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# Asheville artist's exhibit takes on history of slavery

## Asheville artist Linda Larsen's exhibit takes on history of slavery

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'Baptism' by Linda Larsen, 24 x 15 inches, monotype. / Ivana Larrosa / Special to the Citizen-Times

Written by Arnold Wengrow Citizen-Times correspondent

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When Asheville artist Linda Larsen began using seashells instead of humans as models in early 2010, something puzzling happened.

She had stopped working for awhile after an autumn 2009 solo show of figurative paintings. "I didn't know what do to, I didn't know what I wanted to do," she said. She decided to set up some still lifes with seashells collected from visits to Edisto Island, S.C.

"At least they don't move around like a model," she said.

Shells are complicated to draw and she used them to "get myself back in training again," she said. They were a neutral subject to experiment with the formal qualities of painting.

But portraits of African heads began appearing among the shells in what Larsen calls "a waking dream."

As she watched the heads evolve, she realized she was meditating on slavery.

"The heads and the shells on the beach are the presence I feel when I go to the beach," she said, "especially the Charleston area, where a profitable slave trade took place."

As she painted, she was asking herself questions. What is it like to be separated from family and culture and forced into conditions not fit for an animal? What would it be like to be denied education and access to the privileges that I take for granted?

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'My Inheritance' by Linda Larsen, 19 by 14 inches, oil on canvas. / Ivana Larrosa / Special to the Citizen-Times

"In a broad sense we are all in bondage to enslaved ways of thinking and reacting," Larsen said, "and maybe this is our common humanity. But none of us white people were actually physically enslaved, and that's a big difference and something I wanted to better understand."

Larsen's three-year meditation and questioning is now coming together in a new set of paintings she calls "Sights Unseen." The exhibition opens Saturday at the Flood Gallery Fine Arts Center in the River Arts District.

### Opening a conversation about race

Larsen acknowledges she was uncomfortable as a white artist responding to the experience of black people. She took some of the images she had started to her friend Deborah "Dee" James, a professor of literature and language at UNC Asheville. She had taken a seminar on Toni Morrison with James in 2004.

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**What:** "Sights Unseen," an exhibition of 35 new paintings and monotypes by Linda Larsen, with selected

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**Asheville writer Arnold Wengrow is a contributing editor of Theatre Design and Technology magazine.**

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