

After debate about aesthetics and politics, Anacostia artwork is removed



A reflection shows people walking by a storefront window at the 1200 block of Good Hope Road SE where artist Abigail DeVille's controversial "New Migration" installation is located. (Lucian Perkins/For The Washington Post)

At 1205 Good Hope Rd. SE, piles of beat-up, old tires fill the vacant building's display window. Bits of dead leaves and broken glass carpet the floor. The disembodied limbs of a science-class skeleton poke eerily out from the mess, the plastic fingers grasping at nothing.

Is it brilliant social commentary? Or is it just junk?

According to the District's Department of Fire and Emergency Medical Services, it doesn't matter: The display, which is one half of a controversial public art installation, is a safety hazard. It will be removed Monday.

The announcement, which came this past Wednesday, is the latest chapter in the weeks-long saga of "The New Migration," a pair of storefront works designed by Bronx-born and Yale-educated artist **Abigail DeVille**. Installed as part of the citywide "5x5" public art project and orchestrated by the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities, **DeVille's** piece is intended to represent the dual challenges of gentrification and urban decay.

But to Anacostia residents walking past the installation Saturday afternoon, the collection of debris sends an entirely different message.

"It's making Southeast look bad," says Andrea Teku, a Ward 8 native. "They're trying to fix up this block, and this is just making it worse."

The debate has ping-ponged back and forth for nearly a month: **DeVille's** work was installed with fanfare and a community parade organized by the artist but soon drew criticism in the form of telephone complaints, messages scrawled on a protest sheet posted on the window and several outraged proclamations from Ward 8 council member Marion Barry, who called the work "despicable."

In a neighborhood that has long been a byword for urban neglect, the debris-filled storefronts seem to many like an affront. That stretch of Good Hope Road is pocked with a number of cracked and boarded-up windows — even the two Department of Housing and Community Development-owned buildings where "The New Migration" was installed usually are empty. Only in Anacostia, residents thought, would the city fill a window with trash and call it art.

"I don't see something like that up in Georgetown," says Kim Brown, shaking her head.

On Sept. 12, the Commission on Arts and Humanities announced that it would uninstall the piece, but by the next week the commission reversed course. After hearing more messages of support, the commission decided that "it would be inconsistent with our mission" to take down the work, Lionell Thomas, the commission's executive director, wrote in a statement at the time.

Instead, the commission added "additional narrative," or explanatory posters, to each of the storefronts. The small print clarifies that **DeVille's** work is modeled after Jacob Lawrence's painting series "The Migration" (on display at the Phillips Collection), which depicts the early-20th-century exodus of African Americans from the segregated South to Northern cities. The objects in the Good Hope Road displays, collected during a journey **DeVille** took in the reverse direction of the exodus, are intended to illustrate that the opposite is happening now: Redevelopment is uprooting urban black communities, forcing those residents to move elsewhere.

Loretta Wright, a Southeast resident who has walked past "The New Migration" numerous times, never noticed the poster until it was pointed out to her. After scanning the two-paragraph explanation, she reconsiders the collection of tires and debris.

"At first I thought somebody had just dumped something," she says. "But it's creative, letting people know what's really going on." Now that she's read the story, Wright is disappointed that the work is going to be taken down. If the arts commission had done a better job of explaining **DeVille's** message, she wonders, might her neighbors have seen the piece differently as well? Brown, who has also heard the artist's interpretation, doesn't think so. "I think [the explanation] makes it even more sad," she says. The Monday-morning removal of the installation is a disappointing end for Thomas and **DeVille**, who, like Wright, think the work's message might have resonated with Anacostia residents had it not been lost in translation. For Barry (D), though, the removal is a victory. After trying for weeks to get the arts commission and Department of Housing and Community Development to have the work uninstalled, he had asked the District's fire department to look into the display early last week. Though it's not clear whether his complaint is the one that prompted the fire department's investigation, Barry took some credit for the decision in a statement released Thursday. "I am determined to have this eyesore removed once and for all," Barry said.