

ADKINS  
CLARK  
EDWARDS  
GILLIAM  
HENDRICKS  
LINZY  
ODITA  
OLIVIER  
RINGGOLD  
WILLIAMS

**MAGICAL  
VISIONS**

**10**

CONTEMPORARY  
AFRICAN AMERICAN  
ARTISTS



# MAGICAL VISIONS

10 CONTEMPORARY  
AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS



University Museums  
OLD COLLEGE GALLERY  
**MECHANICAL HALL GALLERY**  
MINERALOGICAL MUSEUM

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## FOREWORD

Bringing together artists whose work spans the decades from the 1960s to the present, *Magical Visions: Ten Contemporary African American Artists* reveals the rich complexity of African American art today. Shown together here for the first time, works by these artists provide an unparalleled opportunity to consider how creativity commemorates, transforms, engages, and questions.

Sam Gilliam found a point of departure in the Washington Color School but soon challenged any conventional concept of “painting on canvas” with works that float free of conventional boundaries of the support. Faith Ringold invokes traditions of women’s work, quilt making, and storytelling to articulate narratives through paint and fabric. Abstraction gains new meaning in William T. Williams’s compositions, in which gesture, African symbol, and Islamic calligraphy coalesce.

In media ranging from digital imagery to welded steel, from video to installation, these works reward contemplation. Multiple meanings and layers reveal themselves as we consider Terry Adkins’s invocation of the hierarchies of institutionalized religion, Kalup Linzy’s satirical and funny examination of black stereotypes, Sonya Clark’s meditation on a comb as tool and cultural icon, or Karyn Oliver’s exploration of “twins” that in the end underscores difference.

Personal stories as well as broader histories—American, African, Caribbean— offer a point of departure. Patterns of African art, pop art, and popular culture might inform the works of Odili Odata, but his art, to borrow guest curator Keith Morrison’s phrase, “reflects the pulse of the African landscape discharging its energy into cyberspace.” Barkley L. Hendricks’s image of a man in a Superman T-shirt may allude to Bobby Seale’s statement that “Superman never saved any Black People,” but it also creates a masterful composition that oscillates between abstraction and representation, between portrait and icon. The welded manacles, chains, and locks of the sculptures of Mel Edwards have an unmitigated force, both formal and thematic, that challenges mere formalistic analysis and compels the viewer to confront history.

On behalf of the University Museums of the University of Delaware, I want to thank all of the artists and galleries that have generously lent works for this exhibition. Also, I express my deepest gratitude to guest curator Keith Morrison, who found time amid his work as artist, teacher, and writer to undertake this exhibition and offer to the University community and public a unique opportunity to experience the multiple horizons opened to us by ten masters of contemporary art.

Janis A. Tomlinson  
Director, University Museums  
University of Delaware



# MAGICAL VISIONS

Keith Morrison

*Magical Visions* brings together the work of ten artists who have made significant contributions to American art over the last half century. Their ideas, emerging at various times, have to varying degrees pioneered changes in the art world that are important today. They work in media ranging from assemblage, fiber, painting, photography, printmaking, quilt making, and sculpture to video with performance. Each of them has pioneered imagery independent of traditional art theories (such as abstraction, formalism, principles of craft versus art, performance art, and portraiture) through their own visual perceptions, which are sometimes formally elusive and outside the parameters of art theory—hence the title *Magical Visions*.

