

***The Dirty South: Contemporary Art,
Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse***

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR

Curated by Valerie Cassel

March 12–July 25, 2022

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On its final tour stop at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, *The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse* (on view from March 12–July 25, 2022) served up a resounding success. Contrary to the current trend of highlighting the “global” nature of contemporary art, this show shined a spotlight on the often ignored, marginalized, and appropriated Black American South. Valerie Cassel, exhibition organizer and Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, simultaneously demonstrated harshness and beauty in the region’s history through glittering video, abundant assemblage, and poignant print media.

Though each section in the tripartite exhibition structure (Landscape: The Politics and Poetics of Dirt; Systems of Thought: The

Vision of Envisioning; and The Black Body: Repository/Site/Agent) warranted its own rich exhibition, Cassel’s insistence on Southern artists and Southern subjects provided cohesion. The first work immersed viewers with this notion via Lexington, Kentucky-born Allison Janae Hamilton’s 2019 video [Wacissa](#). Its inverted camera angles and aquatic audio announced that even Florida’s sinister so-called Slave Canal (named for the enslaved people who built it as a channel for the cotton industry), holds beautiful visions for resilient futures.

Many artists proved that the sounds of Black Southern joy are not restricted to the future. In the case of [Red Rambling Rose Spring Song](#) (1976), Alma Thomas (born in Columbus, Georgia) brought Nat King Cole’s “Ramblin’ Rose” to the canvas with sky blue and new green bursting between patches of

poppy red. Others brought quotidian sounds to the ear. Earlie Hundall Jr. (born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and working in Houston, Texas) photographed daily life, such as [Flipping Boy, 4th Ward, Houston, TX](#) (1983), evoking screams of childhood joy, revving engines, and chatter on the block. [Blackwater Baptist Church, Mississippi](#) (1990) offered an entirely different visual encounter with the sonic. Hundall revealed only the back of a figure entering a wooden church through overgrown pines, eliciting solitary stillness rather than sounds on the street.

For a more direct auditory experience, the exhibition also included a playlist. As diverse as the visual art in the exhibition, [the official Dirty South Playlist](#) swings from Solange to Charlie Parker and concludes with Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Exposition Speech from 1895.¹ Though highly attuned to Cassel's regional and joyful thesis, the addition felt underutilized at Crystal Bridges, as visitors had to access the songs by scanning a QR code on their own devices. Though there were no silent spots in the show—the low hum of nearby video never disappeared—more prominent presentation of the playlist would have elevated this contribution as the work of art it is.

Even so, Cassel dismantled the hierarchy of media throughout *The Dirty South*. Giants of painting like

Sam Gilliam (born in Tupelo, Mississippi) and Jacob Lawrence (born in New Jersey, but a famous student of Asheville, North Carolina's Black Mountain College) stood near the more experimental or lesser-known practitioners, like assemblage artist Anderson Johnson (born in Lunenburg County, Virginia) and Dapper Bruce LaFitte, aka Bruce Davenport Jr. (born in New Orleans and working with markers). All reminded us as art historians that museum organizational structures like geographically-based curatorial departments, Eurocentric presentations of a single art-historical narrative, or even medium level divisions between "sculpture" and "decorative arts" are descendants of a White supremacist system—and that, like these artists, we can resist their stranglehold.

The Dirty South showcased nearly 100 years of Black Southern artistic resistance through joy, marking a time span as long and as intellectually dense as the "longue durée" of nineteenth century France.² Artists born into slavery, artists drawing directly on histories of enslavement, and artists inspired by hybrid African and African diasporic spiritualities set the stage for artists working today in response to ongoing racial injustice and continued celebrations of identity.

The most obvious celebration of personhood was the exhibition's abundant portraiture. Washington, DC-born Elizabeth Catlett's undated sculpture, *Portrait*, dazzled the eye with a bronze finish and a knowing gaze. Sheila Pree Bright's similarly glittering photographs, [Terence \(Memphis, TN\)](#) and [Tony \(Memphis, TN\)](#), both from 2009, celebrated the shining pride of grills.³ Sister Gertrude Morgan also unabashedly celebrated herself through her 1965 [Self Portrait/Revelations](#), which showed her in all-white, sent to earth to evangelize and testify, verbally and visually.

