

THE
DIRTY SOUTH

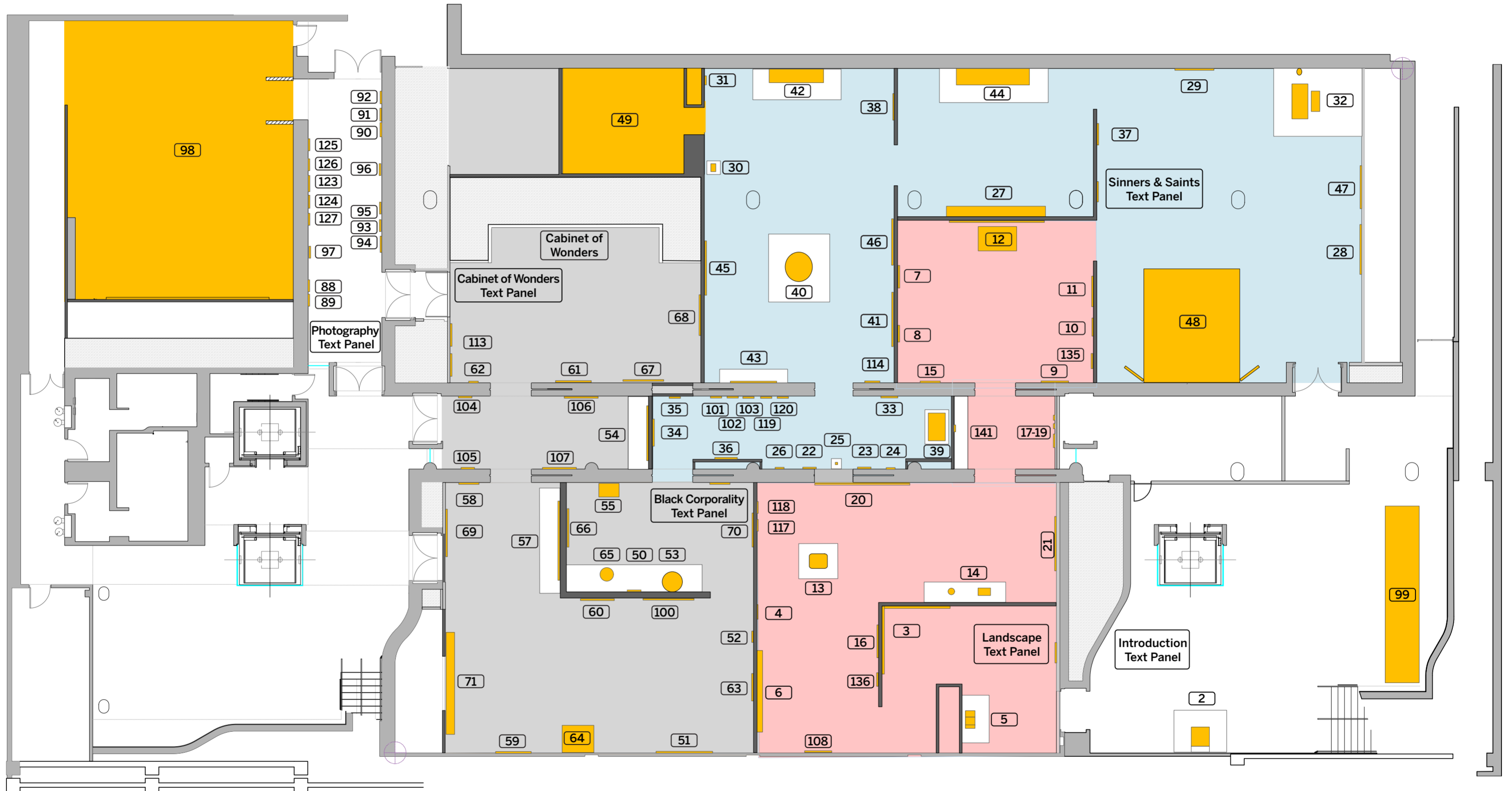
**Contemporary Art, Material Culture,
and the Sonic Impulse**

Large Text Guide

VMFA

VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

The Dirty South Floor Plan



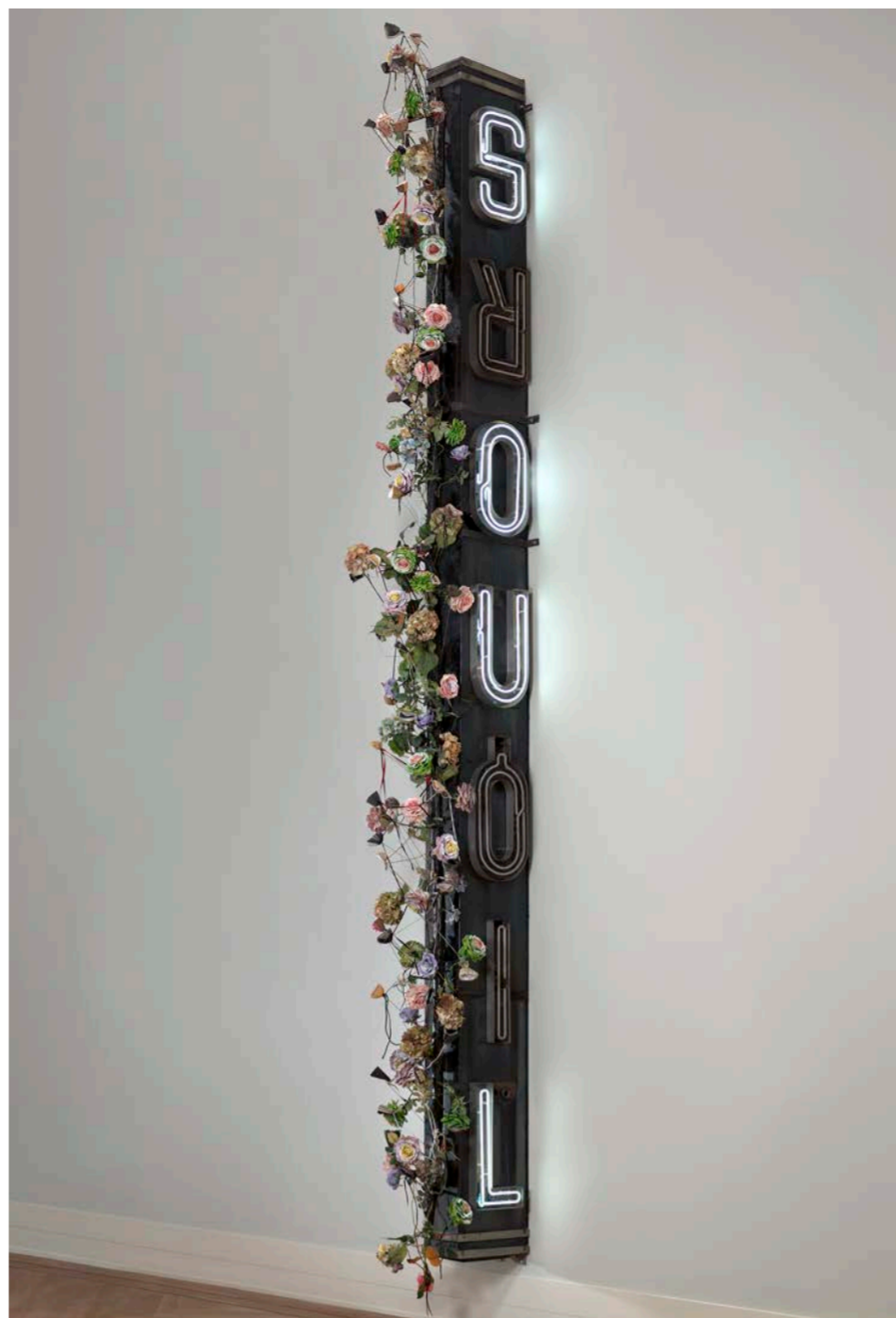
Introduction Text Panel

In the 1980s, the musical genre of hip-hop became for many the language of the voiceless, echoing from New York to Los Angeles. However, musicians of the South were not a recognized force in the movement until the mid-1990s, notably after the clarion call by André 3000 of the Atlanta-based duo OutKast, who proclaimed that the South had something to say. The assertion shone a light into a rich centuries-old repository of aesthetic traditions rooted in the fraught history of this nation. While the expression “Dirty South” is codified within the culture of southern hip-hop music, it encompasses a much broader understanding of the geography, history, and culture of the Black South. The Dirty South exhibition explores the traditions, aesthetic impulses, and exchanges between the visual and sonic arts over the last century.

The featured works cross generations, genres, and disciplines, illuminating the historical roots and expansive narratives that frame the Black experience, both past and present. Yet, common themes emerge from these disparate sonic and visual expressions. They speak collectively of the forces that have shaped and sustained Black communities and cultures throughout the decades: the refuge of landscape—natural and man-made; an enduring system of beliefs and philosophies foundational to both sacred and secular thought; and the Black body itself.

The African American South is testament to both the persistence and regenerative strength of tradition; the evolution of its musical and visual output, guided by both academically trained artists and other aesthetically astute artists whose creative vision was honed through family and community experiences, stands as proof. The rich exchange between these disciplines has helped foster an understanding of the South as a place where troubled and complex histories continue to dog society into the present even as it has allowed room, under unyielding persistence, for Black bodies to not simply survive but thrive.

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Nari Ward

American, born Jamaica, 1963

Xquisite Liquorsoul, 2009

Metal and neon sign, wood with artificial flowers, shoelaces, shoe tips

Nari Ward addresses themes of culture, history, consumerism, and gentrification in his monumental assemblages. By transforming found everyday items and detritus into complex three-dimensional compositions, he creates works laden with symbolism. Ward constructed *Xquisite Liquorsoul* as part of a series of neon-sign works that chronicle the gentrification of his own neighborhood. The letters of the original “LIQUOR” sign are creatively inverted and illuminated to spell out “SOUL”—a wordplay that also references the prevalence of churches and liquor stores in Black communities like his. Ward’s addition of remnants collected from the sign’s former site—discarded shoes, shoelaces, and plastic flowers—suggests the work as a memento or memorial for what has been lost.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Aldine S. Hartman Endowment Fund, Eric and Jeanette Lipman Fund, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2019.283a-b

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Paul Stephen Benjamin
American, born 1966

Summer Breeze, 2018

Three-channel video, color, sound; runtime 20 min.

Paul Stephen Benjamin continually poses contemplative questions regarding Black culture and history in his work. His layered installations often incorporate historical footage that links past and present, challenging us to consider such questions through a historical lens. In *Summer Breeze*, Benjamin juxtaposes footage of Billie Holiday's 1939 rendition of "Strange Fruit" with Jill Scott's 2015 version. Written by Abel Meeropol in 1937, the song's lyrics likened "black bodies swinging" to fruits hanging from trees, exposing a wide public to the acts of lynching committed in the American South. Benjamin plays up the incongruity of the song's familiarity and its abject horror with the continuous imagery of a child wistfully swinging on a swing.

Courtesy of the artist, Paul Stephen Benjamin

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Text Panel

Landscape

The topography of the South, with its varied flora, forests and woods, swamps and marshes, sand hills and iron-ore earth, provides an almost mythical backdrop to the works featured in this section. For over a hundred years, African American artists have contemplated the physical landscape to understand their culture as deeply rooted but ever evolving. So too has the built environment underscored not only the presence of Black bodies in the South but also the histories, encounters, and aspirations of collective and individual Black lives. Selfhood is literally embedded in both the vernacular structures and the natural landscape that they punctuate. Through the cultural remnants left behind—ruins of “shotgun” shacks or traces of a once-thriving rural community—the persistence of life is unmistakable. As such, the landscape functions as preserver and protector in the long narrative arc of the African American South—from a site of trauma and labor to a wellspring of life, beauty, spiritual thought, and creative expression. The present even as it has allowed room, under unyielding persistence, for Black bodies to not simply survive but thrive.



Beverly Buchanan
American, 1940–2015

Untitled (*Frustula* series), ca. 1978

Concrete

Beverly Buchanan conceived of her *Frustula* series as commemorative markers for little-known events and Black acts of resistance that took the rural South. Her cast-concrete sculptures, which recall the ruins of the southern landscape, exemplify art's ability to convey the history of desecration and perseverance, decay and permanence, as well as survival with minimal gestures. Among the vanguards of her time, Buchanan explored how consciousness of place, history, and landscape speak to the wider concerns of displacement and how we memorialize the past.

Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Arden Scott, 2017, 2017.9a-c



Allison Janae Hamilton

American, born 1984

Wacissa, 2019

Single-channel video

In this haunting and visceral video, Allison Janae Hamilton underscores the South's precarious nature wrought by both its troubled history and the possibility of future promise. Her work operates through the abstracted visual sequence of moving images that both frame and disorient. Created by submerging and then dragging a video camera in waters of the Wacissa River, Hamilton plays with imagery shifts above and below the waterline, as if capturing histories seen and unseen, in particular the river as a conduit to the capitalism of Black enslavement. The Wacissa is part of Florida's Slave Canal, named for the enslaved workers who toiled in the swamp-like waters to dig miles of navigable channels. The system of canals was intended to transport the products of the demanding cotton industry that enslaved labor also maintained. More recently, it has served to ferry chemical runoff from the turpentine factories that once dotted the area. While keenly aware of its brutal histories, Hamilton remains optimistic that the resilience of the land will mirror the persistence of those whose ghosts still inhabit its shores.

Collection of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen

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RaMell Ross

American, born 1982

Caspera, 2019

Archival pigment print

Through the medium of photography and film, RaMell Ross quietly seeks to untangle the myth of blackness that is at the root of much southern lore. After moving to Hale County, Alabama, in 2009, Ross began taking photographs of people, objects, and the landscape that surrounded him as a way to investigate the relationship of the region to the Black body, particularly his own, as a Black man. In *Caspera*, he has incorporated recognizable signifiers of the “Historic South,” such as the dusty, bare feet of a presumably young Black child standing in the dried mud of a largely desolate environment. The mysterious figure is hidden by a black shroud and stands upon fertile soil mixed with iron-rich clay, another integral element of this area, which made it an ideal spot for growing cotton. Through his work, Ross attempts to develop new aesthetic frameworks that offer an alternative lens by which to see the communities of the African American South.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, National Endowment for the Arts Fund for American Art, MC2020.56

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Nathaniel Donnett

American, birthdate unspecified

“I looked over Jordan and what did I see; a band of angels coming after me,”

2017

Fluorescent light, wood, roofing shingles, machete, glass, acrylic paint

When referring to his installations, Donnett has said, “It’s do-it-yourself. It comes from my roots in music, hip-hop, and a little bit of the punk rock generation.” He counsels, “You have [to use] the minimal amount of things to say a lot.” The title of this work takes its name from the African American spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” The sculpture’s form suggests the side of the iconic “shotgun” house from which emanates a violet-blue glow. Shotgun houses are an African-derived architectural form popular particularly in southern African American communities before and after the Civil War. Two windows are visible—one half-boarded up as if in disrepair and the other framing an old machete, the kind of tool used in sugarcane fields. In its totality, the sculpture emanates the history of Black presence in the South and the expression that comes from labor, aspiration, and hope.

Courtesy of the artist

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Mildred Thompson
American, 1936–2003

Wood Picture, ca. 1965

Found wood

Mildred Thompson began experimenting with the elasticity of painting as early as the late 1950s. Her series *Wood Pictures* expanded ideas around the general practice of painting but also the specific genre of landscape painting. Working with pieces of found wood, Thompson combined and assembled wooden fragments, using each piece as a gesture of the brush. Drawing upon her material's natural grain, she punctuated the picture frame with her compositions that placed one grain strategically against the other. Her work also comments on the notion of place, with each piece of wood representative not only of its original source but also its connectedness to the larger whole. Thompson's view on life was metaphysical, and she drew upon the principles of interconnectedness throughout her practice.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2019.2

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Aaron Douglas
American, 1899–1979

Untitled, 1934

Gouache on paper

Collection of Eric Key

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Alma Thomas
American, 1891–1978

Red Rambling Rose Spring Song, 1976

Acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

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Nick Cave

American, born 1959

Soundsuit, 2010

Mixed media including twigs, synthetic berries, metal, and mannequin

“How do I exist in a place that sees me as a threat?” This was the question artist Nick Cave asked himself following the Rodney King incident in 1992. As an artist, Cave was seeking a way to express the profound sense of vulnerability he felt as a Black man. While contemplating the significance of identity in the park one day, he began to collect fallen sticks and twigs on the ground, associating these cast-offs with his own feelings of devaluation and marginalization as a Black man. Eventually, Cave assembled a full-body costume from these materials and discovered that,

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when worn, it also became a musical instrument.

A blend of color, noise, and texture, these wearable sculptures have been arranged in static displays and donned for performance (Cave is also trained in dance and a former member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater). In layering elements of motion, sound, and human interaction, Cave underscores the process of inanimate forms brought to life. Initially, the Soundsuits were meant to serve as a metaphorical form of a talisman and protective armor—obscuring the wearer’s race, class, and gender to protect them from bias.