In keeping with the mandate of the gallery, to exhibit African American art and art by people of African descent, the artists included here are mostly from the United States but also from Africa and the Caribbean. Each is highly sophisticated and well informed about how their work relates both to art made in the past and to art made in the present. Each has brought a new dimension into the dominant cultural parameters of contemporary art. The title of the exhibition, *Magical Visions*, supports the idea that the work of every one of these artists springs from perceptive originality and joins the established visual conventions each of them knows so well. By “perceptive” I mean a set of personal choices that develops outside the prevailing art conventions that attract the artists as points of departure. These are not “outsider” artists in the sense of being indifferent to conventions. Their perceptions are neither reactionary nor rebellious, but in each case, in different ways, these are artists whose works are born of a freely confident search for originality by pushing boundaries of contemporary art. Their ideas are attuned to vanguard art theories and directions of our time but bring to the table new dimensions of image making. They add to their works ideas that, though often running in parallel, have not been focused on by earlier, conventional art analysis. Ten of the most highly original points of view, developed apart from the conventions of our time, are to be seen in the work of these artists. Their art reveals that some of the best African American artists have expanded or shifted the visual paradigm of contemporary art. Although certainly not alone in this venture, their works have added to the vocabulary of art, so that what was essentially a Euro-American paradigm a short half century ago has evolved, in no small measure thanks to the work of these artists, into a more global concept, making art today more reflective of the cultural heterogeneity of our time.



Terry Adkins, *Bishop*, 2011. 4 photographs as a set of one, 24 x 36

TERRY ADKINS, activist, artist, commentator, musician, and poet, has been working in a variety of art media for more than twenty years. Adkins is like a shaman, playing formal and improvised instruments in ways that mesmerize, dramatize, and ultimately express imagery about the African American/African spirit. His work includes installation concepts with sculpture, performance, photography, poetry, and, as noted, music. Often his work is collaborative; he joins with other artists to create and perform ritualistic and ceremonial environments. His art seeks to immortalize cultural icons and to replay historic occasions and associations, especially about the African American past. His mission: to elevate or restore significant cultural and political icons who have affected the African American legacy to their rightful place in history.

Adkins's art, whether performed in a group or alone, engages audience participation. His art is essentially conceptual, seeking the most salient means to identify and symbolize his image. He researches his subject, establishes a historic context, and selects or creates objects and emblems that signify the meaning he wishes to express. Sometimes he presents his idea through photographs, alone or with objects. At other times he adds music to verse he writes. In the manner of the ancient carrier of traditions and messages, Adkins is a purveyor of truth through metaphor. The objects in his work cannot be identified by a style but by a craftsmanship that refines found or manufactured objects in a way that brings to them a singular spirituality that makes their historic significance live again. In his guise as a musician—drumming, playing flute, saxophone, or some other instrument—his music is refined, with tones echoing spirituals, blues, jazz, and a complexity of contemporary sounds from the music hall to the street, from the formal to the vernacular. He may write verse to recite by himself or in collaboration, sometimes with his audience, or the verse can be improvised or spontaneous. He makes icons of sacred places (black minstrel material, pulpits, jail cells), historic people, both black and white (John Brown, Sojourner Truth, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison), or great musicians (Thelonius Monk, Billie Holiday, Max Roach, Ludwig van Beethoven).

The photos in the exhibition, entitled *Bishop*, reference Catholicism (the artist's roots), which Adkins renewed when he lived for a year in Rome near Vatican City. They are about the sacred and the profane, the hierarchy of government and the perceived corruption of the papacy. These images also appear to be related to priestlike musical and religious ceremony in African American culture. As in many of his works, Adkins uses the cultural lens in his African American soul to explore universal stories with empathy and compassion.

