

VISUAL ART

## This Powerful Art Exhibit Proves the South Still Has Something to Say

The Dirty South makes a bold statement about the intersections between Southern culture, visual art and music.

By [Amarie Gipson](#) • November 15, 2021

### The Dirty South Exhibit at CAMH Proves the South Still Has Something to Say



# THE DIRTY SOUTH

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

Emerging from New York to Los Angeles in the 1980s, the musical genre of hip-hop became, for many, the language of the voiceless. However, until the mid-1990s, notably after the release of the seminal 1993 Atlanta-based duo OutKast, who proclaimed that the South had something to say. André 3000's light into a contemporary registry of rich southern aesthetic traditions rooted in the fraught history of this nation. With the expression "Dirty South" is confined within the culture of southern hip-hop music, it encompasses a much broader understanding of the geographic, history, and culture of the Black South. The Dirty South explores the traditions, creative impulses, and exchanges between the visual and sonic arts over the last century.

Crossing generations, genres, and disciplines, the featured works examine the historical roots and separate narratives that frame Black experiences. Yet, common themes emerge from these varying 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 antebellum-rural 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 artists trained through the traditions of the academy and those whose creative visions were honed through family and community experience, stands as proof. The rich exchange between these disciplines has helped foster an understanding of the South as a place where tradition and complex histories continue to dog persistence for Black bodies not simply to survive but to thrive.

The Dirty South Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse is organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver, Deputy and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. The exhibit's presentation is coordinated by CAMH Assistant Curator Patricia Restrepo. Sponsorship for The Dirty South Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse is provided by the Texas Commission on the Arts, with major support provided by Chihuly and Eddie Allen and additional support from Penelope and Lester Marks.

Resonando desde Nueva York hasta Los Angeles en la década de los ochenta, el género musical de hip-hop se convirtió para muchos en la lengua de los sin voz. No obstante, los músicos del sur no eran una fuerza reconocida en el movimiento hasta mediados de la década de los noventa, notablemente después del lanzamiento del álbum de 1993 de los OutKast de Atlanta, quienes proclamaron que el sur tenía algo que decir. La lírica de André 3000 abrió una vía a un registro contemporáneo de ricas tradiciones estéticas sureñas en historias plagadas de esta nación.

Aunque la expresión "Dirty South" (sucio sur) está confinada dentro de la cultura de la música hip-hop sureña, abarca una comprensión mucho más amplia de la geografía, la historia y la cultura negra del sur. The Dirty South (El sucio sur) explora las tradiciones, los impulsos creativos y los intercambios entre las artes visuales y sonoras durante el último siglo.

Abrazando generaciones, géneros y disciplinas, las obras presentadas examinan las raíces históricas y las narrativas expansivas que encuadran las experiencias negras. Sin embargo, temas comunes surgen de estas diversas expresiones sonoras y visuales que hablan colectivamente de las influencias que han configurado y sostenido a las comunidades y culturas negras a lo largo de las décadas: el refugio del paisaje—natural y creado por humanos; un sistema penitenciaro de creencias y filosofías fundamentales tanto para el pensamiento sagrado como para el secular; y el propio cuerpo negro.

El sur afroamericano es un testamento a la persistencia y también a la fuerza regenerativa de la tradición. La evolución de su producción musical y visual, guiada por artistas formados a través de las tradiciones de la Academia y aquellos cuyas visiones creativas se perfeccionaron a través de experiencias familiares y comunitarias, permaneció como una prueba. El profundo intercambio entre estas disciplinas ha ayudado a fomentar la comprensión del sur como un lugar donde las historias complejas y problemáticas continúan persiguiendo a la sociedad en el presente, incluso cuando ha dejado espacio—bajo una persistencia inquebrantable—para que los cuerpos negros no solo sobrevivan sino que prosperen.

The Dirty South Contemporary Art, Material Culture and the Sonic Impulse (El sucio sur: arte contemporáneo, cultura material, y el impulso sonoro) está organizada por el Virginia Museum of Fine Arts y curada por Valerie Cassel Oliver, la curadora auxiliar de Sydney y Frances Lewis para arte moderno y contemporáneo. La presentación de la exposición en el Contemporary Arts Museum Houston está coordinada por la Curadora Asistente Patricia Restrepo. El patrocinio de presentación para The Dirty South (El sucio sur) es proporcionado por Texas Commission on the Arts, adicional de Penelope y Lester Marks.

Valerie Cassel Oliver's exhibition, *The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse* makes a cosmic return to the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

IMAGE: HOUSTONIA/NIC HIGH

**THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS MUSEUM HOUSTON'S** (CAMH) latest effort, *The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse* is a historic undertaking brought forth by Houston native, noted scholar and curator Valerie Cassel Oliver.

*The Dirty South*, on view through February 2022, explores a century of Black visual and sonic traditions. Rooted in three central themes—landscape, religion and the Black body—the exhibition features over 140 artworks by a multigenerational roster of self-taught and academically trained artists. The exhibition made its debut at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in May 2021, and its Houston premiere marks a special homecoming.

**Here's an excerpt from *Houstonia's* Winter 2021 issue on stands November 30.:**

For nearly two decades, Cassel Oliver has dedicated her career to championing the work of Black artists, especially those from the U.S. South. Before embarking on her role as the Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the VMFA, she spent nearly 17 years as the senior curator at CAMH, where she organized an array of groundbreaking exhibitions. Towards the end of her tenure, Cassel Oliver proposed a project that would investigate how hip-hop provided contemporary artists of the 1980s with what she describes as, "a real sense of self." The exhibition idea followed her to Richmond, where she has spent the past four years deepening her research and building the VMFA's permanent collection. "The power that Houston has presented to the world is so amazing. A lot of growth and cosmopolitanism was happening there and artists were bringing attention to that power and creativity. The music was giving visual artists a license to press forward," Cassel Oliver says. Visual artists like Jason Moran, Kaneem Smith, Mel Chin, Melvin Edwards, John Biggers, Robert Hodge, and Jamal Cyrus represent the best of the city's dexterity.

*The Dirty South* is a history sweeping tribute to the genius and ingenuity embedded within Black Southern culture, from Grillz to jazz and slabs. Undoubtedly her most ambitious project to date, the exhibition is a culmination of Cassel Oliver's curatorial endeavors, as several of her previous shows have nourished its conception, including a number of first-rate presentations at CAMH. "There's no one American visual narrative," Cassel Oliver concludes. "There are multiple and some of them converge into one another. In our desire to compress and get to one, we ignore all of these other narratives that are so crucial to understanding our true selves. That was the part I wanted to get to with *The Dirty South*. We have to understand that the South is the American story, everything happens here."