Private Collection. Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



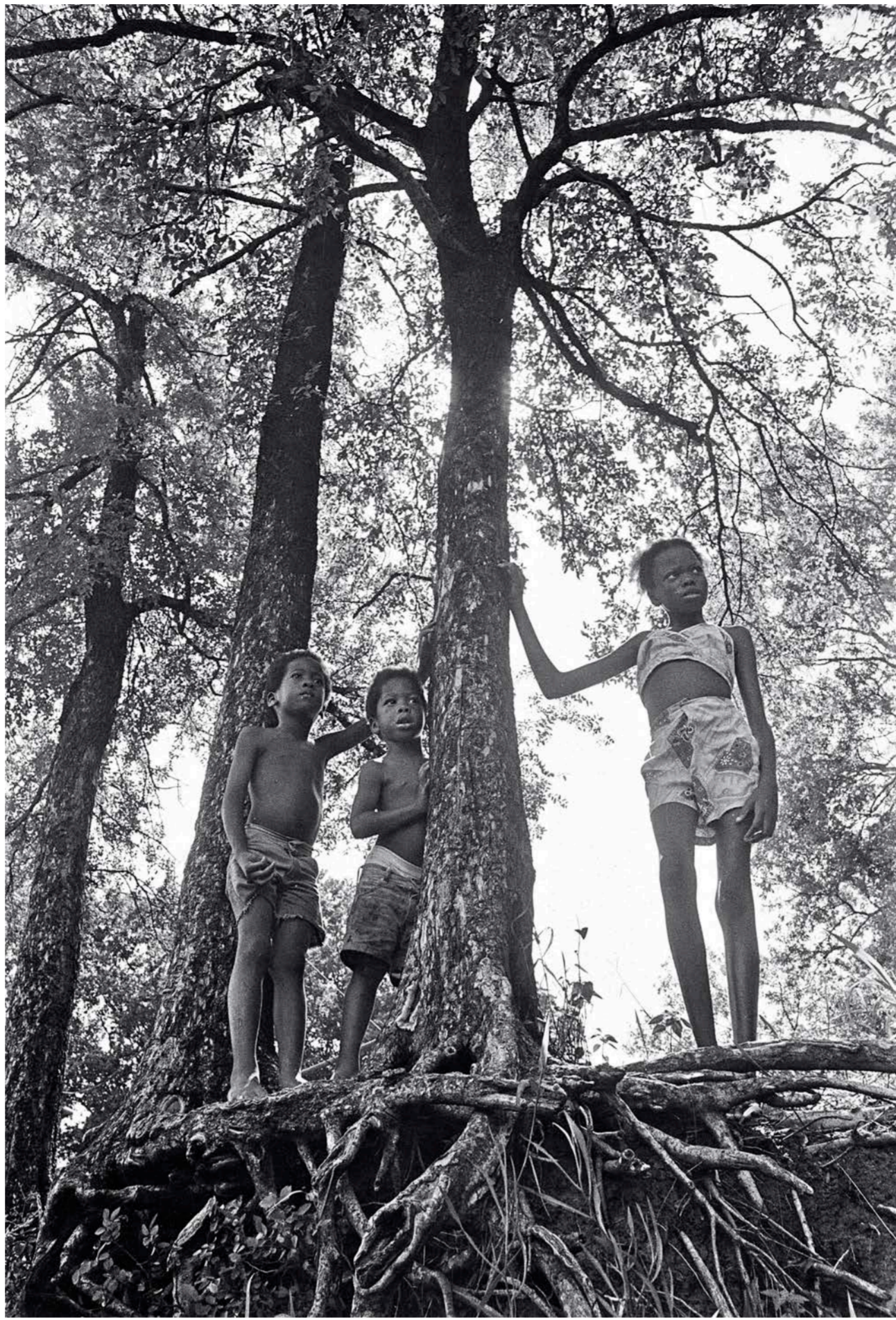
Earlie Hudnall, Jr.
American, born 1946

Flipping Boy, 4th Ward, Houston, TX, 1983

Gelatin silver print

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Kathleen Boone Samuels Memorial Fund, 2013.183

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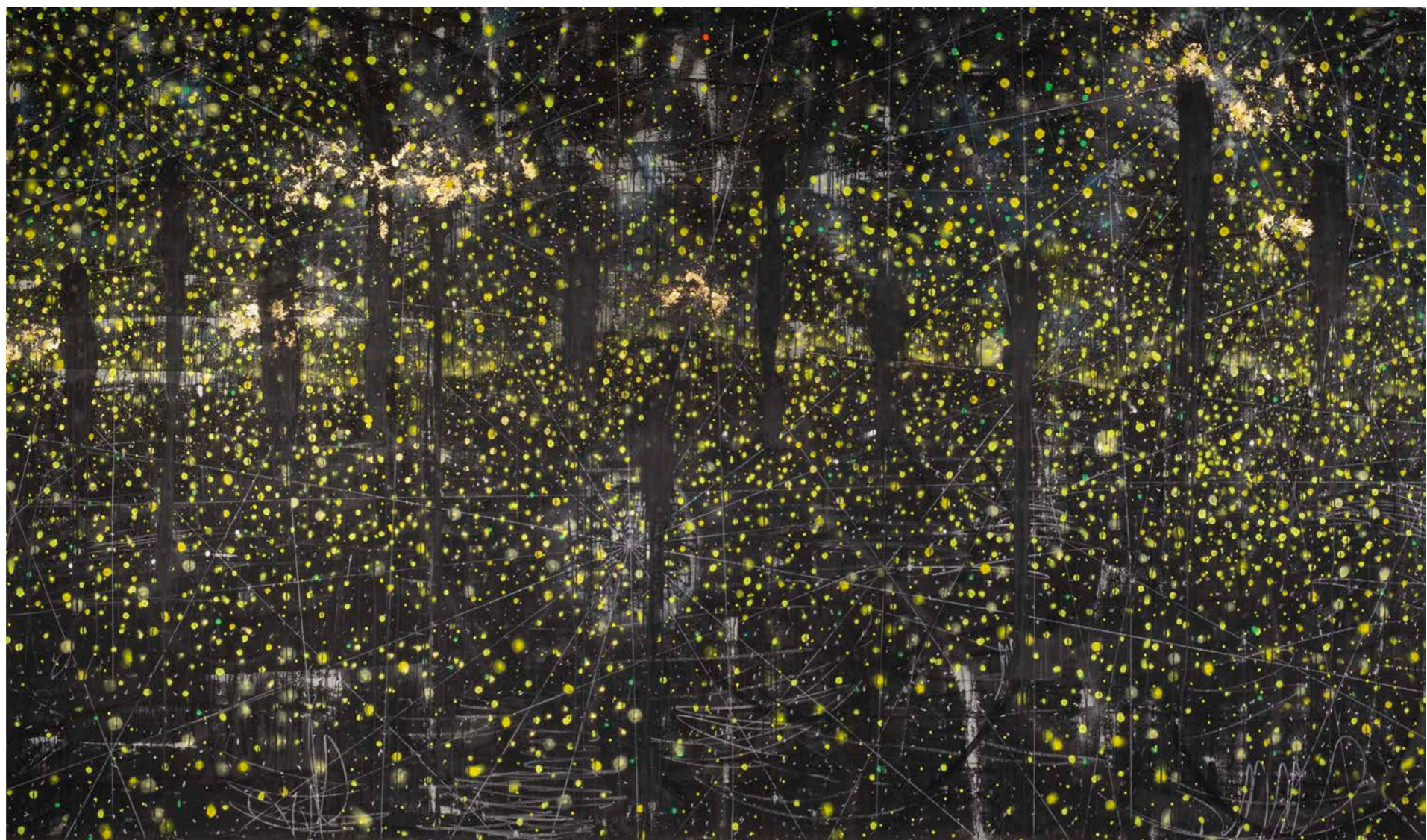
Earlie Hudnall, Jr.
American, born 1946

Roots, 1997

Gelatin silver print

Courtesy of the artist and Photographs Do Not Bend Gallery

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Michi Meko

American, born 1974

The Seasons—Summer, 2019

Acrylic, aerosol, graphite, gold leaf, latex, oil pastel

“I always, in some ways, try to make a connection with land, but in some ways you feel detached from it. Because a lot of spaces, especially wilderness spaces, don’t seem that inviting to black bodies.” —Micho Meko

Atlanta-based artist Michi Meko is an avid fisherman and camper. As an artist, he draws upon his deep connection to nature in his practice. His works frequently address Black bodies within nature and the wilderness, and his use of the color black extends toward the complex framing of race. Created as part of a series representing the four seasons, *Summer* captures a southern summer-night sky illuminated by lightning bugs. Meko explores the use of materials and attempts to eliminate the brush. In this case, the lightning bugs were applied in a rhythmic fashion directly from the paint tube.

Courtesy Michi Meko; Alan Avery Art Company

Image © Alan Avery Art Company/Michi Meko

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Kevin Sipp

American, born 1966

Take It To The Bridge/Trance-Atlantic, 2009

Mixed media including found wood, turntable, and vessel

Kevin Sipp is part of a group of Atlanta-based artists whose work delves deeply into the complexity of Black culture. Sipp's art addresses the transcendent consciousness of Africa and the African Diaspora, often incorporating themes of historical and contemporary musical forms and their connections to one another.

“Take it to the bridge,” a soulful directive often heard during performances of James Brown, refers to a passage of music that links two parts of a song. Within the framework of James Brown's music, however, we look to connect the soul of the genre with the larger repository of musical traditions of the South. Music has historically been (and still is) essential to the African American experience—often as a restorative translation of life's hardships or as a balm for such hardships.

In this work, a long, gnarled tree branch connects a wooden vessel (traditional West African drum?) to a turntable. Trees and branches are common symbols of

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family structures as well as connections to the earth and the spiritual world. While turntables have been used by many hip-hop DJs since the late 1970s, the soul of hip-hop is born from the musical traditions that take root in the southern landscape.

Courtesy of Clark Atlanta University Art Museum, 2009.004

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Demetrius Oliver
American, born 1975

Nomadic, 2005–6

Digital projection

“My interest in cosmology is related to my understanding of Transcendentalism.” —Demetrius Oliver

Demetrius Oliver’s large-scale digital projection, which explores cosmology, is heavily influenced by the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Here, buttons sewn onto the back of a dark sports coat transform it into a starry sky. As a meditation upon the nomadic imagery, Oliver draws from the perceptions of bodies moving through the landscape. A native of Florida, he also considers the region’s history and the restrictive movement of Black bodies or, conversely, their resistance to enslavement by stealing away under the cover of darkness. His work evokes thoughts of Black liberation, whether through a meditative spiritual practice or escape.

Courtesy of the artist

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T. J. Dedeaux-Norris
American, born 1979

Ted's Place, 2014

Found fabric, found yarn, finger-crocheted yarn, thread, blue painter's tape,
found fiber from artist's studio in the Upper 9th Ward, New Orleans, page from
PawPaw and Grandma Nutsie's road atlas

Collection of the artist



Minnie Evans
American, 1892–1987

LEFT TO RIGHT

Untitled, ca. 1946–68

Pencil, ink, crayon, and oil on paperboard

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, purchase through funds provided by an anonymous donor to Collectors Evening 2011, 2011.4

Three Faces Surmounting Landscape, 1969

Crayon and pencil on paper

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, T. Marshall Hahn Collection, 1997.68

Untitled (Face Surrounded by Foliage), mid-20th century

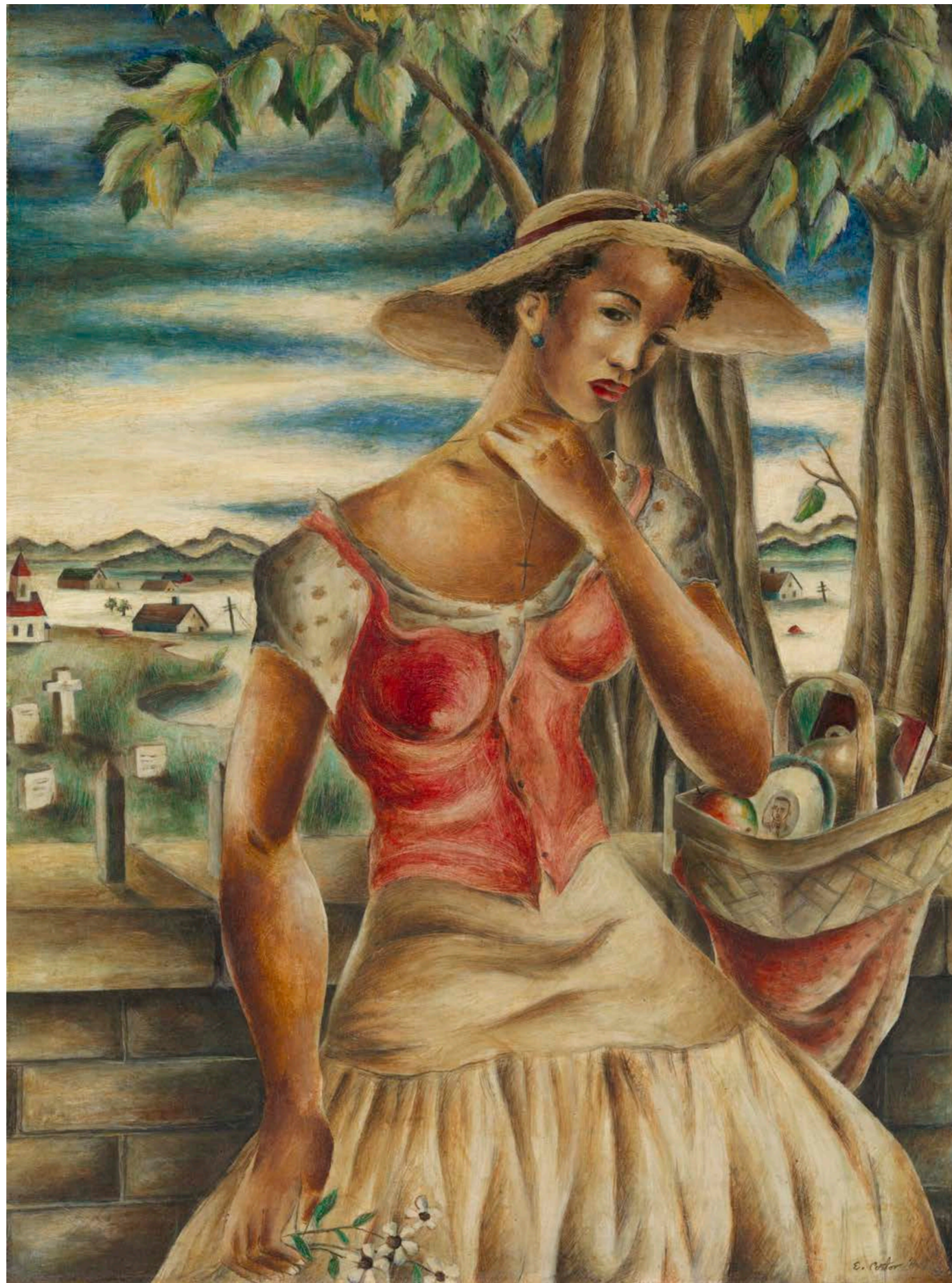
Crayon, ink, and graphite on paper

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, T. Marshall Hahn Collection, 1997.69

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“I never plan a drawing, they just happen. In a dream it was shown to me what I have to do, of paintings. The whole entire horizon all the way across the whole earth was out together like this with pictures. All over my yard, up all the sides of trees and everywhere were pictures.” —Minnie Evans

Minnie Evans came to drawing later in life, when at forty-three she heard a voice that told her she must “draw, or die.” The sacred and secular combine in her envisioned worlds, where God, people, and nature merge. Evans was deeply influenced by the physical world around her, especially the lush, natural landscape of Airlie Gardens in Wilmington, North Carolina, where she was employed as a gatekeeper. She often painted while at work and was able to display and sell some of her art to visitors. Although she included real-life imagery in her works, Evans’s overall composition is layered with otherworldly motifs such as disembodied eyes that suggest the presence of the divine.



Eldzier Cortor
American, 1916–2015

Southern Landscape, 1941

Oil on Masonite

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2016.2

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William H. Johnson
American, 1901–1970

House Sun Tree (Landscape with Sun Setting, SC), n.d.

Oil on canvas

Swirling waves of color and thick, textured brushstrokes, along with a radiating sun, animate this vibrant landscape. Painted during a visit home to Florence, South Carolina, *House Sun Tree* likely shows the site of the Johnson family residence in 1930. The painting marks a turning point in the artist's career as he began to assert and cultivate his African American roots. While this expressive rendering of a nondescript street scene recalls Johnson's academic training in expressionism as a young man, it also denotes a major shift in his subject matter—a focus on telling the story of the Black experience.