SONYA CLARK has come to international prominence over the last twenty years. From the foundation of working with fiber, Clark has developed an extensive range of expression that includes a variety of materials, such as textiles, glass, beads, amulets, found objects, plastics, photographs, and other mementos, which she presents in two- or three-dimensional form as wall hangings and environmental installations. Linking objects and surfaces to the imagery of material culture, she makes forms and environments of memory from found objects, fragments of her own past and of her ancestral and cultural ancestry. A pioneer in elevating craft to the highest level of art, Clark makes works that connect the act of art making to the experience of ceremony, to the occult, to cultural memory, and to reclamation of culture. Clark's works are sometimes freestanding icons, sometimes environmental experiences, or objects of adornment. Her work recaptures memory as much as it relives it, transforming imagery of the past into metaphors for the present. Clark's art is steeped in human history with African history at its core, but it is no less respectful of European history. Her art manifests the importance of the hand as the maker of the object and the purveyor of communication between people, and, along with the brain, the dual tool central to visual anthropology. Her work is highly crafted. Objects made or found are hewn, woven, polished, and refined with her hand with a sensibility or high deference for the historic ritual of making and transmitting culture, not only as information but art as sacrament. She has explored communication tools, such as beads and amulets, as symbols of current and historic connectedness. Networks of transmission and reception are exemplified in her work through systems that relate to their use in ancient African cultures. She has also investigated the theme of pairs, in which she uses eyeglasses and images of twins and Ibeji to celebrate twoness or bifurcation. (Carved by the Yoruba people of Nigeria, Ibeji are divine twins that represent duality, the union of opposites, and the union of the same idea.) She has done work exploring the theme of heads and wigs, sometimes using complex mathematical formulas to develop patterns in headdresses. Another theme is roots, having to do with ancestry, but developed with imagery of human cells, suggesting growth, bifurcation, branch structures, systems, physiology, and technology. She is also interested in shared cultural identity: the African American flag, Ghanaian Kente cloth, weave structures on a European loom, or a gele (African woman's headdress). Her work on the theme of hands is her homage to the skill of making. Yet another of Clark's themes, the comb, one of the most ancient of human tools, is especially significant in human history, which Clark memorializes through its role in the African legacy. Striking a careful balance between exploiting its formal attributes and recognizing its importance to culture and identity, she explores the complex psychological uses of the comb as a symbol of hairstyling, cultural heritage, racial identity, gender politics, standards of beauty, vanity,



Sonya Clark, *Long Hair*, 2007. Digital print, 96 x 28 x 24. Courtesy of Sonya Clark

attitude, and intimidation, but also of fear and pain when hair is difficult to comb. In this exhibition Clark presents two digital prints about hair, one of her most explored subjects. One, *Parting*, is a series of six digital prints with a human hand parting hair. The part suggests division, change, togetherness, and uncertainty. Clark extends concepts of craft into forms that are allegorical and tell a metaphorical tale through the trails of human history.

MELVIN EDWARDS developed sculpture that infuses abstract art with issues of African ancestry, slavery, and the African American experience. Much of Edwards's inspiration comes from his life in America but also from Africa, where he spends several months each year in Senegal. Edwards is known for his large public sculpture, smaller freestanding works, and the kinetic Rockers series. His large-scale works include *Mt. Vernon* and *Homage to Billie Holiday and the Young Ones at Soweto*. He is also formidable printmaker.

In the evolution of metal sculpture beginning about the first third of the twentieth century, one could consider three important directions to which Edwards's work relates yet stands apart, the sculptures of Julio Gonzáles, Henry Moore, and David Smith: Gonzáles, for his pioneering drawing in space with metal; Moore, for abstract metal sculpture combined with psychological allegory; and Smith, for enlarging totemic abstract forms that merge raw metal with manufactured form. Edwards's works sit among this group, involving some of their ideas but taking them in a different direction. Edwards's art brings to reality the idea of subject matter in abstraction. The paradigm of modern sculpture had been the evolution of pure (nonobjective) abstraction from Constantin Brancusi to, say, David Smith; and the evolution of abstract figuration from Pablo Picasso to Henry Moore. The latter, of course, made important forays into abstract sculpture and art with subject matter, but echoes of figuration can be seen as for the basis of his abstraction. Edwards's abstractions, by contrast, are based on human ornaments and tools more than on the figure itself. His sculpture animates the cultural anthropology of the utilitarian object. He has pioneered the concept of the psychology of the image being carried through the cultural memory that is latent in objects and tools. Edwards's forms are images of implements that suggest cultural struggle, echoes of harrowing bondage, cruelty, and toil. His sculpture transforms a general paradigm of abstract form in space to a specific awareness of cultural iconography in space. His images, in both substance and psychology, have the look of iron. Typically, he makes his art from a variety of metal objects, including chains, locks, hammers, and railroad splices (the bar connecting railroad tracks), and charms, transforming them into emblems of an African ancestral past and its permutation through the Americas, North and South. His art conjures implements of slavery into abstract iconic forms that express the cultural spirit of the African international journey. Perhaps there is no better evidence of Edwards's development of implements into sculpture than his *Lynch Fragments*. These small, welded metal wall reliefs, informed by the history of brutality to black people in North America, have been developed



