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Art in Review

Lorna Williams

'brown baby'

Dodge Gallery

15 Rivington Street, Lower East Side

Through Oct. 2

This uneven but lively exhibition of assemblages by Lorna Williams (born 1987; graduated last year from the Maryland Institute College of Art) feeds a suspicion that many youngsters are turning for inspiration to that funky, organic decade of the 1970s, when the idiosyncratic aesthetics of artists like Joseph Cornell, Betye Saar and Eva Hesse were ascendant.

Like a rural outsider artist, Ms. Williams mixes gnarly branches, roots and tree trunks, plumbing hardware, patterned paper, beads, feathers, doll parts, bones and lots more natural and non-natural stuff into pantheistic poetry. The biggest and most impressive efforts resemble arboreal spirits come to life in a magical forest at the edge of a junkyard. One over eight feet tall, called "birth right," has a peak-roofed wooden bird feeder for a head and is doing a stomping dance on twiggly legs and splayed feet. Another, "equiv.o.cal," looks at first just like a 12-foot-long tree branch; look again and it becomes a reclining, spread-legged female figure in erotic ecstasy.

In smaller, more compressed works it is less certain whether Ms. Williams is manipulating surrealistic and primitivist clichés or the reverse. But she has a personally urgent story to tell about sex, gestation and birth. In "crowning," the egg-shaped top of a small skull emerges from a nest of deep purple fur that fills an excavation in a multilobed slice of a big log. Maybe it is the artist herself emerging into the grown-up art world. Put her on your artists-under-25 watch list.

KEN JOHNSON