The work is on loan from the Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and Howard University reserves all rights with respect to the work

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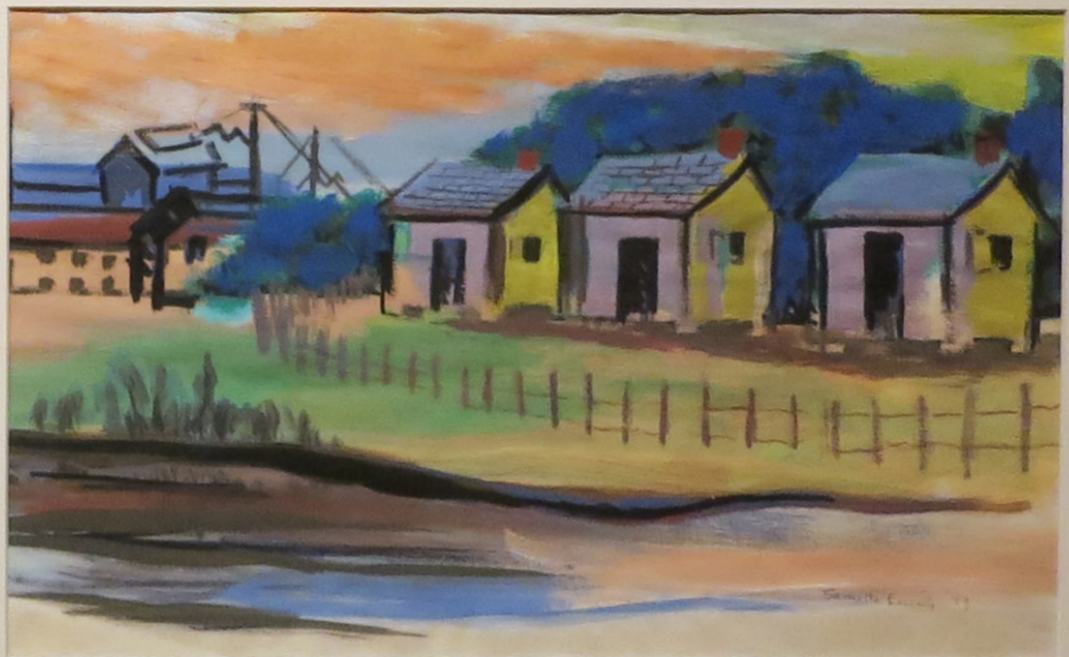
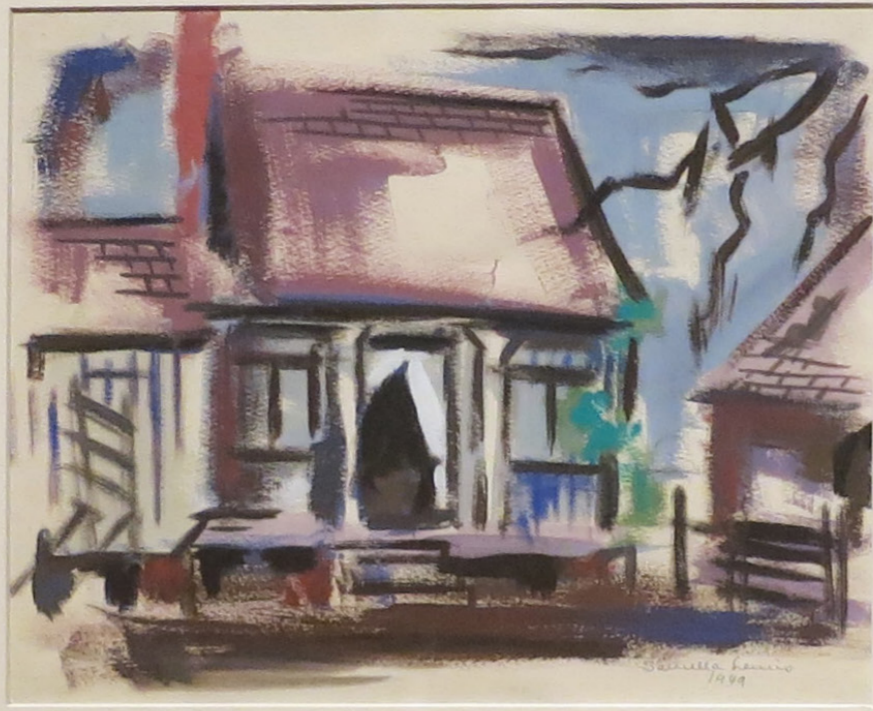


John Biggers
American, 1924–2001

Four Seasons, 1990

Colored lithograph on paper

Gibbes Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, 1994.017



Samella Lewis
American, born 1924

Plantation Houses, ca. 1949

Acrylic on paper

Collection of Eric Key

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Kaneem Smith

American, born 1973

The Past is Perpetual/Weighted Fleet, 2012

Reclaimed cotton bale, vintage iron hanging scales, bailing wire, wood palette

In this thought-provoking installation, fiber artist and sculptor Kaneem Smith investigates the nature of material to evoke dialogue. Smith carefully chooses materials that are often imbued with cultural memory, historical resonance, and significant meaning—such as cotton. A large, rectangular cotton bale is framed by iron weights and flanked by rows of old iron hanging scales. As a historical commodity of the South, cotton often evokes visceral reactions through its associations with the enslavement and disenfranchised labor of African Americans. The scale weights, placed so centrally, call to mind various themes from trade to justice. All combined, these objects are sculptural investigations of the many facets of the human condition such as overindulgence and exploitation but also strength, resilience, and spiritual renewal.

Courtesy of the artist and Nicole Longnecker Gallery, Houston, TX

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Clementine Hunter
American, 1886–1988

Melrose Plantation, ca. early 1960s–88

Oil on Masonite

New Orleans Museum of Art, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Robert F. Ryan, 73.205

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Bill Traylor

American, ca. 1853–1949

Dance, n.d.

Graphite, colored pencil, and paint on machine-made, wove paper

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of BK Fulton and Jackie Stone, MC.XXXX



Bill Traylor

American, ca. 1853–1949

Nothin' to Somethin' Freedom, n.d.

Graphite, colored pencil, and paint on machine-made, wove paper

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of BK Fulton and Jackie Stone, MC.XXXX

Text Panel

Sinners and Saints

This section explores the belief systems that have emerged from this country's unique mixing of cultures, particularly West African, European, and Indigenous American spiritual traditions. Drawing upon the harsh realities of enslavement, the mysticism of the landscape, the endurance of African traditions, and the Christian belief systems superimposed upon them, spirituality in the African American South grew into an expansive and complex constellation of thought. Its manifestation ranges from spiritual "sightedness" and visions to "doubling," an understanding of the duality of self (possessing both a physical and spiritual incarnation). This sightedness underscores a liminal or intermediate space where the physical and spiritual worlds connect. Operating in both the secular and sacred realms, expressive transference is one of the hallmarks of Black spirituality—infusing a static object with spiritual embodiment or supernatural energy for protection and empowerment. In syncretic religious practices and in Christianity, aural or musical components have been integral throughout history, from the spiritual songs of old to the blues of Robert Johnson or the time-bending pulse of DJ Screw.



Jason Moran

American, born 1975

STAGED: Slugs' Saloon, 2018

Mixed media (wood, paint, jukebox player, cello, drum set, saw dust, construction hardware, wallpaper, Plexiglass mirror, tin, fabric, vintage outlet cover) and sound

Jazz is a recurring source of inspiration for many African American artists, but Jason Moran's innovative techniques engage with the material culture and history of jazz, exploring the intersections of visual and performing arts through stagecraft. *Slugs' Saloon* recalls the culture of "free jazz" that thrived in New York's East Village. A living remnant of jazz history, Moran's work incorporates physical artifacts and draws upon the architectural features of this historical jazz venue to simulate an experience from that past.

Moran's installation work also relies on "activation." The artist not only reconstructs sites, he also activates them through performance, essentially "calling down" the ancestors whose legacies he evokes through the work. During the course of the exhibition, Moran will perform an artistic invocation on the stage, a ritual of calling the ancestors and their expressive energy back to the physical plane of this site.

Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Commissioned by Walker Art Center, T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund 2018, 2018.14

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Emma Amos
American, 1938

The Heavens Rain, 1990

Acrylic on linen canvas with kanga and other African fabrics

Collection of the Newark Museum of Art, Purchase 1990 Eleanor S. Upton Bequest Fund and The Links, Inc., North Jersey Chapter, 90.3



Benny Andrews

American, 1930–2006

Revival Meeting, 1994

Oil and collage on canvas

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, purchase with funds from Alfred Austell Thornton in memory of Leila Austell Thornton and Albert Edward Thornton, Sr., and Sarah Miller Venable and William Hoyt Venable, 1995.1



Sonya Clark

American, born 1967

Til Earth and Heaven Ring, 2019

Player piano, piano roll made of Jason Moran's version of James Weldon Johnson's poem "Lift Every Voice and Sing," light, bronze cast reproduction of the Liberty Bell, artist's hair

Sonya Clark constructs works about history from the materials that speak to that history. Over the course of her career, she has explored the nature of material in the hands of the artist and the embodiment of the self in art. In this multimedia work, Clark extends this meditation in a collaboration with visual artist and jazz musician Jason Moran.

The player piano plays "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (embraced as the Black American national anthem) by emitting light through punched holes that correspond to notes created by Moran. Installed on a nearby wall hangs a small replica of the Liberty Bell; but instead of a typical metal clapper, it contains one that Clark constructed using her own hair. The concept emphasizes not only the muffling of the bell's sound but also the DNA-based subjugation tethered to the notion of "Liberty" at the very founding of this country.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund, by exchange, 2020.74a-c

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Romare Bearden
American, 1911–1988

Three Folk Musicians, 1967

Collage of various papers with paint and graphite on canvas

Three Folk Musicians, like much of Bearden's imagery in his collage work, re-creates an ordinary scene of African American life. The artist blends a wide range of Black cultural moments, from the personal to the collective, with a modernist aesthetic that fragments and abstracts. Bearden uses the collage technique, constructing fractured forms out of cut-and-reassembled materials, which results in flat and angular images.

In this composition, three musicians stand side by side, their different-sized features recall the polyrhythmic qualities of traditional African American music and visual art. This work pays homage to “the down-home music” of the African American South that has inspired so many visual and sonic artists.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2016.336



Palmer Hayden
American, 1890–1973

Untitled (Dreamer), ca. 1930

Oil on canvas

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 2016.234



Joe Overstreet

American, 1933–2019

Saint Expedite I, 1971

Acrylic on constructed canvas with metal grommets and cotton rope

Estate of the artist; Courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery

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Nadine Robinson

American, born England, 1968

Coronation Theme: Organon, 2008

Speakers, sound system, mixed media

Nadine Robinson's monumental sonic sculpture addresses complex narratives and historic moments through sound. Composed of thirty speakers, this sculpture is designed to mirror the facade of Atlanta's historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. served as co-pastor until his assassination in 1968. *Coronation Theme* was inspired by a 1963 Project C (Confrontation) demonstration in Birmingham, Alabama, during which nearly one thousand children and young adults were attacked by dogs and fire-hosed by police for peacefully protesting segregation. With this work, the artist produced a sonic portrait of the moment. The audio played through the sculpture is a composite of that iconic history and features choral music, sounds of water, and barking dogs as well as fragments of sermons, songs, prayers, and protests. The work notably includes a coronation anthem by German composer George Frideric Handel, which gives the piece its name.

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, given by John F. Wieland Jr. in memory of Marion Hill, 2008.175

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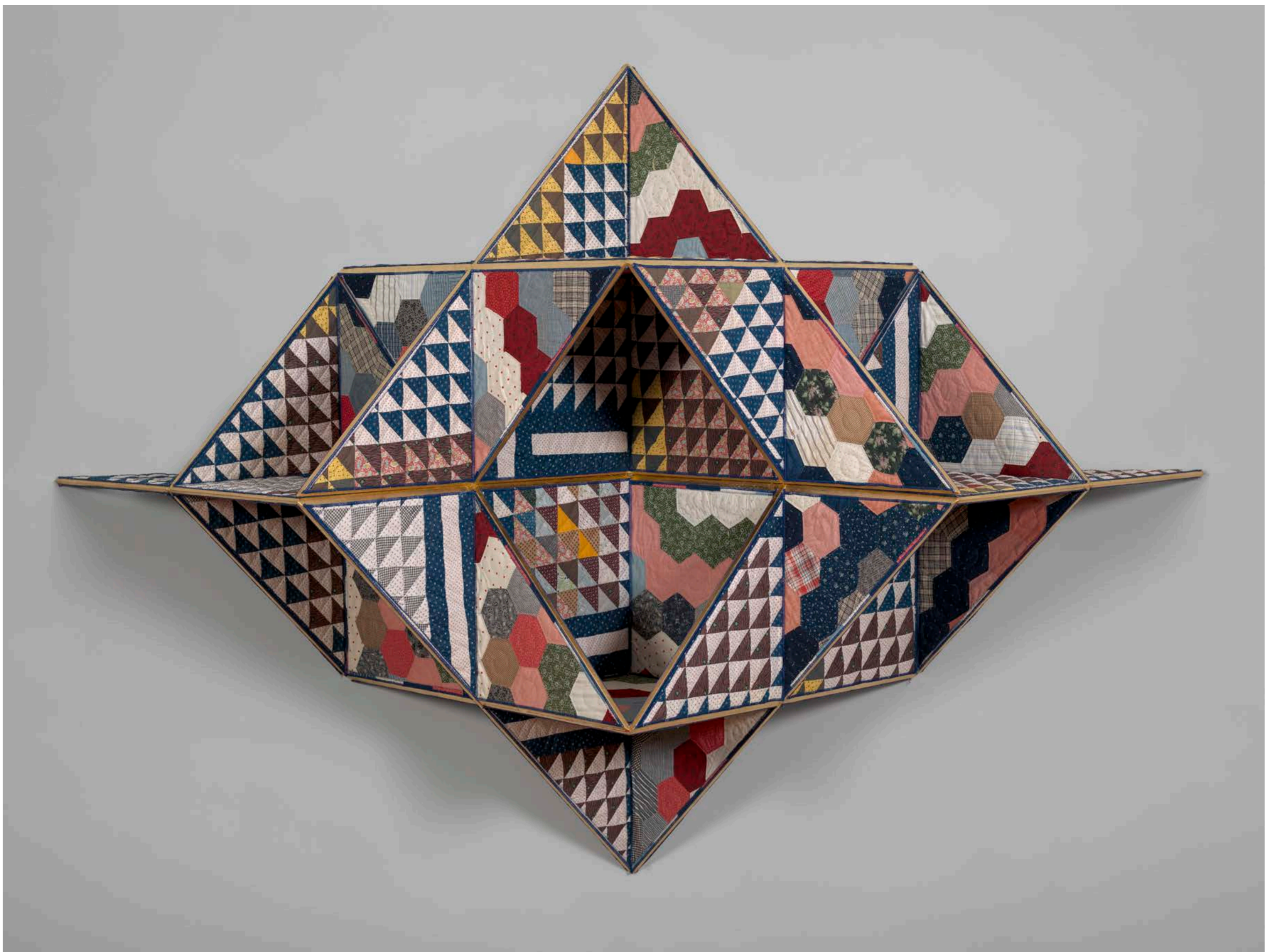
Purvis Young
American, 1943–2010

Angel of Freedom, ca. 1993–97

Painting on wood, Masonite, and metal

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Dr. Stephen Paul, 2020.249

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Sanford Biggers
American, born 1970

Khemestry, 2017

Antique quilt, birch plywood, gold leaf

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, National Endowment for the Arts
Fund for American Art, 2017.192a-b



Aaron Douglas
American, 1899–1979

Rise Shine, for Thy Light Has Come, 1927

Opaque watercolor and black ink on paperboard

The work is on loan from the Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC,
and Howard University reserves all rights with respect to the work



Rodney McMillian

American, born 1969

From Asterisks in Dockery, 2012

Vinyl, thread, wood, paint, lightbulb

This hand-sewn installation by Rodney McMillian re-creates the interior of a small, turn-of-the-century wooden chapel in the rural South. Although this space seems surreal, the title references an actual historic site—Dockery Farm in Mississippi—a former ten-thousand-acre cotton plantation, often referred to as the “birthplace of the blues.”

Viewers enter into a narrow space of a clapboard church stitched in vinyl. Every item is completely saturated in a deep-red hue, a color associated with blood, power and conjuring. By deconstructing the architecture of the church and reframing it through the secular lens, McMillian plays upon the conflation of ideologies that exists within the sacred and the profane. In the artist’s church, the blues become sacred, and its parishioners among them musicians like Charlie Patton and Robert Johnson—have knelt to spiritual power of its teachings.

Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles

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William Edmondson
American, 1874–1951

Angel, 1932–1938

Limestone

Spirituality and biblical narrative are the driving forces behind William Edmondson's sculptures. Working most of his life at labor-intensive jobs, he did not begin sculpting until after 1930 when he received a "divine calling" from God to take up the practice. Using discarded blocks of limestone and chisels fashioned from railroad spikes, he began sculpting memorials and grave markers, gradually moving on to more intricate depictions of animals and biblical figures, such as *Angel*.

Here, Edmondson has barely released this figure from the block of stone, emphasizing the coarse texture and heavy weight of the material—a stark contrast with the common conception of these light and delicate figures of the divine. Edmondson's motifs derived mostly from African American cemeteries and burial traditions. The cemetery is historically one of the few places where elements of Black identity could be asserted and maintained. A tombstone or grave marker, in a sense, becomes a grave offering.

