

Press Release

Exhibition

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

November 4, 2021–February 6, 2022



#CAMHDirtySouth
#TrustArtists
#atCAMH
@camhouston

RaMell Ross, *Caspera*, 2020. Large scale archival pigment print, 40 x 60 inches. Image and work courtesy the artist.

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HOUSTON, TEXAS (September 15, 2021) – Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) is excited to present the groundbreaking exhibition *The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse*. Recently called one of the best exhibitions of the year and a tour de force by the Los Angeles Times, *The Dirty South* makes visible the roots of Southern hip-hop culture and reveals how the aesthetic traditions of the African American South

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

5216 Montrose Boulevard
Houston, Texas 77006
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El Franco Lee, II
DJ Screw in Heaven 2, 2016
Neon bulb and single-channel audio, 3:04 minutes
60 x 60 inches
Image and work courtesy the artist

have shaped visual art and musical expression over the last 100 years.

Echoing from New York to Los Angeles in the 1980s, the musical genre of hip-hop became, for many, the empowering language of the voiceless. In the mid-1990s, André 3000 of the Atlanta-based duo OutKast, proclaimed, “The South got something to say!” André’s clarion call shone a light into a centuries-old repository of rich Southern aesthetic traditions rooted in the fraught histories of this nation while centering the South as a vital contributor to the rich musical genre of hip-hop. 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* explores the traditions, aesthetic impulses, and exchanges between the visual and sonic arts over the last century. Featuring a multigenerational group of artists working across a wide range of media—including sculpture, painting, film, photography, and sound—*The Dirty South* presents more than 130 works and will span the entire Museum. The exhibition opens Thursday, November 4, 2021 and remains on view through February 6, 2022.

“CAMH is thrilled to present the virtuosic exhibition *The Dirty South*—those who have seen this ‘love letter to the South’ are enraptured by its depth, complexity, and bracing vision of music, spirituality, and Black life in our region,” said Hesse McGraw, CAMH Executive Director. “We believe *The Dirty South* will be particularly impactful given Curator Valerie Cassel Oliver’s history at CAMH and the centrality of Houston artists embedded throughout the exhibition. We look forward to welcoming audiences to this celebration of the essential contributions of artists to the resilience and joy of life in the South.”

The African American South is testament to both the persistence and regenerative strength of tradition. The evolution of its sonic and visual output, guided by both academically trained artists and other aesthetically astute artists whose creative visions were 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 not simply to survive but to thrive.

While the exhibition is expansive in scope, it has deep roots in Houston. Artists hailing from Texas and Houston are prevalent in *The Dirty South*. From the historic significance of Earlie Hudnall, Jr., Mel Chin, and John Biggers, to contemporary works from established and mid-career artists such as Jamal Cyrus, Robert Hodge, Deborah Roberts, Robert Pruitt, El Franco Lee II, Jason Moran, and Nathaniel Donnett, *The Dirty South* shines a powerful light on artists who call Texas home. Crossing generations, genres, and disciplines,



Nadine Robinson
Coronation Theme: Organon, 2008
Speakers, sound system and mixed media
175 x 18 1/2 x 174 inches
Image and work courtesy the artist and VMFA

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Rodney McMillian
Asterisks in Dockery (Blues for Smoke), 2012
Vinyl, thread, wood, paint and lightbulb
180 x 186 x 216 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles
Photo by Brian Forrest

the featured works illuminate the historical roots and expansive narratives that frame Black experiences. Yet, common themes emerge from these disparate sonic and visual expressions that 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 spiritual beliefs and philosophies foundational to both sacred and secular thought; and the Black body itself. The exhibition's massive Cabinet of Wonder contains musicians' stage wear, instruments, and ephemera, including Bo Diddley's guitar, outfits worn by James Brown and CeeLo Green, Ornette Coleman's saxophone, and original DJ Screw "grey tapes."

The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse is organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) and curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver, Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art (formerly Curator/Senior Curator at CAMH for 16 years). The exhibition's original presentation has been modified for presentation at CAMH and is coordinated by CAMH's Assistant Curator, Patricia Restrepo.

