the insatiable need for factory and service workers in the north’s growing industrial city-centres. Her early art education came courtesy of “The Black Church.” She then attended the Sir John A. MacDonald Comprehensive Arts High School followed by the Ontario College of Art, from which she graduated in 1976. A few years after that, Wade moved to the Northwest Coast—first Gibson’s Landing, then, in 1983, to Vancouver. Despite its size, the city boasted a robust independent art and music scene, within which she started making and exhibiting work as well as ephemeral artist editions.

Wade undertook residencies, research, and exhibitions in Cuba, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Haiti. She was one of two Canadian artists invited to present work at the 1st International Art Biennale in post-Apartheid South Africa (1995). Her 2021 show at the Vancouver Art Gallery, *Soul Power*, marked that institution’s first solo exhibition by a Black female artist.

From her position in western Canada, Wade continued to consider the diverse and transnational sources of her perspective and knowledge: “Much of my research has been focused on the socio-political symbols and practices of diasporic and African Slave Cultures ... My first aesthetic creative influence was the visual art and spiritual practice of Black People from the Southern USA ... nothing goes to waste ... everything has value or can be re-used ... Black culture ... art and music ... is full of a kind of necessary Eco-conscious aesthetic.”<sup>5</sup>



Jan Wade, *Memory Jug*, detail

Wade's work offers the patient and observant viewer her divinations. As an historian and artist she salvages the incidental fragments from our mass-media and material culture to fashion a gauge of our progress towards becoming the empathetic society that's required for our survival.



Jan Wade, *Memory Jug*, detail

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.appalachianhistory.net/2018/05/memory-jug.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> As told to author in conversation on August 28, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Artist text, "JanWade Memory Jugs and the Origins of Traditional Grave Art in African American Slave Cultures in the Southern United States," 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Artist biography, 2020.

### *Artist's statement*

I saw a photograph of a memory jug when I was quite young. Also photos of Black graves covered in shells and other gravesites ... long destroyed or moved with what seemed to me very ... intentional sculptural work ... that had both power and meaning. I was taken with their forms and the content of the objects and materials ... and at times the playfulness of their content.

Memory jugs held a particular fascination for me. Memory jugs had been found on early African American graves in the South. Some scholars believe their form was influenced by the Bakongo culture of central Africa by slaves brought to America through the slave trade.

Many slave burials included a ritual of placing the personal belongings of the dead on their grave ... the last objects used or touched when living (clothing, watch, favourite bowl or pipe, etc), objects owned by the deceased. These objects were believed to hold their energy and were meant to help direct that energy to the realm of the ancestors ... to prevent the spirits of the dead from lingering among the living. The older memory jug pieces may have held some of these objects on the vessel with mud or left plain.

Very early Black root religions kept traditions of their original lands and ancestors, such as the Bakongo belief that their spirit world was turned upside down and that they were connected to that world by waters. Some of their gravesites and jars and vessels were decorated with shells that would help them through this watery world to the afterlife and the home of their ancestors. The belief was that their spirit world started just beneath the mirror surface of water.

"The shells stand for the sea. The sea brought us, the sea shall take us back. So the shells upon our graves stand for water, the means of glory and the land of demise"

Bessie Jones

Quoted in *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, Robert F. Thompson

My memory jugs are an honouring of these traditions but also go beyond it to pure sculptural forms that serve a sociopolitical as well as spiritual function. I also use the cast-offs of society and follow a tradition of most Black Southern households ... nothing goes to waste. When I first started making what are now called my "assemblage pieces," I had no idea what that meant. I remembered some of the rare pieces of signage and works done in the community I was born into. I have always been influenced by a Black Southern cultural aesthetic ... but the African-American traditions of a sort of ... imposed eco-minded thrift and the necessity of wasting nothing was part of my upbringing ... saving everything and finding a reuse, a transitioning for everything, was in my DNA. Many of the old traditions from the South lingered in our lives and were included in church and family rituals.

The African American burial tradition included an open casket funeral and the kissing of the dead. The last funeral I went to in our A.M.E Church in Hamilton ... my beloved Uncle had died and I remember getting in the line with family to kiss him farewell. This tradition ... no longer practiced ... held an important lesson for me about life and death. I was a bit fearful ... but then ... I looked on my Uncles much-loved face and realized ... he was not there ... what I was looking at and saying farewell to was in fact ... A VESSEL ... THE SOUL ... the spirit that animated THE VESSEL

... was gone ... where had it gone ... into the infinite  
 . to the Ancestors ...

Early Southern slave cultures were said to view death as an important rite of passage rather than an end of life. It was necessary to observe this right of passage to the spirit world. Praising...calling out and singing (gospel) were part of ceremony.

I made this *Memory Jug* piece as part of a "Day of the Dead" festival for the Granville Island Cultural Society in 2016 (organized by Ari de la Mora and Barbara Chirinos). I had been thinking of making a piece for quite a while. I was impressed with the idea of being in a group exhibition that spoke of death from the view of artists from varying cultural backgrounds. I was particularly interested in working on a piece about BLACK LIVES MATTER and a movement that brought the deaths of Black people at the hands of authority to the forefront ... Not only the deaths

happening now in the light of modern technology, but the historical deaths of all those slaves and their generations, those that have struggled and died for hundreds of years to gain freedom and justice and died in the effort to attain this through the ages.

I am working on a whole series of "Memory Jugs" right now and I am learning so much about myself and the rituals of honoring and "Calling Out" ... in the time in the human realm. In these times in particular there is so much to explore and redefine ... transition ...

Jan Wade  
 2020

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