Collection of the Newark Museum of Art, Bequest of Edmund L. Fuller, Jr. 1985,
85.30

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Kevin Beasley

American, born 1985

Untitled Slab (cotton island), 2018

Housedresses, kaftans, t-shirts, cotton, altered garments, winter slippers, fishing net, seashells, sea stones, coral, clothing line, polyurethane resin

Collection of Hedy Fischer and Randy Shull

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Rita Mae Pettway
American, born 1941

Housetop (Fractured Medallion), 1977

Corduroy

Rita Mae Pettway is a member of a group known today as the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective. The town of Gee's Bend, later named Boykin, is located southwest of Selma, Alabama. Because of its geographical isolation, many of the quilters in the enclave are direct descendants of the enslaved Africans who populated plantations in the area. The development of their unique aesthetic emerged from necessity: living in unheated quarters, they made quilts for warmth and utility. Sacred sensibilities are intertwined in Gee's Bend quilts, preserved from their ancestors brought to America as enslaved labor. In *Housetop (Fractured Medallion)*, named for the pattern, the push and pull of the lines are associated with "call and response," a cultural tradition use in language, music and religious worship that migrated through channels of the African Diaspora. With alternating colors, the two

sides of this quilt seem to call back and forth to one another. This pattern also creates a visual framework to trap evil, which was believed to travel in straight lines.

Drawing upon aesthetic legacies, creative vision, and patterns from the world around them, Black quilters have constructed some of the most iconic textiles of the American South.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund and partial gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2018.73



Thornton Dial
American, 1928–2016

Foundation of the World (A Dream of My Mother), 1994

Welded steel rods, tin, rope, carpet, rope-fiber wood, burlap, enamel, spray paint, industrial sealing compound

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund and partial gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2018.58



James Little

American, born 1952

Zulu Boogie-Woogie, 2012

Oil and wax on canvas

James Little found in abstraction, an artistic voice of self-determination and free will. Relying on form, composition, and color, his works demonstrate not only an openness to celebrating the history of the genre, but also a sense of individuality and personal expression. Little brings physicality to his paintings through a labor-intensive process. After mixing his own pigments, he adds heated beeswax to create an encaustic that is then poured methodically onto the canvas in several layers over the course of about three months. This laborious method results in a smooth, flowing finish and embraces what he describes as a “relationship to the medium.”

The shifting colors and undulating patterns in Little’s work are strongly informed by improvisation as well as traditional West African textile production. The title of

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this work reveals additional African influences, perhaps a subtle reminder that although formally abstract, his works still contemplate issues of race, African ancestry, and the systems of belief that imbue the static with supernatural aspects of movement.

Collection of the Newark Museum of Art, Purchase 2013 Alberto Burri Memorial Fund established by Stanley J. Seeger, 2013.8

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Sam Gilliam

American, born 1933

Purpled, from the series *Chasers*, 1980

Acrylic on canvas

The art of Sam Gilliam is a pure expression of his pioneering and defiant spirit. For Gilliam, experimentation is the only consistent element throughout his artistic career, resulting in a body of work that presents an ongoing exploration of paint, texture, and shape. Like artist James Little, Gilliam is fascinated with the physicality of painting. In this work, Gilliam blurs the line between painting and sculpture. He draws upon the African American quilt pattern “Flying Geese” and repositions from within a modernist visual language. Like the work of African American quilters, Gilliam’s *Purpled* emphasizes this concept of capturing the expressive within the static form.

As an artist working in abstraction, Gilliam has defied the categorization. While aligned with Washington Color Field, the artist has embraced chance, experimenta-

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tion and African American traditions in this work. Gilliam would be aware of quilts from his upbringing in Kentucky. The irregular geometry, asymmetrical designs, and segmented patchwork harkens to improvisation found in both music and the visual arts. Gilliam's use of shifting textures and pops of bright color, outlined by an uneven edge, creates tension in the work found in the quilt pattern he references.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of an Anonymous Donor, 86.1



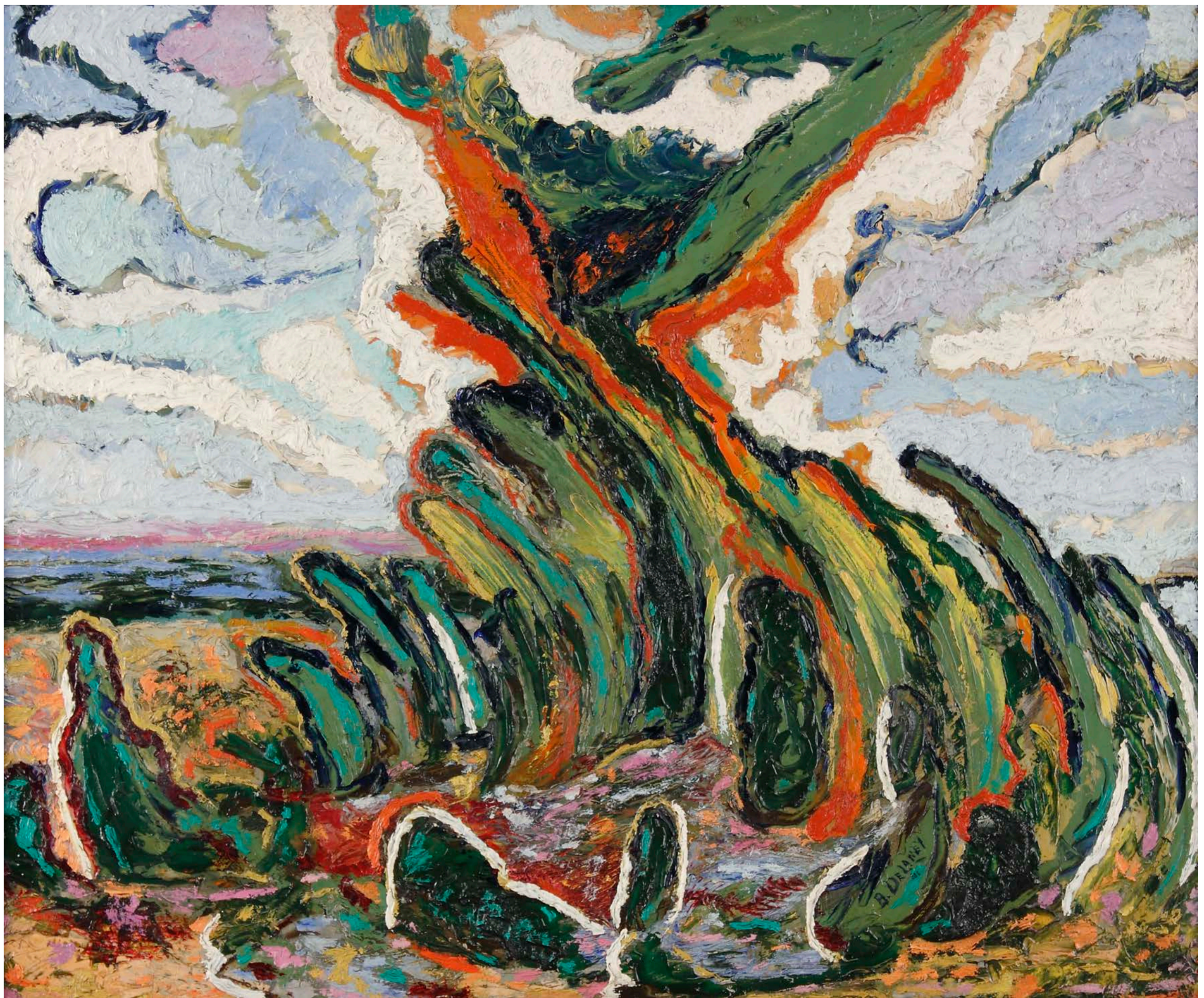
Mose Tolliver

American, ca. 1920–2006

Crucifixion (Blue Jesus), 1990

Polychrome wood

William and Ann Oppenheimer Collection



Beauford Delaney
American, 1901–1979

Burning Bush, 1941

Oil on paperboard

Collection of the Newark Museum of Art, Purchase by Exchange, 1988. Gift of Emilie Coles from the J. Akerman Coles Collection, Mrs. Lewis Ballantyne and the Bequest of Louis Bamberger, 88.225

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Renee Stout

American, born 1958

She Kept Her Conjuring Table Very Neat, 1990

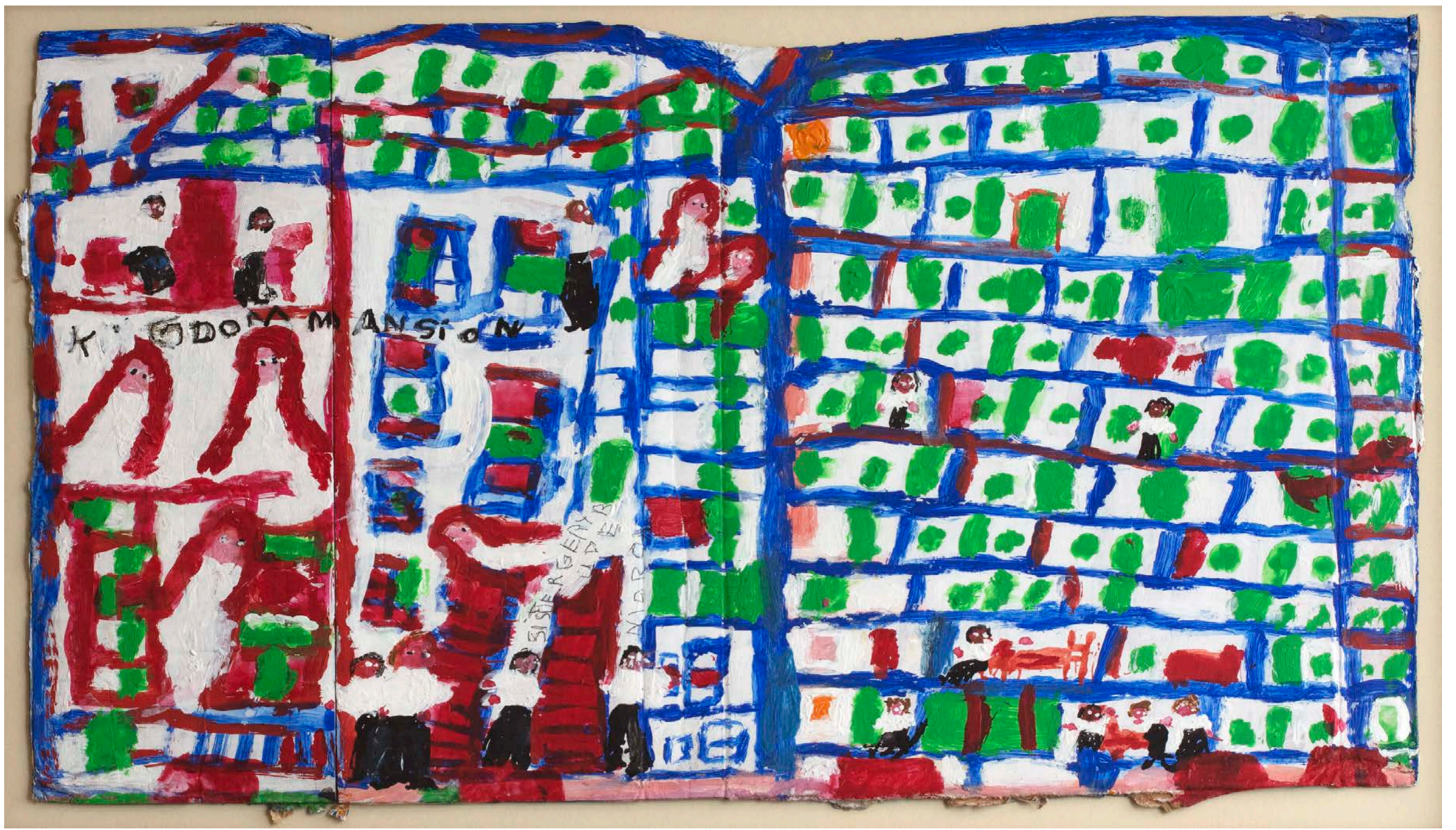
Mixed media

Artist Renee Stout has built a signature practice that throws into stark relief syncretic religious practices found throughout the African American community, but particularly those in the South.

Created with found and constructed objects, Renee Stout's work is a testament to her long-held fascination with the perseverance and adaptation of West African religious traditions in our contemporary world. The work provides an interior view of a fictional conjurer's source of power—the conjuring table. Lifted slightly off the floor, the table holds an array of small but potent items, placed carefully and precisely, as if to activate the forces that facilitate communication with sacred, unseen forces. An adorned pair of shoes is placed directly in front of the table, identifying this space as one of reverence.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, by exchange, 2020.21

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Sister Gertrude Morgan
American, 1900–1980

Kingdom Mansion, 1975

Oil on cardboard

Ogden Museum of Southern Art, Gift of the Roger H. Ogden Collection, 2003.1



Sister Gertrude Morgan
American, 1900–1980

Rose Hill Memorial Baptist Church, 1965

Acrylic and/or tempera and crayon on paper

Ogden Museum of Southern Art, Gift of the Roger H. Ogden Collection, 2003.1

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Sister Gertrude Morgan
American, 1900–1980

Self-Portrait/Revelations, 1965

Mixed media on paper

Ogden Museum of Southern Art, Gift of the Roger H. Ogden Collection, 2003.1



Sister Gertrude Morgan
American, 1900–1980

Jesus Is My Air Plane, ca. 1970

Watercolor, ballpoint pen, and pencil with heavy thread and safety pin on paper

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, purchase with T. Marshall Hahn Folks Art Acquisition
Fund for the T. Marshall Hahn Collection, 2000.10



Sister Gertrude Morgan
American, 1900–1980

Untitled, n.d.

Mixed media on paper

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, gift of the Judith Alexander Foundation, 2012.619

AUDIO: Let's Make a Record, 2005

Sister Gertrude Morgan, whose music can be heard in this space, was a preacher, artist, musician, and poet. She recounted how she was compelled by God to preach and to create art, spending years, mostly in New Orleans, doing both. To aid her evangelizing, she created paper megaphones to help carry her message, one of which can be seen nearby.

Morgan's paintings focus on the biblical themes of her teachings. The five works in this gallery demonstrate Morgan's creative use of material, spiritual calling, and personal devotion.

Recorded in the early 1970s, *Let's Make a Record* captures songs Morgan sang as part of her ministry.



Bob Thompson
American, 1937–1966

Adoration (Pink and Blue Figures), 1962

Oil on canvas

Bob Thompson's iconic body of work melds visual images of Old Masters, sonic improvisations of jazz, and biblical narratives into singular works of art. In *Adoration*, Thompson echoes the traditional Christian depiction of the Nativity of Jesus and the Adoration of the Magi, the three wise men who presented the infant with gifts. While the subject matter is steeped in a deep knowledge of Western art and art history, Thompson's practice was inspired by improvisation and spontaneity as well as the visual fragmentation of narrative. Through his fluidity of form and use of bold color, Thompson evokes the elements of jazz. His appropriated narrative is reframed within a flat, repetitious, abstract design, replacing the typical characters with two monochromatic figures who seem to be engaging in some sort of intimate exchange.