"The confluence between the visual and sonic arts in the Black creative expression has long been recognized. What has remained elusive, particularly in the presentation of these forms, is the long trajectory of this exchange," said Cassel Oliver. "André 3000's iconic phrase, 'The South's got something to say,' really sparks for me a meditation to dig deep and to understand how Southern hip-hop artists were shaping their identity within the bedrock of the landscape that they knew and the creative expression born from the history of that landscape. One then can not help but to see it in the longer arc and interplay between disciplines and genres that reflect the African American South."

Exhibition Artists

Terry Adkins, Charles Henry Alston, Emma Amos, Benny Andrews, Radcliffe Bailey, Romare Bearden, Kevin Beasley, Paul Stephen Benjamin, Julia Beverly, John Biggers, Sanford Biggers, Sheila Pree Bright, Beverly Buchanan, Bisa Butler, Elizabeth Catlett, Nick Cave, Mel Chin, Sonya Clark, Bethany Collins, Abraham Lincoln Criss, Eldzier Cortor, Jamal Cyrus, T.J. Dedeaux-Norris (aka Estate of Tameka Jenean Norris), Beauford Delaney, Thornton Dial, Nathaniel Donnett, Aaron Douglas, William Edmondson, Melvin Edwards, Winton and Rosa Eugene, Minnie Evans, Leonard Freed, Theaster Gates, Sam Gilliam, Allison Janae Hamilton, David Hammons, Palmer Hayden, Robert Hodge, Earlie Hudnall, Jr., Clementine Hunter, Arthur Jafa, Anderson Johnson, William H. Johnson, Dapper Bruce LaFitte (aka Bruce Davenport), Jacob Lawrence, El Franco Lee II, Samella Lewis, James Little, Whitfield Lovell, Jonathan Mannion, Kerry James Marshall, Spider Martin, Rodney McMillian, Michi Meko, Jason Moran, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Marilyn Nance, Rashaad Newsome, Demetrius Oliver, Joe Overstreet, Fahamu Pecou, Rita Mae Pettway, Robert Pruitt,

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CAMH Mission

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston presents extraordinary, thought-provoking arts programming and exhibitions to educate and inspire audiences nationally and internationally.

General Information

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston is located at 5216 Montrose Boulevard, at the corner of Montrose and Bissonnet, in the heart of Houston's Museum District. Hours of operation are Wednesday 12–6PM, Thursday 12–9PM, Friday 12–6PM, Saturday 12–6PM, and Sunday 12–6PM. Admission is always free. For more information, visit CAMH.ORG or call 713.284.8250.

Deborah Roberts, Nadine Robinson, Sulton Rogers, RaMell Ross, Nellie Mae Rowe, Kenneth Royster, Paul Rucker, Augusta Savage, Joyce J. Scott, John Simms, Kevin Sipp, Kaneem Smith, Renee Stout, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, Felandus Thames, Alma Thomas, James “Son Ford” Thomas, Bob Thompson, Mildred Thompson, Mose Tolliver, Bill Traylor, Freeman Vines, Kara Walker, Nari Ward, Arliss Watford, Jack Whitten, William T. Williams, and Purvis Young.

Publication

Accompanying the exhibition is an illustrated catalogue, edited by Cassel Oliver, which will serve as a contemplation on the African American South and feature contributions by Cassel Oliver, alongside noted scholars Fred Moten, Anthony Pinn, Regina Bradley, Rhea Combs, Guthrie Ramsey, Andrea Barwell Brownlee with Park McArthur and Jennifer Burris, Roger Reeves, Kirsten Pai Buick, Charlie Braxton and Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky, That Subliminal Kid. The publication will also feature an exhibition checklist, plates of the works in the exhibition, artists' biographies and a bibliography.

Exhibition Ephemera Attributed To

Chuck Berry, James Brown, Ornette Coleman, Robert Earl Davis, Jr. (aka DJ Screw), Bo Diddley, CeeLo Green, James Richard “Dick” Griffin, King Johnny, Donnie Lewis (aka MadSkillz), and Sun Ra.

Support

CAMH's presentation is funded in part by the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance.

Please visit camh.org for a complete list of Museum programs relating to this exhibition.