Still, the aural animated all. Charlotte, North Carolina-native Romare Bearden's [Three Folk Musicians](#) (1967) portrayed two guitarists and a banjo player in the artist's signature collage, connoting both the music of the figures and the ripping and shuffling of paper combined in the creation of the work. Bill Traylor, born into enslavement in Benton, Alabama, also evoked violent voices with the open mouth and knife-like finger in *Untitled (Blue Man, Red Dog)* (ca. 1939–42). The unmistakable slaveholder's hat of Traylor's *Blue Man* and its unidentifiable canine companion forecasted screaming White police and snarling German Shepherd dogs that, just fourteen years after the artist's death, would become national emblems

for opposition to the Civil Rights Movement.

The power of voice, the poignancy of its loss, and the urge to physically see its presence was also well-represented. Inspired by the parallels between the family separation crisis at the US-Mexico border in 2019 and the impact of the aftermath of the Civil War on Black communities, Bethany Collins (born in Montgomery, Alabama) honored missing family members through [In Mississippi](#) (2019). The artist embossed segments of newspaper ads seeking lost loved ones on black paper, matted and framed in black, reinforcing the racialized dimensions of these losses and nodding towards all-black funeral attire. Likewise, Houston-born Jamal Cyrus's *A Witness* (2019) visualized absence through sewn strips of blue denim, sporadically interrupted by undyed, white streaks. The work reconstructed National Women's Political Caucus co-founder, Mississippi Freedom Summer co-organizer, and Freedom Democratic Party co-chair Fannie Lou Hamer's censored FBI witness testimony regarding racialized police violence against Black voters.⁴

The sounds of Civil Rights history provided the springboard for Fulton, Missouri native Nick Cave's *Soundsuit* (2010), alongside a variety of African and African diasporic

masquerade traditions. The horrific 1991 beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police inspired Cave's first in a series of wearable, performing, and audible full-body coverings, which the artist has likened to protective armor.⁵ The suits also make oblique allusions to many African masquerading traditions, many of which utilize full-body coverings in woven fiber and are used in a diverse range of celebrations and ceremonies. Renée Stout's [*She Kept Her Conjuring Table Very Neat*](#) (1990) offered more specific references to central African divination practices and homages to ancestors through the presentation of portraiture and ritual offerings.⁶ Like Cave's, Stout's assemblage was also inspired by violent White supremacy and the necessity of human presence to activate works of art.⁷ These notions provide particular power in relation to the "verbal/visual nexus" of African arts, the concept whereby an understanding of a rich revue of oral tradition is necessary to interpret visual art across the continent.⁸

During a rise in scholarship on European modernism's roots in African arts, there is a strong desire to identify the specific African visual traditions quoted by contemporary Black Southern artists.⁹ But throughout the exhibition, allusions like the literal Black skin and

white mask of [*Dobale to Spirit*](#) (2017) by Fahamu Pecou (born in Brooklyn, New York and living in Atlanta, Georgia) stood in Fanonian defiance of such identification.¹⁰ Its visage recalled a stylized but slender Dan mask from Côte d'Ivoire,¹¹ but its whiteness was incongruous with the type. By taking pieces from multiple African and African American visual cultures, the artist obscured the painting's roots, reclaiming the forced obfuscation of enslaved individuals' histories. What emerged from the acrobatic pose, contemporary attire, and masked figure was a celebration of a new, distinct identity.

The crown jewel of celebrating identity in the exhibition, however, must be awarded to Rashaad Newsome's [*King of Arms*](#) (2015). Through a rich tapestry curtain and underneath a larger-than-life-size crown, the video gave a five-minute sampling of the New Orleans Museum of Art's staging of the artist's annual King of Arms Art Ball.¹² The performance exalted the resplendent joy of high school homecomings, Mardi Gras, and Carnival, complete with sweet rides, brightly feathered Afro-Brazilian costumes, marching majorettes, and sharp voguing. Video served as the perfect vehicle to emphasize the musical, multidimensional nature of Black art in the South.