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York

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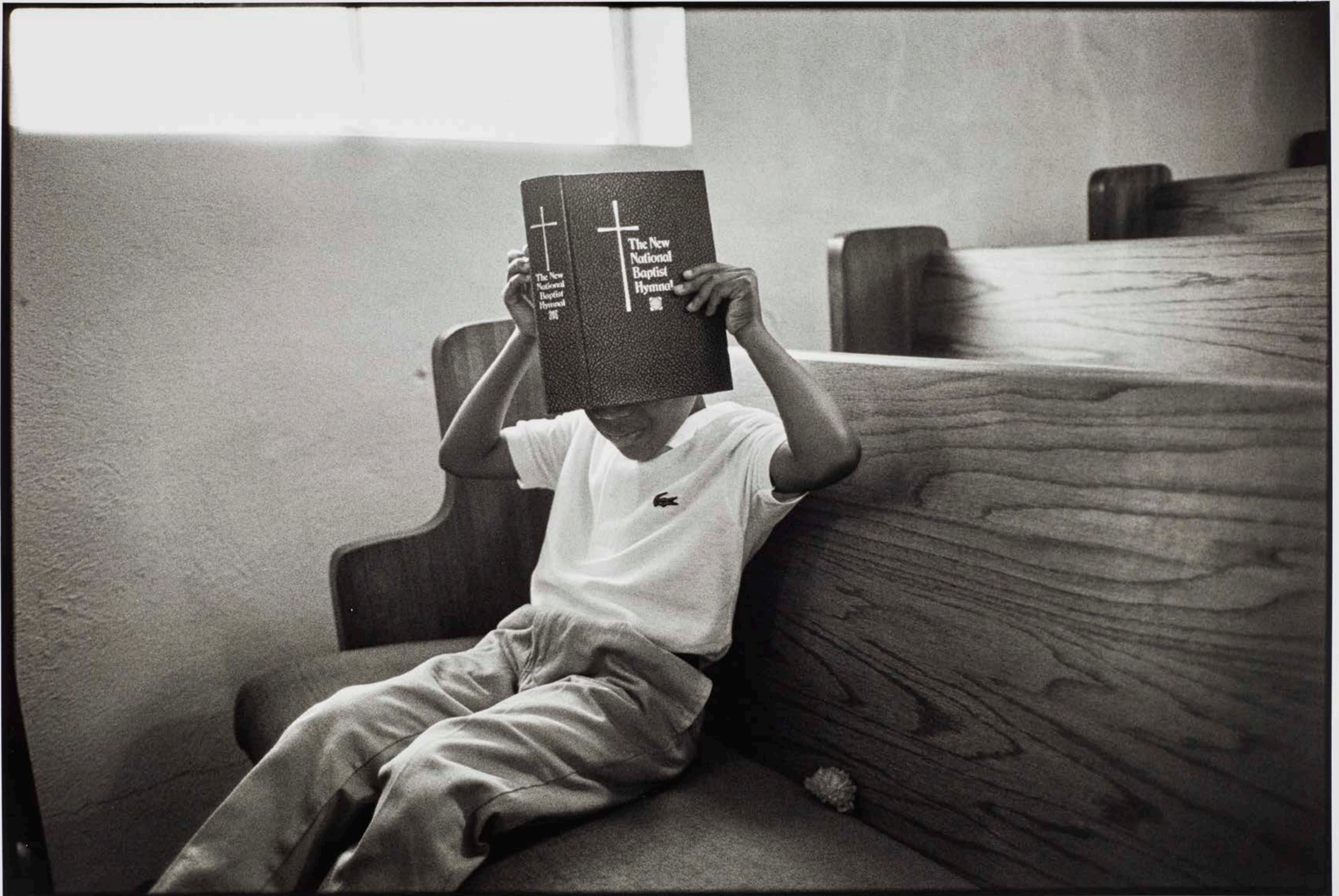


Marilyn Nance
American, born 1953

© **Marilyn Nance Ali and Quentin on Avenue S**, 1988, printed 2021

Courtesy of the artist, 1324-13, 1323-18, 1323-31

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Marilyn Nance
American, born 1953

© **Marilyn Nance Ali**, 1988, printed 2021

Courtesy of the artist, 1324-13, 1323-18, 1323-31



Marilyn Nance
American, born 1953

© **Marilyn Nance Ali and Quentin in Church**, 1988, printed 2021

Gelatin silver prints

Courtesy of the artist, 1324-13, 1323-18, 1323-31



Earlie Hudnall, Jr.
American, born 1946

Feeling the Spirit, 3rd Ward, Houston, TX, 1987

Gelatin silver prints

Courtesy of the artist and Photographs Do Not Bend Gallery

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Earlie Hudnall, Jr.
American, born 1946

Blackwater Baptist Church, Mississippi, 1990

Gelatin silver prints

Courtesy of the artist and Photographs Do Not Bend Gallery

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Jacob Lawrence
American, 1917–2000

Flight II, 1967

Opaque watercolor and tempera over graphite on wove paper

Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire; Bequest of Jay R. Wolf, Class of 1951



Fahamu Pecou

American, born 1975

Dobale to the Spirit, 2017

Acrylic on canvas

Courtesy Fahamu Pecou

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Text Panel

Black Corporality

In the Dirty South, the “Black body” is viewed as an integral link between past, present, and future. In the context of this exhibition, the Black body is examined as a vessel or repository of tradition and knowledge. It also holds the cumulative trauma of the South’s painful past that dominates the narrative as well as significant strains of resistance, resilience, transformation, and joy. The works in this section feature the invisible, intimate, and interior lives that dispel myths, including the idea of a monolithic framing of Blackness. The complexity of defining Blackness lies in the ever-changing, highly regenerative nature of the Black body and Black culture expressed in the creative forms of music, movement, and language. Accumulation, assemblage, and the use of nontraditional materials are on display in a number of these works, continuing a rich tradition that has remained deeply aligned with the African American condition and creative expression for over a century.

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Theaster Gates

American, born 1973

Shoe Shine 1, 2009

Wood, upholstery, metal

Collection of Marilyn and Larry Fields

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Jamal Cyrus

American, born 1973

A Witness, 2019

Blue denim, bleached denim, metal zipper

“Textiles had been on my mind a while in the studio. So I started tearing jeans apart, not sure what I would make with them. Its meaning started to unfold and tell me about itself as I worked with it.” —Jamal Cyrus

Jamal Cyrus explores the untold stories of American history while employing the tradition of the African American denim quilt. Formed from strips, this rectangular textile also resembles a document. Its patches reference “blocked-out” passages

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or redacted sections of FBI files involving a well-known civil rights case in which Fannie Lou Hamer, activist and a leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, gave witness testimony.

The negative space created by the strips of bleached fabric reveals a striking A pointing directly to Hamer's testimony that was removed. The choice of denim is significant; given the fabric's widespread use for clothing worn by hard laborers, it became strongly associated with African American sharecroppers and farmers in the rural South. Hamer, along with other members of the student committee, wore denim overalls to signify their solidarity with and support of the working class they sought to help.

Private Collection



Mel Chin

American, born 1951

Night Rap, 1993

Polycarbide plastic, steel, wireless transmitter, microphone element

Loan from artist

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David Hammons
American, born 1943

Strange Fruit, 1989

Rubber, wood, concrete, found objects

Strange Fruit takes its title from the 1930s song written by Abel Meeropol and later popularized by Billie Holiday. The lyrics provide a sobering and detailed description of lynching in the American South.

In this work, Hammons charges his sculpture with an embodied presence that is imbued with a performative quality. The bare, curling branches of this makeshift tree recall strands of African American hair and functions as a marker of identity that bridges the gap between the literal and figural meaning of a lynched figure. Blooming from Hammons' makeshift tree are its "fruits," which consist of political buttons featuring prominent Black leaders of the community.

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, purchase with funds from the Lannan Foundation, 1989.46



El Franco Lee II

American, born 1979

DJ Screw in Heaven 2, 2016

Acrylic on black canvas with cassette tape

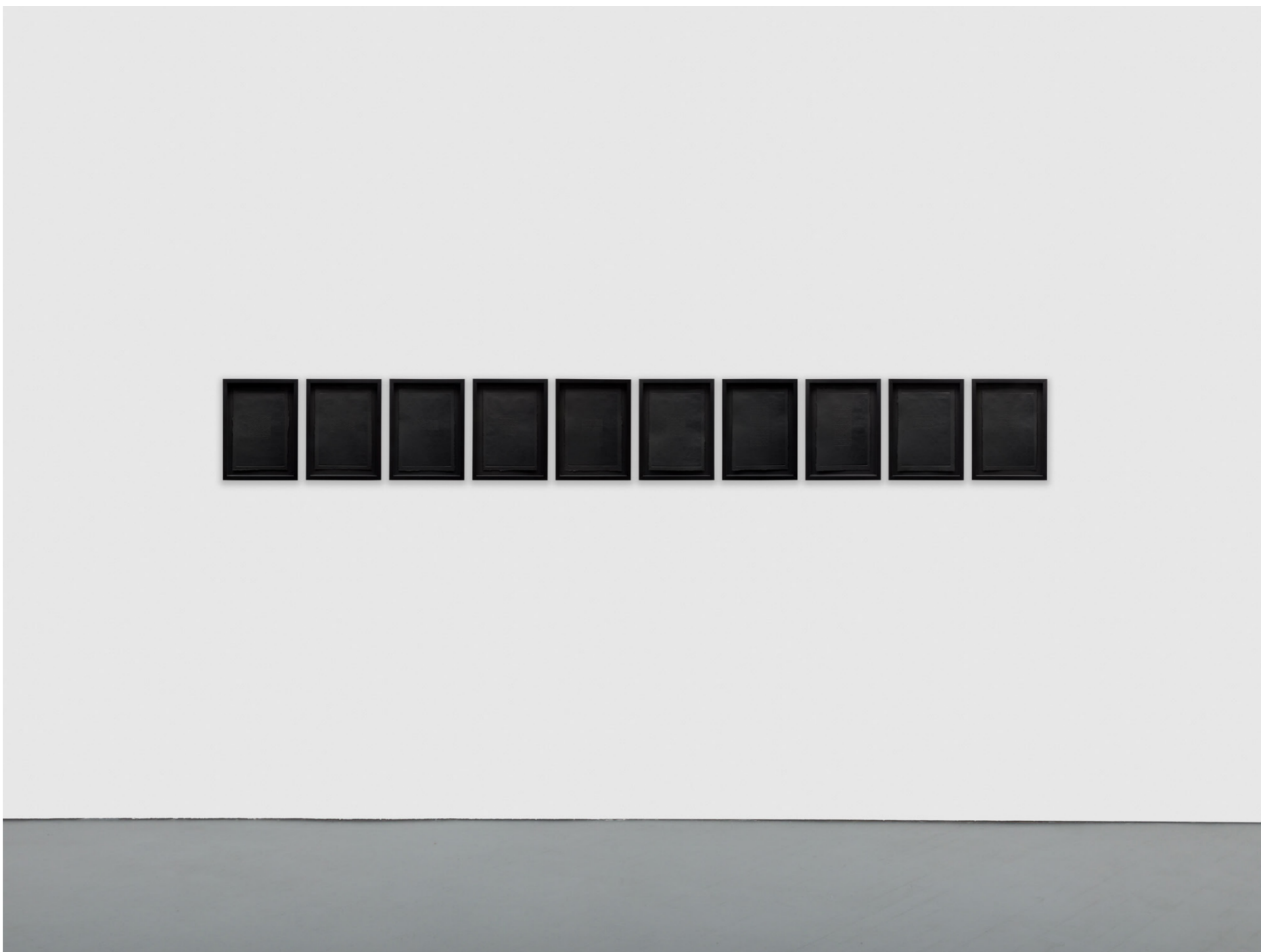
DJ Screw in Heaven 2 is a sequel to an ongoing narrative created by El Franco Lee II, a Houston-based artist. Steeped in the sonic traditions of Houston, this large painting honors the legacy of Robert Earl Davis, Jr., aka DJ Screw, who is hailed as the “godfather” of Houston hip-hop and best known as the creator of the “chopped and screwed” sound. Respected by many in the immediate community and beyond, DJ Screw had an entourage of close friends and musical innovators with whom he often worked, known collectively as the “Screwed Up Click.” Their music became synonymous with the burgeoning Houston hip-hop scene that spawned another unique urban art form—the SLAB—a customized car named for its prominent qualities (“slow, loud, and bangin”). Created as a tribute, this painting not only memorializes DJ Screw but also serves as a memento mori to his

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“click” and followers, as “sizzurp” and violence often precipitated their premature deaths.

With acute attention to detail, Lee presents us with a split composition—the bottom register showing mourners as they view coffins holding well-known members of the Screwed Up Click, and the top register depicting some members in the afterlife. DJ Screw rises in the center, with outstretched arms, reaching for turntables, a symbol of his craft.

Courtesy of the artist



Bethany Collins

American, born 1984

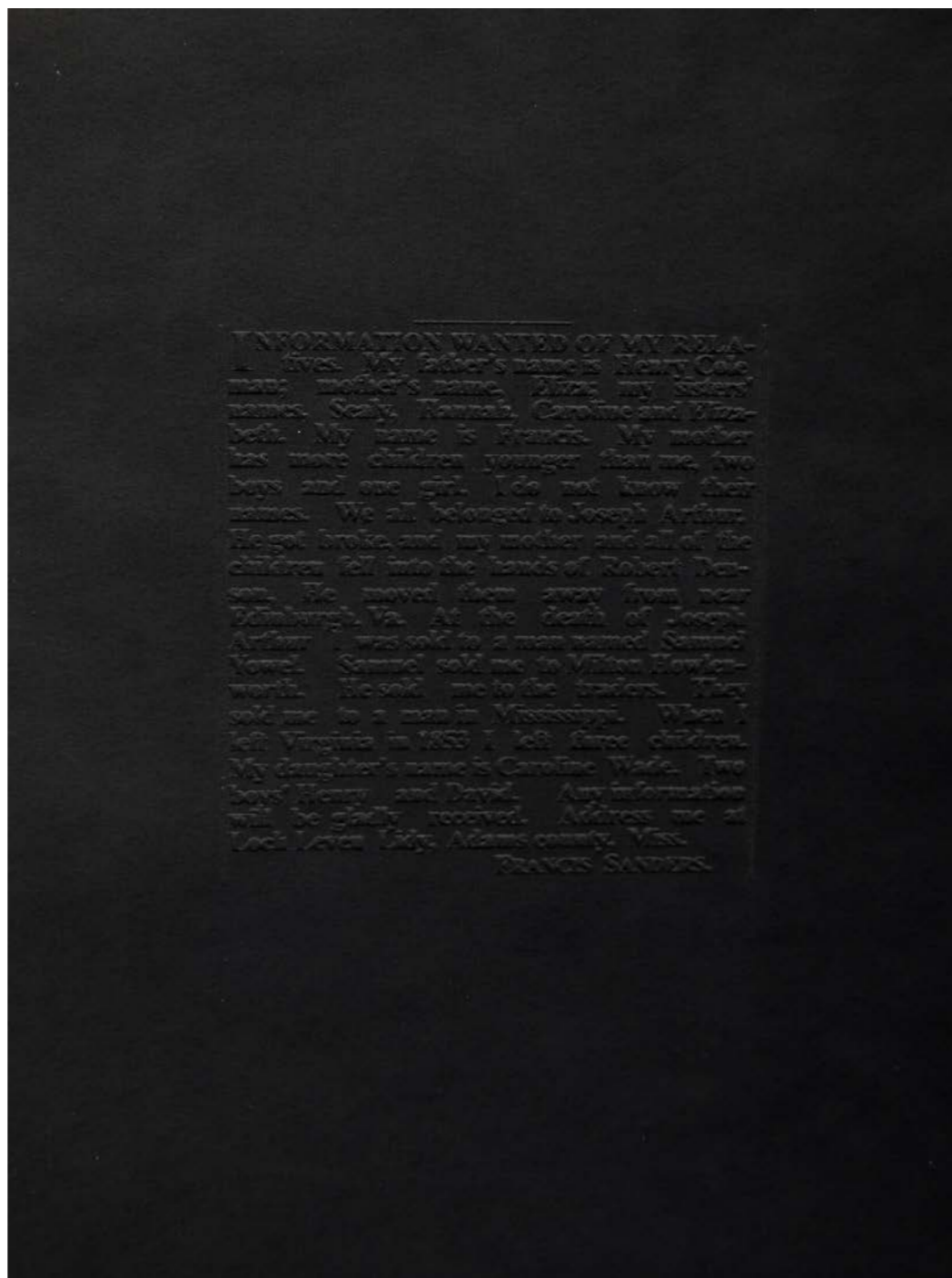
In Mississippi, 2019

Blind-embossed Stonehenge paper

Influenced by the family-separation crisis on the United States-Mexico border in 2019, artist Bethany Collins revisited a similar crisis that existed shortly before the end of the Civil War through the 1920s. Separated by the irreverence toward family bonds during enslavement, the ravages of the Civil War, and the chaos of emancipation, African Americans sought desperately to reunite with lost loved ones. They placed classified ads in newspapers seeking the whereabouts of family members, often intoning the circumstances of their separation. With the work *In Mississippi*, Collins has carefully reproduced bits of these heartbreaking ads with poignant phrases such as “Do you know them?” and “help me to find my people.”

Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago

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Bethany Collins

American, born 1984

In Mississippi, 2019

Blind-embossed Stonehenge paper

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Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago

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Kerry James Marshall
American, born 1955

Untitled (Exquisite Corpse), 2021

Acrylic on PVC panel

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

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Kara Walker

American, born 1969

A Warm Summer Evening in 1863, 2008

Wool tapestry, felt

In 1863, the nation was anticipating the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation. Many white, working-class Americans feared the effects of job competition brought on by the countless Black bodies migrating north. This anxiety was captured in a *Harper's Weekly* newspaper print of August 1963, which stands as a backdrop to Walker's haunting silhouette of a hanged, young black woman occupying the center of the composition. Walker's direct and jarring image refocuses the viewer's attention on the victims who fueled the rhetoric of *Harper's* article. While generations have passed, it is increasingly important to recognize the relevancy of the past as more than distant or abstract events and concepts but rather as origins of the issues that plague contemporary society.

Commissioned by Banners of Persuasion, London, England; to (James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY); purchased by Crystal Bridges Museum of Art, Bentonville, AR, 2010.3

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Not on Display

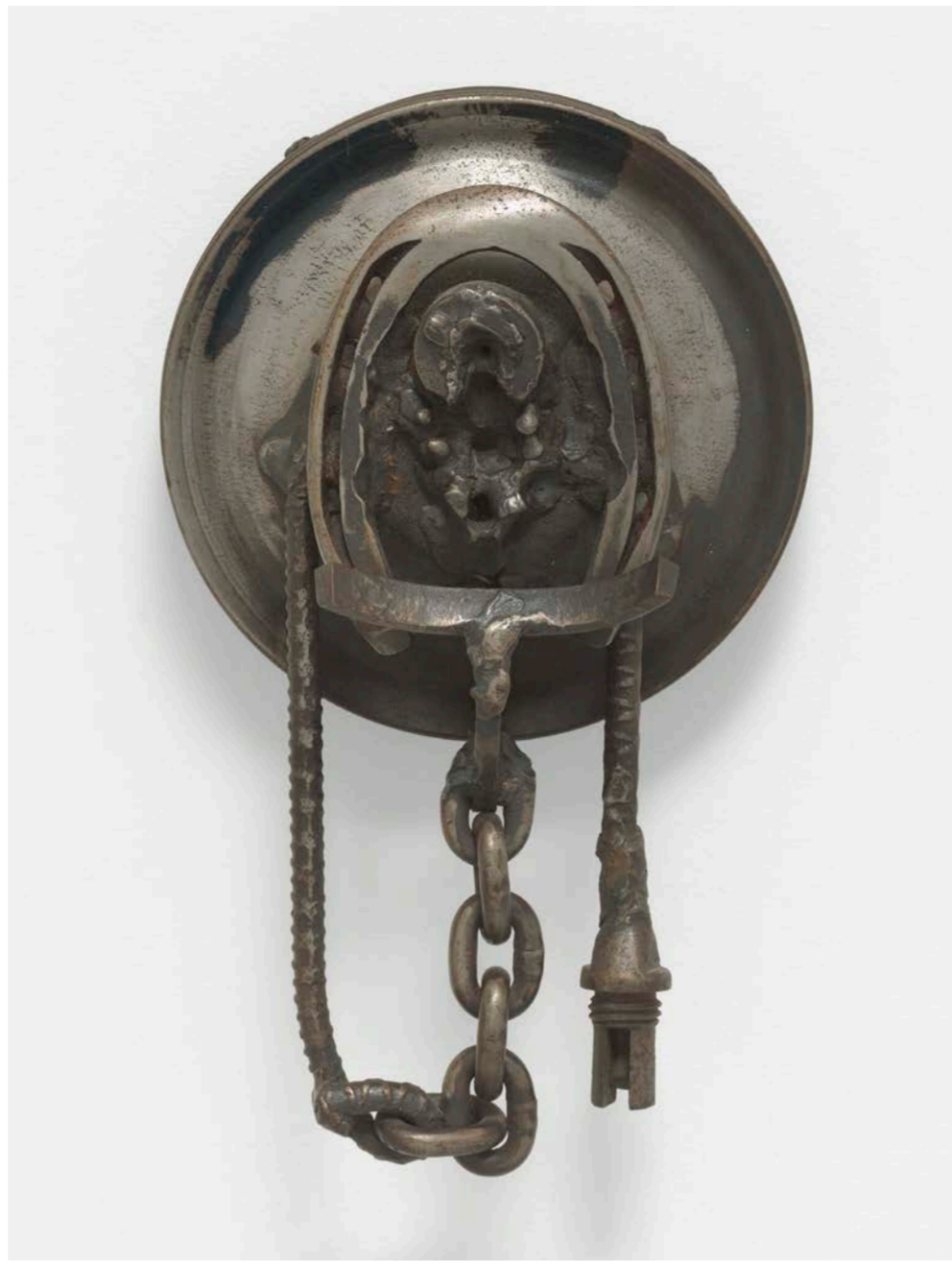
Bessie Harvey
American, 1929–1994

The Family, 1988

Wood and paint

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Regenia Perry, MC2020.40.1

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Melvin Edwards

American, born 1937

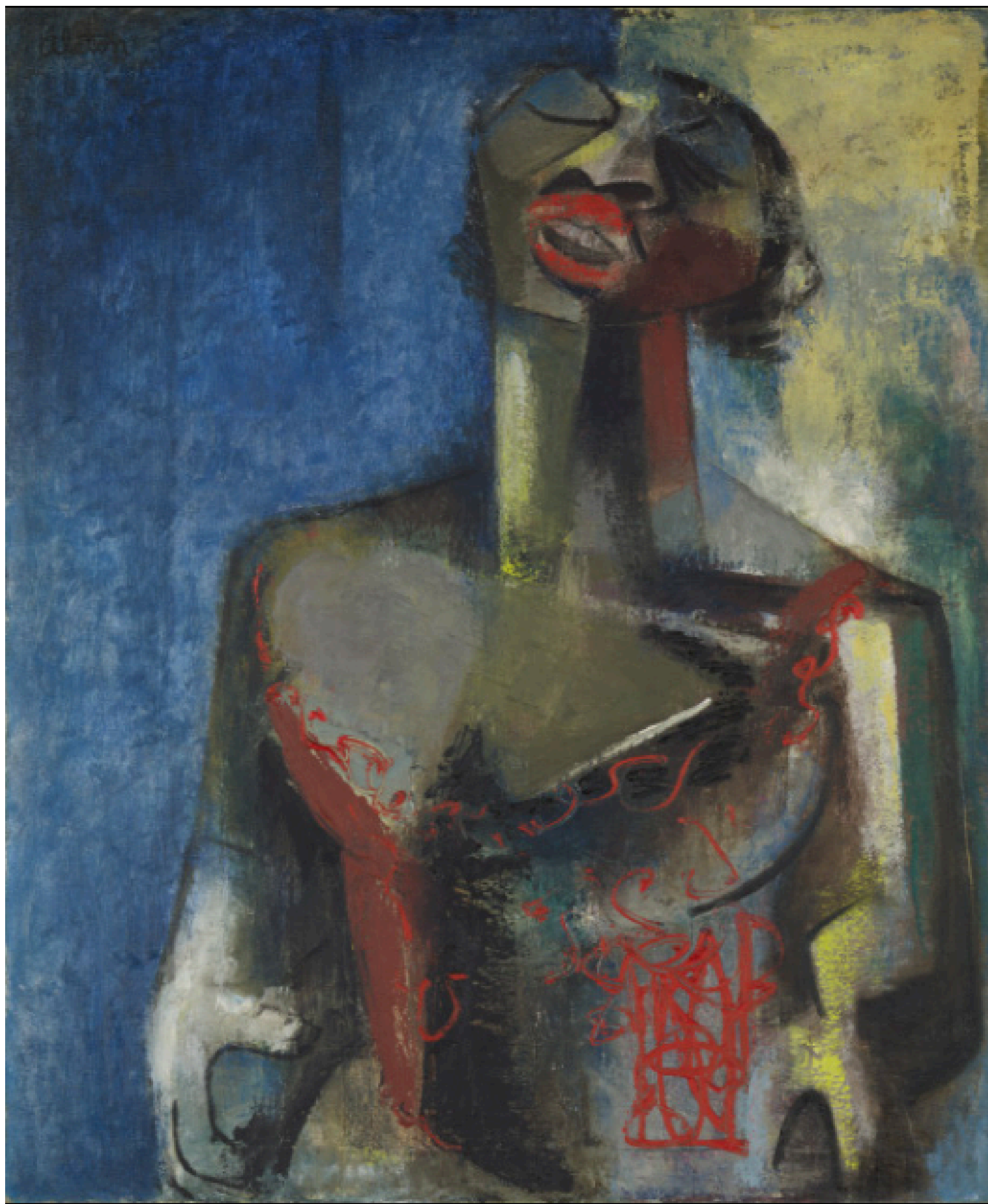
Hers (Lynching Fragments series), 1963

Welded steel

In his series *Lynching Fragments*, artist Melvin “Mel” Edwards evokes the terrorism of lynching that has become part of the dark history of the South. In repurposing scraps of found metal and industrial debris, Edwards creates assemblages that hover between abstracted sculptural forms and human bodies, suspended in mid-air. Chains, nails, bolts, and other objects are assembled and fused together—as a unified collection. And, while the title conjures the horrendous acts of violence imposed upon Black bodies, Edwards’s inquiry does not end with the obvious abomination of that violence; he pushes viewers to explore the complex incitements to lynching, such as Black industrialization in the South and fears of Black economic power and mobility. Channeling a long lineage of blacksmithing in the South, Edwards juxtaposes labor and craftsmanship with these painful legacies.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2017.28

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Charles Henry Alston
American, 1907–1977

Blues Singer #1, ca. 1952

Oil on canvas

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, J. Harwood and Louise B. Cochrane Fund for
American Art and Revolving Art Purchase Fund, 2020.169

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Charles Henry Alston
American, 1907–1977

Pietà, ca. 1950s

Oil on canvas

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1993.14

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Radcliffe Bailey

American, born 1968

If Bells Could Talk, 2015

Wood, trumpets, trombones

Contemporary artist Radcliffe Bailey is deeply invested in framing the histories of Black bodies in the American South. He looks to music and sound, which, like history, attempt to acknowledge, honor, and chronicle the evolving Black narrative through time. In this work, the artist has assembled a sculptural bouquet of brass instruments that spill out of an antique wooden birdcage sitting on top of a 19th-century music stand.

This accumulation of material culture serves as a collective expression of the Black experience. Created as an homage to the liberating sounds of jazz, Radcliffe Bailey's installation provide a deep dive into the numerous contributions of Black musicians to the artistic fabric of this country.

Collection of Martin Z. Margulies

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Whitfield Lovell

American, born 1959

Rise of the Delta, 2013

Conte on wood, wrought iron sconce,
silver-plated platters

Courtesy Norm and Carnetta Davis, Birmingham, Alabama



Rashaad Newsome
American, born 1979

King of Arms, 2015

Single-channel video installation with sound, custom artist frame, and hand-carved crown sculpture with automotive paint, artist textile, and HD rear projection screen

Rashaad Newsome's video presentation, shown from below an ornate gilded urban crown draped with lush textiles, conjures the grand traditions of theater and procession. His work channels a wide range of sounds and spectacles, from Mardi Gras festivities to hip-hop music to "vogueing" (gay ballroom scene from the 1980s) exploring themes of the Black body, ornamentation, and heraldic emblems. Through a blend of conceptual and technical strategies, Newsome constructs a new cultural framework of power that promotes innovation and inclusion.

The *King of Arms* video performance fuses the art world with the opulent ballroom scene while engaging an authentic community voice. Newsome welcomes

collaboration from a range of leaders in the worlds of art, fashion, music, and activism, providing them with a platform for creative expression. His art especially serves as a space for LGBTQ voices and communities of color to shape their own representation and celebrate through pageantry and performance.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, and National Endowment for the Arts Fund for American Art, 2020.67

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William T. Williams
American, born 1942

Sister of Neckbone, 1970

Acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York

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Bisa Butler

American, born 1973

Basin Street Blues, 2014

Cotton denim

Courtesy Claire Oliver and Ian Rubinstein

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Deborah Roberts

American, born 1962

Let Them Be Children, 2018

Acrylic, pastel, ink, and gouache on canvas

Deborah Roberts investigates the unease in which social constructs and perceptions impact individuals and communities. In *Let Them Be Children*, she implores us to preserve the innocence and sense of well-being of young Black children as they seek to build their own identities while navigating society's preconceived constructions about their worth and presence in society.

Roberts's fragmented ensemble of children has a dynamic liveliness to it. Disparate arms and legs jut out at varying angles, suggesting childlike movement or playfulness. However, Roberts subtly complicates the composition by sprinkling in a few gestures of wariness or a solemn expression, reminding the viewer of the social pressures placed on children, causing them to grow up far too quickly.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2019.1

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Marilyn Nance
American, born 1953

© **Marilyn Nance, Super Sunday, St. Joseph's Day Parade, 1991**, printed 2021

Gelatin silver print

Courtesy of the artist, 1557-19A

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Dapper Bruce LaFitte
(also Bruce Davenport Jr.)
American, born 1972

My Daddy Did Not Love Me, 2017

Archival ink on acid-free paper

Courtesy of the artist and FIERMAN, New York

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Felandus Thames
American, born 1974

Just Hanging, 2014

Fat-lace shoestrings, vintage shoes

Felandus Thames is a conceptual artist who examines everyday objects for their role as cultural signifiers. In *Just Hanging*, a shoe dangles below a web-like configuration of shoestrings affixed to the wall. Although physically absent from the installation, the Black body is implied through signifying objects, in this case, the tennis shoe and shoelaces.

Thames's installation evokes the urban practice of "shoe tossing" (throwing shoes up over a power line), which is often incorrectly linked to drug distribution in the Black community, a mythical stereotype that has been perpetuated over time. The action can serve to denote personal milestones, memorialize friends and family, or identify a neighborhood, or simply be performed as a type of athletic feat. By using familiar items and contemporary cultural trends, Thames provides a point of entry into understanding not just material but the complex vernacular of tradition embraced by a community.

Courtesy of Felandus Thames

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Dapper Bruce LaFitte
(also Bruce Davenport Jr.)

American, born 1972

Ms. Paje and Mrs. Bria, 2018

Archival ink on acid-free paper

Courtesy of the artist and FIERMAN, New York

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Marilyn Nance
American, born 1953

© **Marilyn Nance, The White Eagles, Black Indians of New Orleans**, 1980,
printed 2021
Gelatin silver print

Nance captures the dynamism of New Orleans's famed Mardi Gras Indians. The origins of this blend of cultures—Black and Indigenous American—dates to 1740, when Congo Square served as a space for creative expression for enslaved African Americans. The contemporary manifestation, however, was solidified after the Buffalo Soldiers—African American troops who served with the Union forces on the western frontier during the Civil War—arrived in New Orleans. Veterans retained a sense of bonding and brotherhood expressed through an appropriation of Indigenous American culture and appearance. Adorned in splendid regalia, now more than thirty-eight tribes organize in a procession during Mardi Gras and other designated holidays.

Courtesy of the artist, 387-3A

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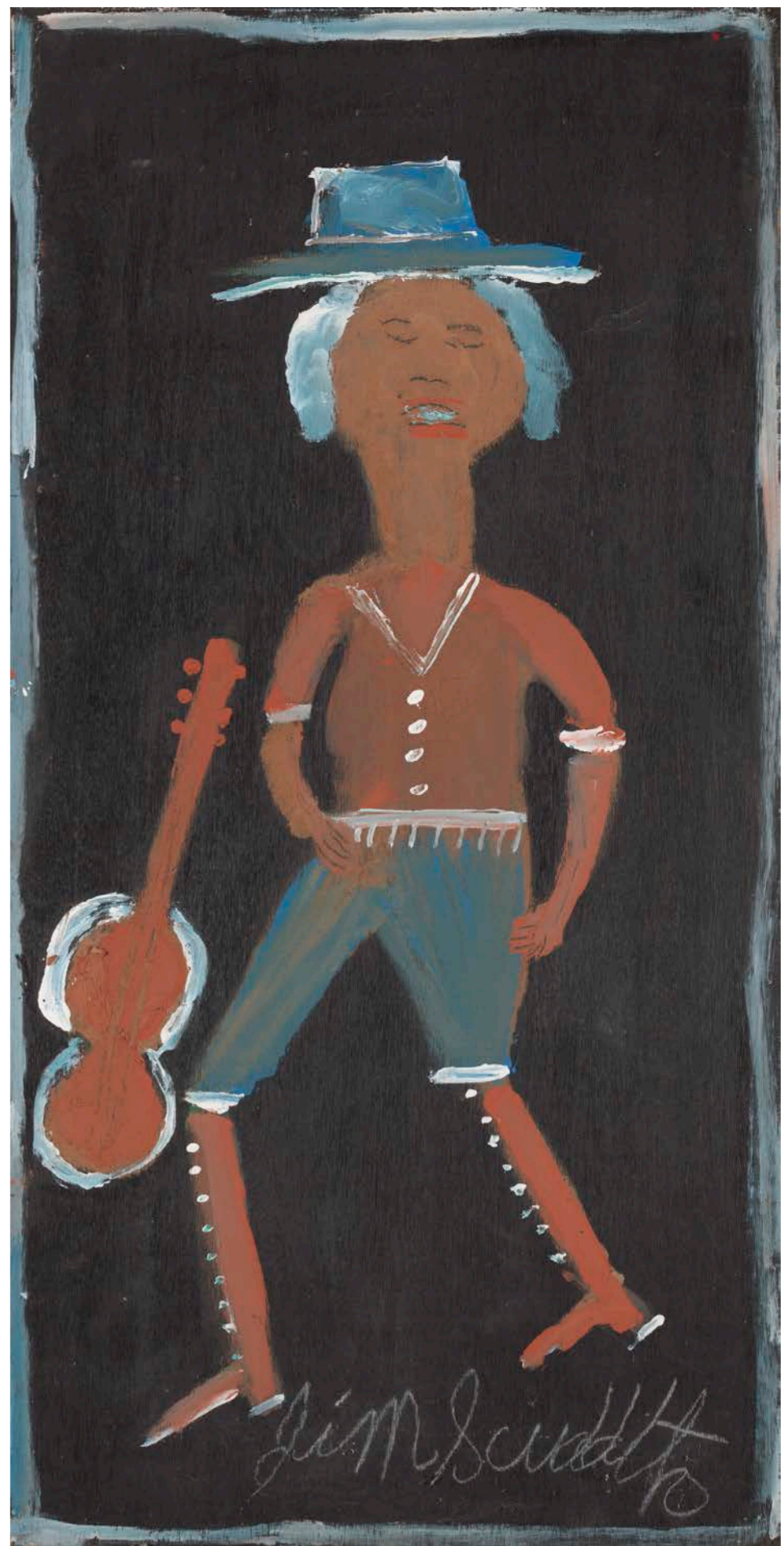
Jack Whitten
American, 1939-2018

Black Monolith, VI Mask (updated version for Terry Adkins), 2014

Acrylic on canvas

Private Collection, Switzerland; Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York

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Jimmy Lee Sudduth
American, 1910–2007

Woman with Guitar, Man with Guitar, 1996

Paint and mud on wood

William and Ann Oppenheimer Collection

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Terry Adkins
American, 1953–2014

Columbia, 2007

Wood, enamel

Courtesy of the Estate of Terry Adkins and Lévy Gorvy, New York

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William H. Johnson
American, 1901–1970