Given the strength of the show's regional focus, one is prompted to ask why Crystal Bridges was the final tour stop. Regional tourists (like this author) and the mostly-White, wealthier-than-average residents of Bentonville should celebrate the beautiful and complicated histories of Blackness presented by *The Dirty South*.¹³ But the show could have elevated Black Southern joy for more Black Southern people if it had ended its tour in Memphis, New Orleans, Birmingham, Montgomery, or Atlanta instead of at an institution funded by corporate money (money gained through the labor of imprisoned people, who are disproportionately likely to be Black men).¹⁴

Perhaps the complicated realities of places and spaces for art made Mississippi native Arthur Jaffa's ubiquitous [*Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death*](#) (2016) an even more apt ending for *The Dirty South*. Sitting with an unbroken, seven-and-a-half-minute string of fast-paced clips, flashing joy, death, dancing, violence, performance, memes, and Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter protests in rhythm with contemporary hip-hop provided the perfect opportunity to reflect on everything.

¹ The playlist in its entirety is not even available on Spotify—but it is listed in the exhibition catalog.

² The oldest work in the exhibition is the painting *Untitled (Dreamer)*, ca. 1930, by Palmer Hayden, aka Peyton Cole Hedgeman (born in Widewater, Virginia), or possibly Green Cove Springs, Florida native Augusta Savage’s plaster sculpture *Gamin*, modeled in 1929 and put into plaster by 1940. Certainly, specific works referenced earlier periods: Kara Walker (born in Stockton, California) titled her 2008 multimedia work *A Warm Summer Evening in 1863*.

³ An actual grill—a gilded, removable dental covering—created by King Johnny of Johnny’s Custom Jewelry in Houston, Texas was also on view.

⁴ Cyrus’ commemoration of Hamer’s legacy in denim pays homage to the activist’s past as a sharecropper and to the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee’s use of denim overalls to show solidarity with rural and working classes (see “Fannie Lou Hamer,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, June 10, 1963, <https://vault.fbi.gov/fannie-lou-hamer/Fannie%20Lou%20Hamer%20Part%201%20of%204%20/view>)

⁵ Nichole Bridges, *Currents 109: Nick Cave* (Saint Louis: Saint Louis Art Museum, 2014), n.p.; Ann Landi, “Dressing for Excess,” *ARTnews* 111, no. 6 (June 2012), 67.

⁶ For more on assemblage and commemoration in West African Vodun, see Suzanne Preston Blier, “The Art of Assemblage: Aesthetic Expression and

Social Experience in Danhomè,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 45 (Spring 2004): 186–210.

⁷ This particular work was created simultaneously with a narrative the artist wrote about a fictitious colonel who collected “fetishes.” For more, see Michael D. Harris, “Resonance, Transformation, and Rhyme: The Art of Renée Stout,” in *Astonishment and Power*, by Wyatt Macgaffey and Michael D. Harris (Washington, DC: Published for the National Museum of African Art by the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

⁸ Coined as such in Herbert M. Cole and Doran H. Ross, *The Arts of Ghana* (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1977), 9–12, the term was originally employed for the use of proverbs, riddles, jokes, folktales, and praise songs in visual Akan arts. To this day, oral traditions play a vital role in shaping visual arts across Africa.

⁹ See for instance Suzanne Preston Blier, *Picasso’s Demoiselles: The Untold Origins of a Modern Masterpiece* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

¹⁰ Frantz Fanon’s seminal 1952 volume, *Black Skin, White Masks* examines the individual and systemic effects of White supremacy on the construction of global Black identity. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008).

¹¹ For example: Dan artist, *Face Mask*, wood, 8 3/4 x 4 7/8 in, accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310746>.

¹² Rashaad Newsome, “King of Arms Art Ball,” accessed June 15, 2022, <https://rashaadnewsome.com/king-of-arms-art-ball/>.

¹³ “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Bentonville City, Arkansas,” accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/bentonvillecityarkansas>

¹⁴ Derek Gilna, “Prison Labor Boosts Wal-Mart’s Profits Despite Pledge,” *Prison Legal News* (September 2014): 48. For more statistics on the racial disparities and history of labor contributed by imprisoned people, see Prison Policy Initiative, “U.S. Incarceration Rates by Race and Ethnicity, 2010,” <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/graphs/raceinc.html>; *13th*, dir. Ava DuVernay (Netflix, 2016); Mumia Abu-Jamal and Johanna Fernández, “Locking Up Black Dissidents and Punishing the Poor: The Roots of Mass Incarceration in the US,” *Socialism and Democracy* 28, no. 3 (September 2, 2014): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2014.974983>.