Quintet, ca. 1940

Opaque watercolor, pen, and ink on wove paper

The work is on loan from the Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC,
and Howard University reserves all rights with respect to the work

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Robert Hodge
American, born 1979

Bert Williams (Tap Dance), 2013
Mixed media and collage on found paper

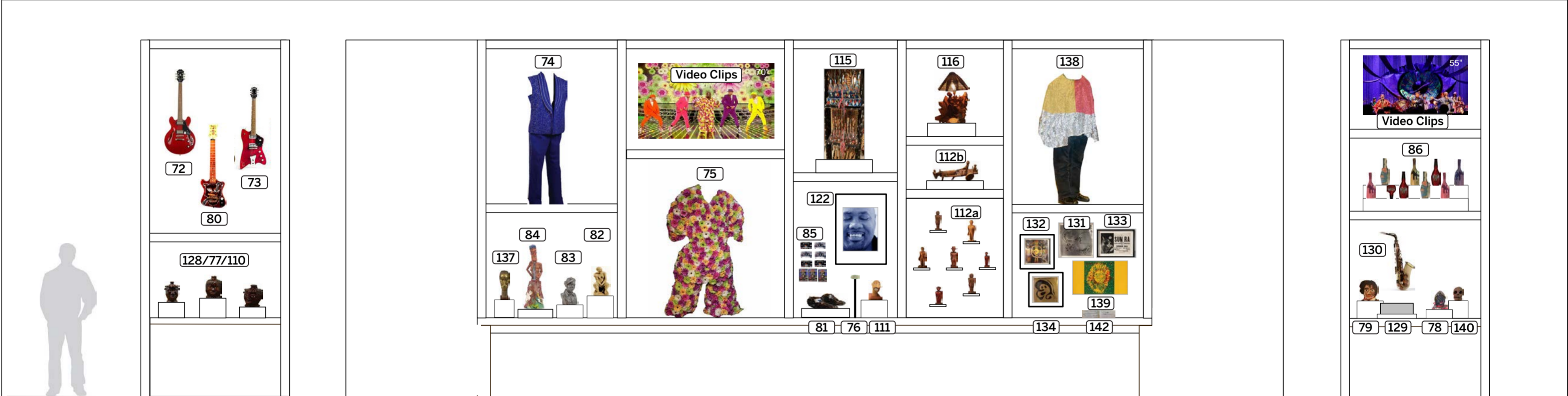
Jonathan L. Proctor and Jane C. Vora

Text Panel

Cabinet of Wonders

Wunderkammers became popularized in 16th-century Germany. As their very name implies, these “cabinets of wonders” held small oddities, natural phenomena, and art objects that inspired thought and marvel. Inhabitants of the well-appointed homes that boasted these cabinets lauded the intellectual curiosity they encouraged and conveyed and the worlds they opened for the collector. Such endeavors would lay the foundation for the modern-day museum—venues and sites with extensive holdings designed to evoke thought, emotion, spiritual awakenings, and genuine wonder through experiential encounters with art objects. In a dynamic reimaging of the *wunderkammers*, this cabinet of wonder highlights the dynamic exchange between object makers and musicians while it underscores the creative impulses that cross genres and disciplines. In this configuration, musical instruments and stage wear conceived as “power objects” resonate with the energy of the performer. Moreover, the work of both academically trained and intuitive intellectuals is intertwined to show their dynamic exchange as they sit comfortably side by side along the trajectory of ideas rooted in tradition.

Cabinet of Wonders



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Samick electric guitar with cherry wood finish played by Chuck Berry, serial no. S98056894

Guitar, loaned guitar strap and brown hard-shell case

Collection of the Estate of Chuck Berry. Courtesy of The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame

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Mudd and Snake (Guitar), 2019

Steinway wood, recycled guitar and neck

Collection of the artist, Courtesy Music Maker Relief Foundation

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[BACK TO CABINET OF WONDERS](#)



Guitar played by Bo Diddley, built by Tom Holmes as a replica of Diddley's Cadillac guitar built by the Gretsch company

Guitar with hard-shell case

Collection of The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame

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Winton and Rosa Eugene
American, born 1945 and born 1949
LEFT TO RIGHT

Miss Mildred, 2021

Smithey, 2021

Sis Campbell, 2021

Stoneware clay

Courtesy of the artists, Winton and Rosa Eugene

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Stage outfit worn by James Brown

Long, royal blue, knit vest embellished with rhinestones, matching pants

Collection of The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame

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Elizabeth Catlett
American, 1915–2012

Portrait, n.d.

Polished bronze

Collection of Eric Key

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Joyce J. Scott
American, born 1948

Mammy Under the Influence, 2007

Blown, cast, and lampworked glass, beadwork (peyote stitch)

Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire,
Purchased through the Virginia and Preston T. Kelsey 1958 Fund

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August Savage
American, 1892–1962

Gamin, modeled 1929, plaster by 1940

Painted plaster

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, J. Harwood and Louise B. Cochrane Fund for
American Art, 2021.70

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Elizabeth Catlett
American, 1915–2012

Tired, 1946

Terracotta

The work is on loan from the Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and Howard University reserves all rights with respect to the work

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Video Clips

Music to My Soul, performed by CeeLo Green, Written by Daniel Alexander Asphund, Thomas DeCarlo Callaway, Geoffrey Patrick Earley, Marc Randolph Griffin, Joe Khajadourian, Bean William Ernest Lobban, Nathan Tyrone Payton, Sr., Andreas Torbjoern Pfannenstill, Alex Schwartz, SONY/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd. (2015). Appearance on The X-Factor (UK), 2015, Fremantle Thames and Syco Entertainment <https://vimeo.com/148561269>

Hey Bo Diddley, performed by Bo Diddley, written by Ellas McDaniel, Checker Records (1957). Appearance on "THE BIG T.N.T. Show," 1966 (with backup singers the Bo-ettes Norma-Jean "The Duchess" Wofford, Gloria Morgan and Lily "Bee Bee" Jamieson), American International Pictures www.youtube.com/watch?v=ye-ZHB3ozglQ

Get on the Good Foot, written and performed by James Brown, Dynatone Publishing Co. (1972). Live performance, Woodstock '99, July 23, 1999 www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcwhS3VgHpl

Johnny B. Goode, written and performed by Chuck Berry, Isalee Music Publishing Company (1958). Live television appearance, Belgium, 1965 www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ROwVrF0Ceg&list=RD6ROwVrF0Ceg&start_radio=1&t=60s



Two-piece outfit worn by CeeLo Green for November 11, 2015, performance of "Music to My Soul" on The X Factor UK

Collection of The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame

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Anderson Johnson

American, 1915–1998

Portable Pulpit, 1989

House paint on wood, egg carton, plastic ice trays, paper, ribbon, Styrofoam

William and Ann Oppenheimer Collection

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Robert Pruitt

American, born 1975

Glass Slippers, 2005

Tennis shoes, broken glass

Private Collection

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Robert Earl Davis Jr. aka DJ Screw

American 1971-2000

Mix Tapes , 1989

Collection of El Franco Lee II

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Sheila Pree Bright
American, born 1967

Tony (Memphis, TN), 2009, printed 2021
Archival ink-jet print

Courtesy of the artist, © 2021 Sheila Pree Bright

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King Johnny

American, born date?

Custom Grill, n.d.

Gold, diamonds

Courtesy of Johnny's Custom Jewelry, Houston, Texas

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Sultan Rogers
American, 1922–2003

Haint, n.d.

Wood, paint, pyrography

William and Ann Oppenheimer Collection

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Abraham Lincoln Criss
American, 1914–2000

Lamp with Two Women, 1978

Wood, electrical parts, electric light, metal bulb

William and Ann Oppenheimer Collection

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Arliss Watford

American, 1924–1998

Donkey and Cart, n.d.

Wood, string, leather, metal, nails

William and Ann Oppenheimer Collection

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Arliss Watford
American, 1924–1998

Family, 1984

Two Women, 1985

Two Men, 1985

Carved wood, paint

William and Ann Oppenheimer Collection

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Three tunics worn by Dick Griffin in Sun Ra Arkestra, ca. 1966-1970

Fabric

Collection of Dick Griffin

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Sun Ra, aka LeSony'r Ra, aka Herman Poole Blount

American, 1914–1993

Design for **The Soul Vibrations of Man**, ca. 1976

Collection of John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis

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Sun Ra, aka LeSony'r Ra, aka Herman Poole Blount
American, 1914–1993

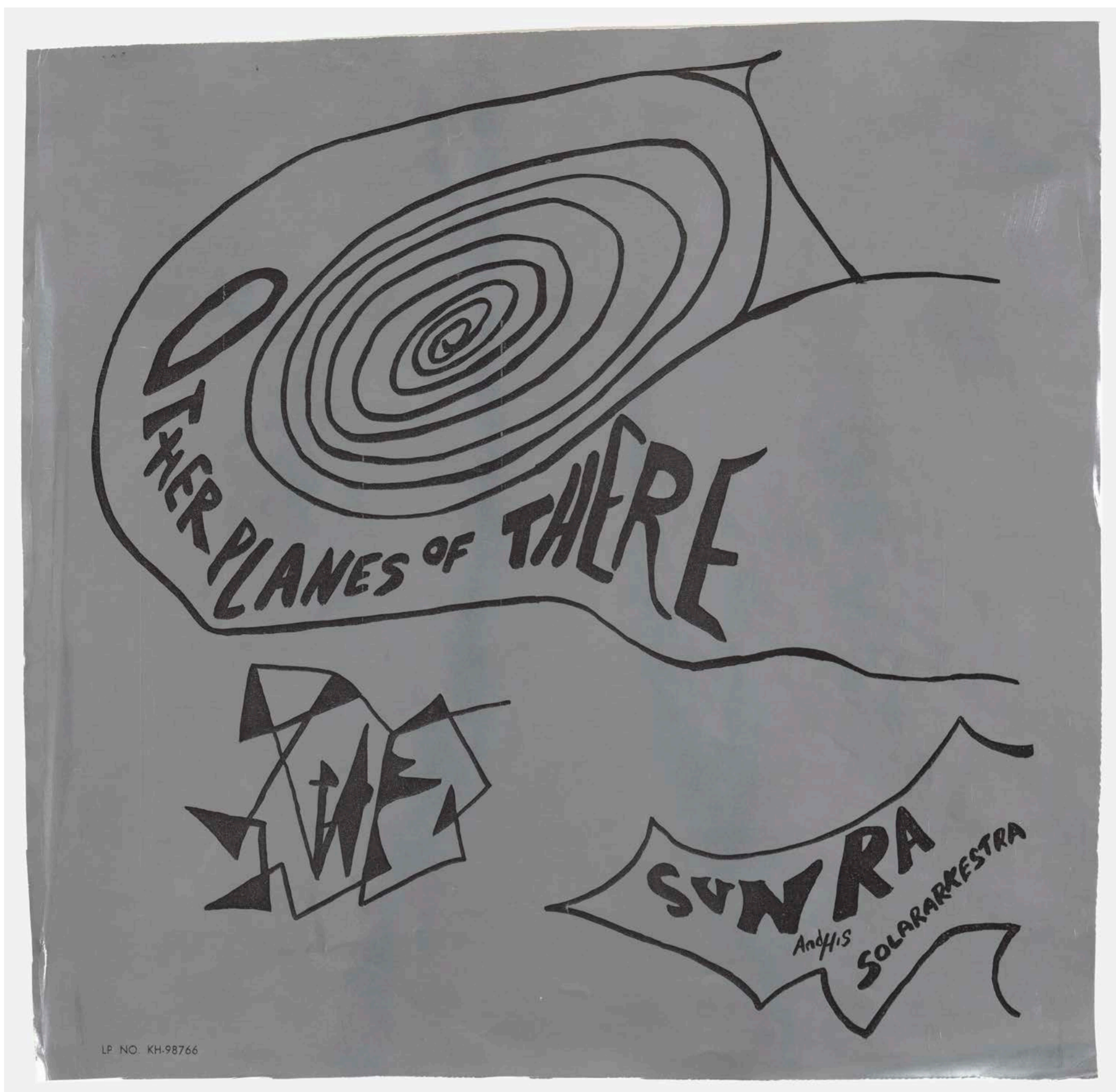
Angels and Demons at Play, 1965

Original album cover artwork

Collection of John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis

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Sun Ra, aka LeSony'r Ra, aka Herman Poole Blount
American, 1914–1993

Other Planes of There, 1966

Original drawing and print

Collection of John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis

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Sun Ra, aka LeSony'r Ra, aka Herman Poole Blount
American, 1914–1993

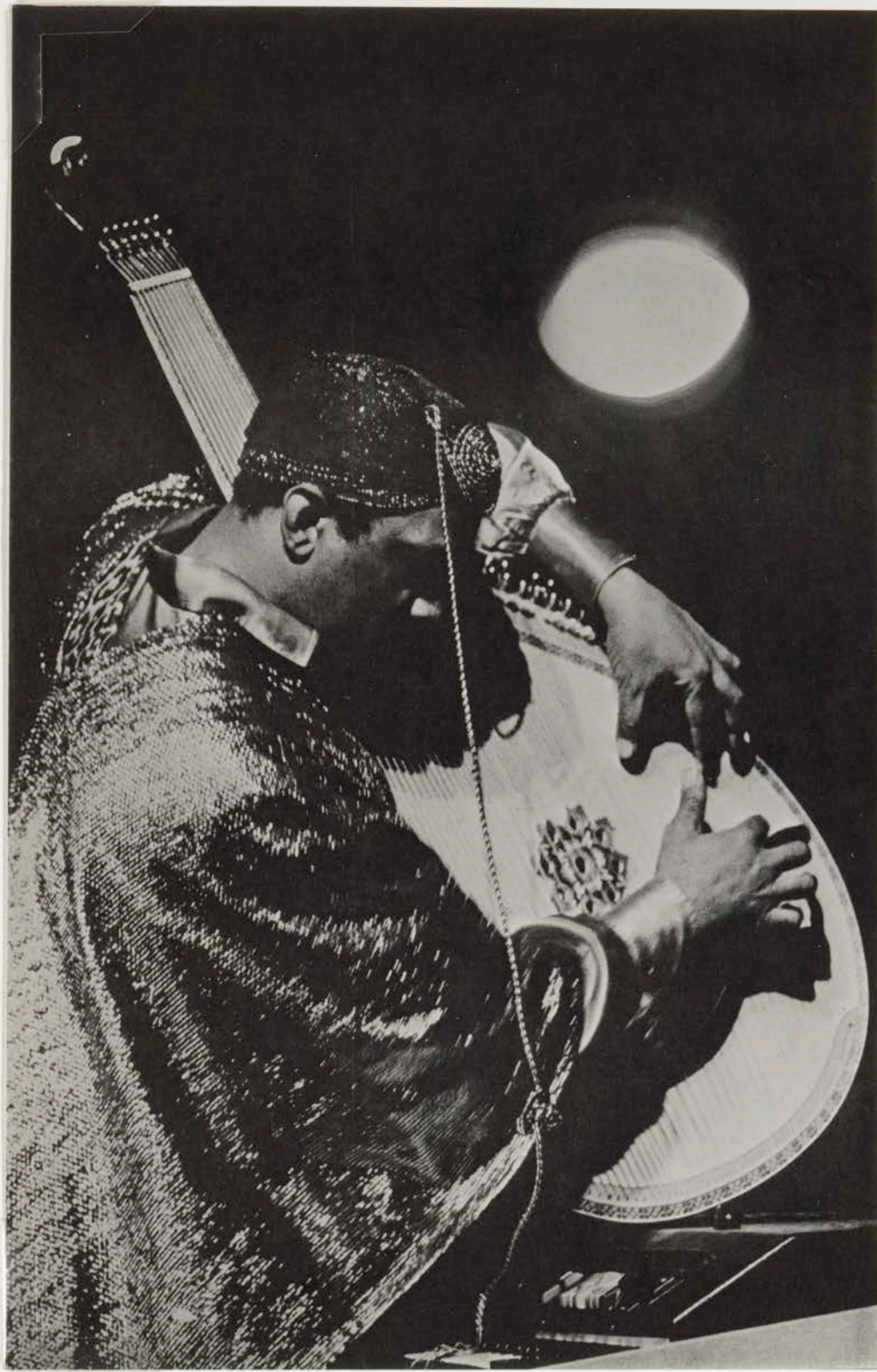
When the Sun Comes Out, ca. 1960

Album cover

Collection of John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis

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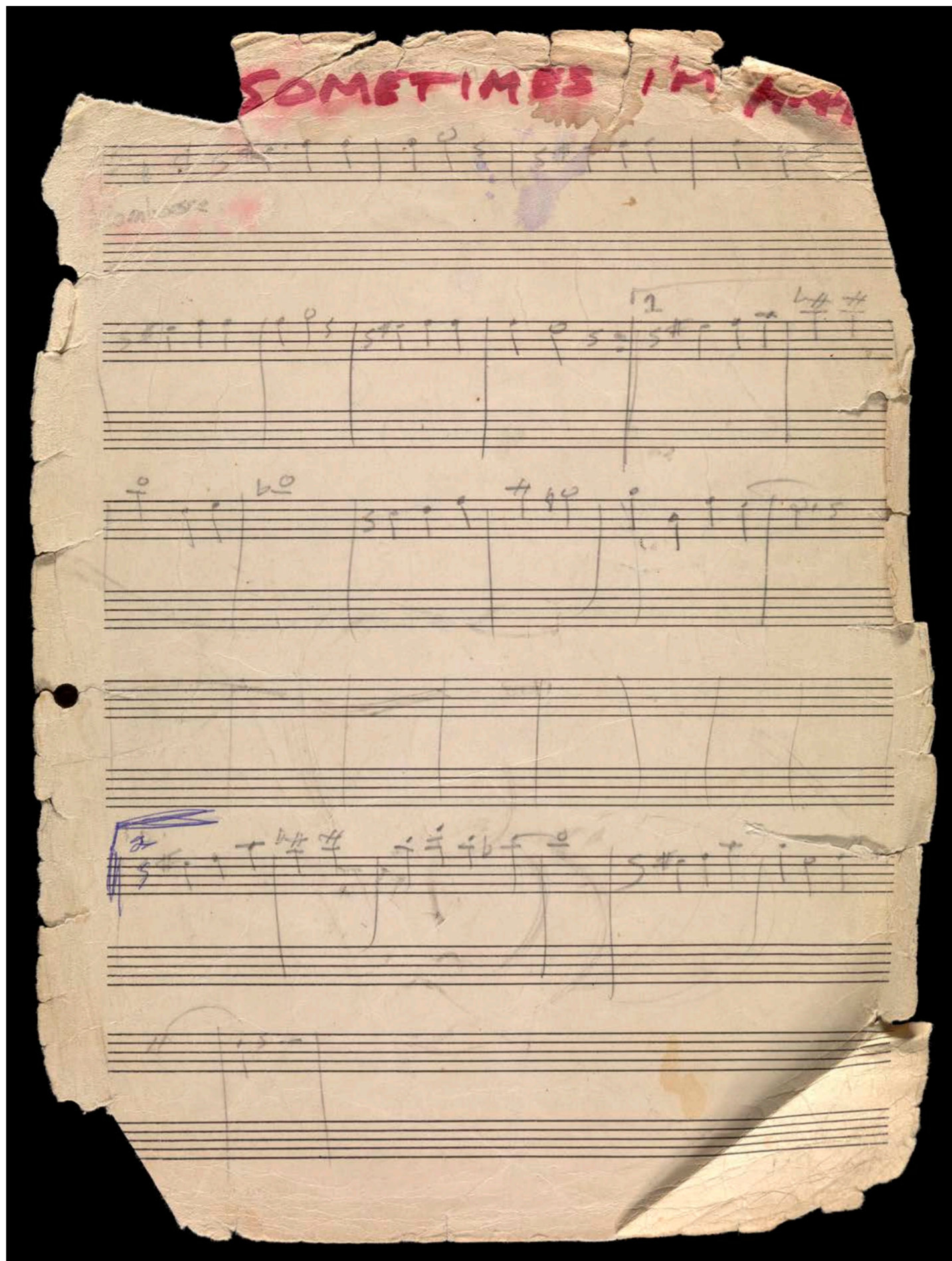
Sun Ra, aka LeSony'r Ra, aka Herman Poole Blount
American, 1914-1993

Carnegie Hall Poster, 1968

Collection of John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis

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Sun Ra, aka LeSony'r Ra, aka Herman Poole Blount
American, 1914–1993

Sometimes I'm Happy Original sheet music, ca. 1967

Composition paper with graphite

Collection of Dick Griffin

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Video Clips

Stars That Shine Darkly, performed by Sun Ra All Stars and the Sun Ra Arkestra with Archie Shepp, written by Herman Poole Blount (aka Sun Ra), published by Enterplanetary Koncepts. Live performance, Philharmonie, Berlin, 1983

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAVXGWEumUc&t=284s>

DJ Screw: Soldiers United for Cash, REL Entertainment, LLC, DVD (2001), recorded October 29, 2000

Ornette Coleman Improvisation, performed by Ornette Coleman Quintet.

Meltdown festival, 2009, Southbank Centre, London <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QugUkEg-B2Y>

Off the Wall, performed by Skillz/MadSkillz, written by Ali Jones, Robert Cleveland, Cornell Hayes, Tohri Harper, published by D2 Pro Publishing, Jackie Frost Music, Inc., Sam Swap Publishing, Tarpo Music Publishing, Universal Music Corporation, Young Dude Publishing (2003). Rawkus Records

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oo_an2HwVnA

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Mose Tolliver

American, ca. 1920–2006

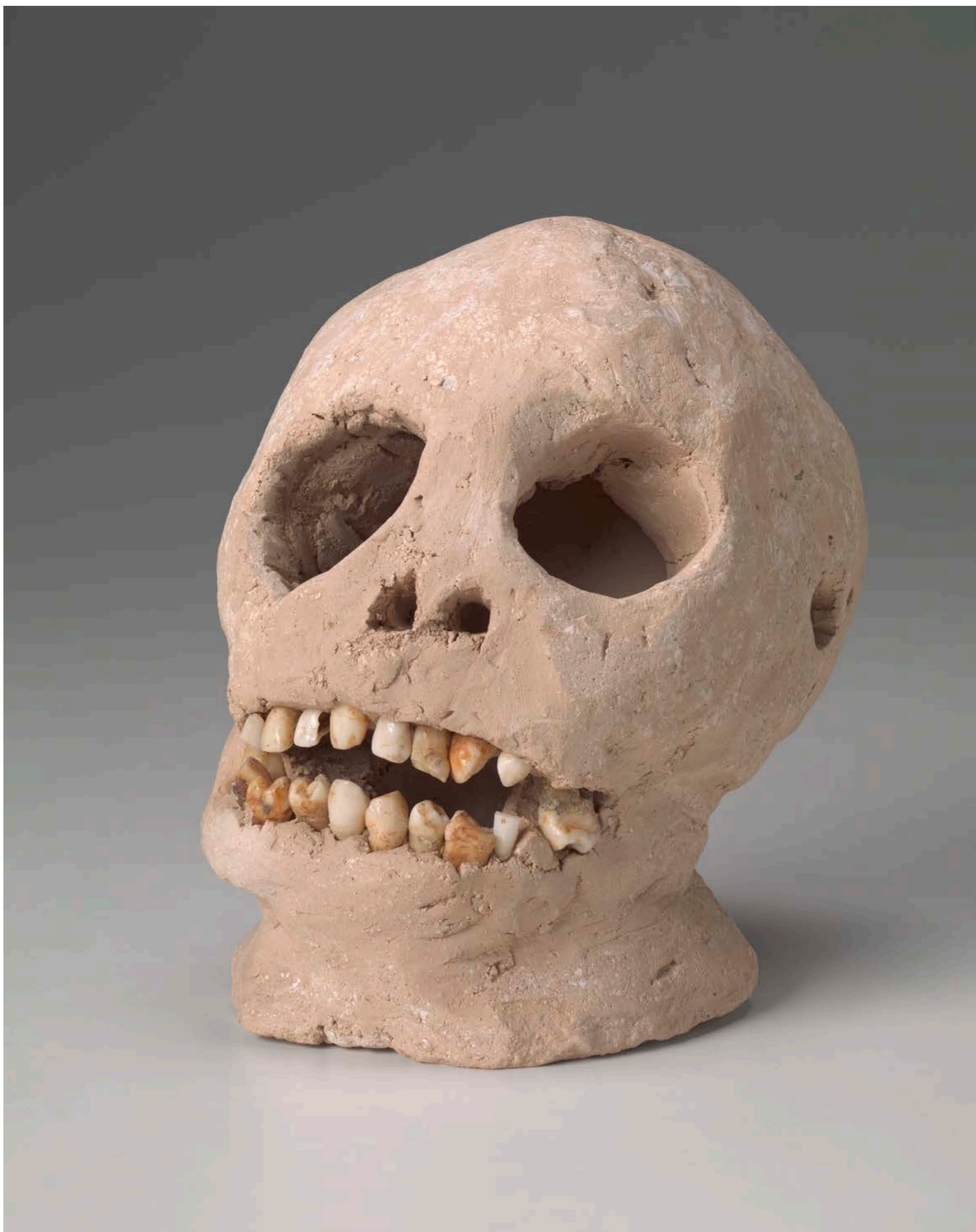
Nesting Bottles, n.d.

Paint on glass

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Regenia Perry, MC2020.40.12.1-11

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James "Son Ford" Thomas
American, 1926–1993

Untitled (Human Skull), 1988

Unfired clay, human teeth

Collection of David Whaley

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Ornette Coleman

American, 1930–2015

Selmer Alto Saxophone, n.d.

Brass with white lacquer

Collection of Denardo Coleman

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Nellie Mae Rowe

American, 1900–1982

Two-Faced Head, 1980

Chewing gum, bottle cap, costume jewelry, ceramic tile, ribbon, artificial hair, marbles, acrylic paint

Collection of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation

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Text Panel

Photography

Photography plays a primary role in documenting fleeting moments; it provides a means to express through image the conceptual ideas that emerge from the culture. In this section, Black life is chronicled over time and geography from the early decades of the 1900s to the 1990s. Through the photographic lens, individuals, their communities, and cultural events are captured, revealing the nuances of the music, gestures, and expressive leanings that have defined the African American South. Blackness in the hands of these photographers is depicted as a summation of a multitude of exchanges. Integral to each successive body of works featured in this area is music. Street preachers sharing songs with passersby, juke joints, brass bands, and musical processions are all foundational manifestations of the African American South, the cradle of Black cultural expression. Embedded in the contemporary images of southern hip-hop are the sonic traditions, complex histories, embodied resilience, and vital understanding of the continuously evolving Black experience.



Sweet Emma and Her Preservation Hall Jazz Band, 1964, Daniel Sweeney Leyer, gelatin silver print. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2016.112



Kenneth Royster
American, born 1944

Washboard Player, 1995

Gelatin silver print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Kenneth Royster in honor of Prof. Samuel L. Green, 2016.41.7



Kenneth Royster
American, born 1944

Young Trombone Players, 1997

Gelatin silver print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Kenneth Royster in honor of Prof. Samuel L. Green, 2016.41.6



Sheila Pree Bright
American, born 1967

Aggravate J Roc, 1995, printed 2021

Archival ink-jet print

Courtesy of the artist, © 2021 Sheila Pree Bright

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Sheila Pree Bright
American, born 1967

Blac Monks (Rap-A-Lot Artist), 1994, printed 2021

Archival ink-jet print

Courtesy of the artist, © 2021 Sheila Pree Bright

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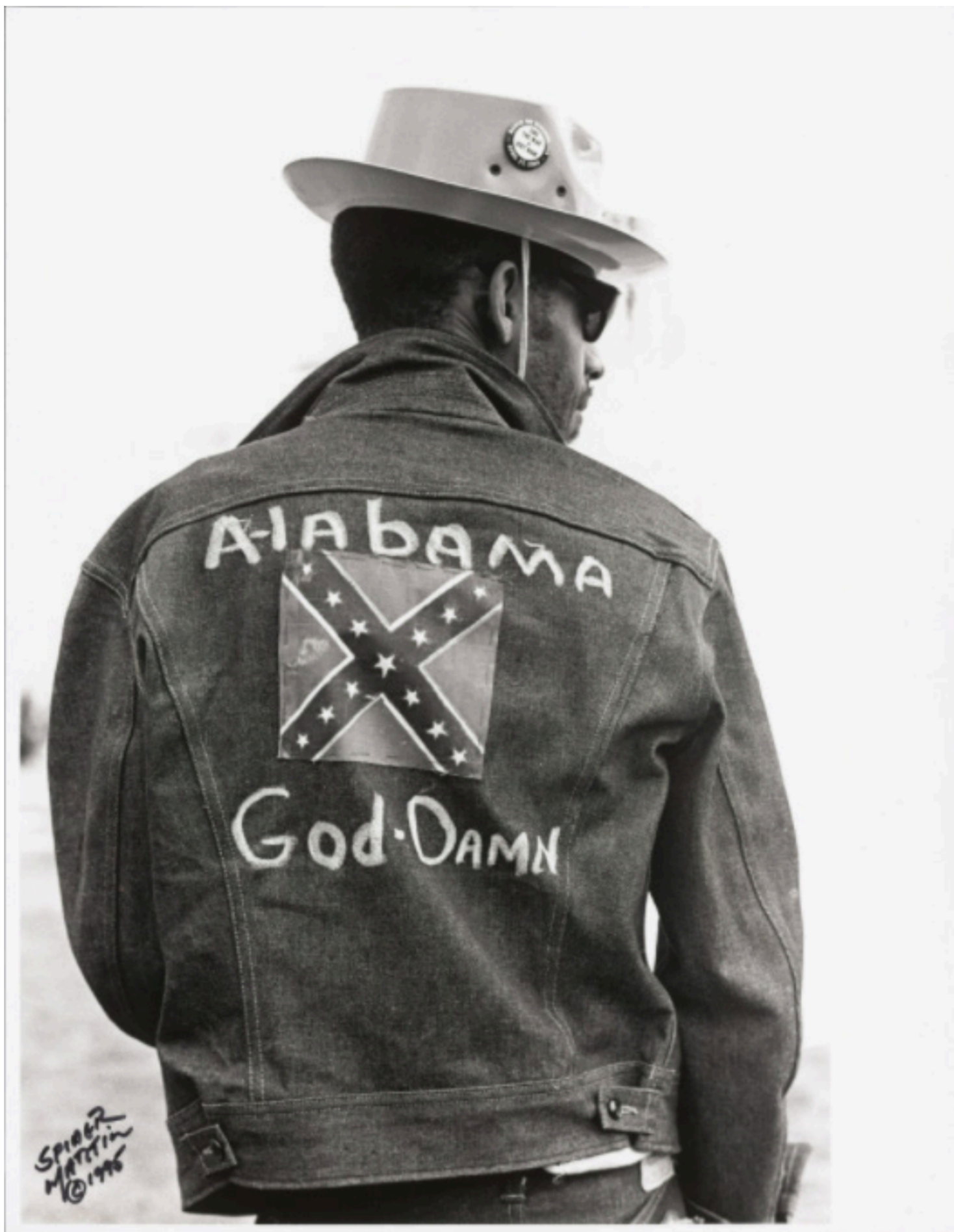
Sheila Pree Bright
American, born 1967

Surround by Sound, 1995, printed 2021

Archival ink-jet print

Courtesy of the artist, © 2021 Sheila Pree Bright

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Spider Martin

American, 1939–2003

Alabama God-Damn, 1965, printed 1995

Gelatin silver print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2011.14.15

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Sheila Pree Bright
American, born 1967

Scarface III, 1995, printed 2021

Archival ink-jet print

Courtesy of the artist, © 2021 Sheila Pree Bright



Jonathan Mannion
American, born 1970

Photographic print of 8 Ball & MJG and friends, 2004

Silver gelatin print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2015.132.247



Jonathan Mannion
American, born 1970

Photographic print of Killer Mike and family, Atlanta, 2005

Silver gelatin print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2015.132.248



Sheila Pree Bright
American, born 1967

Rap-A-Lot Recording Artist, 1995,
printed 2021
Archival ink-jet print

Courtesy of the artist, © 2021 Sheila Pree Bright

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Leonard Freed
American, 1929–2006

Barber Shop, Charleston, SC, 1963, printed 1998

Gelatin silver print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2009.10.10

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Julia Beverly

American, born 1981

Photograph of Rich Boy in front of an "Alabama the Beautiful" sign on I-10,

2005, printed later

Dye and gelatin print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2015.132.148

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Julia Beverly

American, born 1981

Photograph of David Banner in front of a “Mississippi Welcomes You” sign,

2003, printed later

Dye and gelatin print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2015.132.139

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Julia Beverly
American, born 1981

Photograph of David Banner and Ludacris at “Diamond in the Back” shoot, 2004

Dye and gelatin print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2015.132.140

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Arthur Jafa

American, born 1960

**Love Is The Message,
The Message Is Death, 2016**

Video installation; runtime 7:25 min.

Cinematographer, film director, and visual artist Arthur Jafa has endeavored to make visible the nuance of a “black visual intonation.” In the film installation, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, Jafa presents a portrait of Black life in fragments set to a soundtrack of Kanye West’s “Ultralight Beam.” The visual and sonic resonance of the work melds vernacular and artistic film and video footage into a maelstrom of experiences that underscores the external and internalized violence projected upon Black bodies in the United States. The crescendo of fast-moving images delivers a simultaneous primal scream and ecstatic release. We can no longer turn away from the realization that not only is violence upon Black bodies endemic to the Black experience in the United States, but also the resistance to succumb to violence is rooted in an unshakable love that emerges time and time again. After death, a rebirth.

Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of the R. H. Defares to the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2017.34

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James "Son Ford" Thomas
American, 1926–1993

Woman (Head), n.d.

Unfired clay, wig, costume jewelry, marbles, paint

Longwood Center for the Visual Arts, Gift of William and Ann Oppenheimer

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Jonathan Mannion
American, born 1970

Photographic print of Trick Daddy at the Delano Hotel, 2004

Silver gelatin print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2015.132.250

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Earlie Hudnall, Jr.
American, born 1946

Flipping Boy, 4th Ward, Houston, TX, 1983

Gelatin silver print

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Kathleen Boone Samuels Memorial Fund, 2013.183

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