Melvin Edwards, *Bara Niasse Tugge*, 2008. Welded steel, 14 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 6 3/4.  
Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY

by the artist, with varying periods of intensity, since 1963. There are now more than two hundred pieces in the series. These sculptures, most about a foot tall, are meant to be hung on the wall at eye level. The essence of these works lies in the transformation to which Edwards subjects the objects he finds to use in these sculptures. The objects are so radically changed that they are perceived as abstractions that belie the state in which he found them, all the while retaining the aura of their origin as utilitarian objects and the spirit of historic brutality for which they were used. Edwards forges, welds, bends, and stretches the metal objects in these works—hammer heads, scissors, locks, chains, and railroad splices—and transforms them into a new kind of sculpture.



Sam Gilliam *David*, 2011. Mixed media, 89 x 67 x 17. Courtesy of Sam Gilliam

**SAM GILLIAM** is one of the most important painters of the twentieth century, having burst on the scene of American art in the early 1960s. His landmark paintings float the canvas from the stretcher, making color and form ethereal. Over the years he has expanded that concept by giving pigment visceral solidity and blurring the lines between painting and sculpture; adding collage elements in ways that change the concept of space; charging colors with scintillating light so that they seem to be a chimera; raking and building paintings from the floor; making architectural structures and environments; and exploring forms that move

off the surface in rhythmic and polyrhythmic pattern and counterpoint. Working amid the Washington Color School artists, such as Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, and Gene Davis, Gilliam's painting became distinguished from theirs as he freed the canvas from the wall and made it flow freely in space. Like many of his contemporaries, Gilliam applies paint to his canvas in ways that maintain the flatness of the pictorial surface, yet he wrinkles, tears, creases, and rumples his draped forms, canvases unsupported by stretchers, varies the thickness of his pigments, using many tools to trowel, mold, and spray his surfaces. Gilliam brought to American painting an entirely new concept of space and surface and the idea of a medium between painting and sculpture. From the early '60s through the mid-1970s Gilliam explored draped paintings. In the '70s and '80s he investigated painterly construction, adding other materials, such as wood, plastic, and metal, to the surfaces, combining them with pigment and sometimes returning the artwork to the wall. At other times during this period he made large wall paintings with layers of pigment applied and scraped with a restless hand, exploring imagery that moved within the flat surface. In the late '80s and '90s he made a series of large public pieces that were sculptural, combining metals and plastics with pigment for work to be shown either in- or out of doors. From that period until now he has explored the illusion of the tactile object, making forms that drape or flow, often with transparency, so that the space, though tangible, is disorienting. Gilliam's art has long seemed chimerical, where what you think you see is not always what you get. Like his earliest Color School peers, he is a colorist, but he moved away from them with his use of glittering surfaces, scintillating textures, and fractured light. His work in the present exhibition is an image that involves the architectural planes of the walls and floors of the gallery with the organic space of the draped canvas. Gilliam's art, at once visceral and cerebral, has changed the paradigm of painting, extending it into sculptural and environmental space and, through complex surfaces and color, created a visual spectre that alternates imagery from the tactile to the mystical form.

BARKLEY L. HENDRICKS came to national attention as a painter in the early 1970s, when his work was included in *Contemporary Black Artists in America*, at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Using the dual eye of painter and photographer, Hendricks paints both portraits and landscapes. His imagery spans a wide range of people and places, of different races and ethnicities. His likenesses of African Americans create a new kind of portraiture, in which clothes and jewelry tell of the hip urban life, bling, and attitude. A Hendricks portrait—and his works in this exhibition are portraits—is a fierce, uncompromising statement about urban African American style, guile, and ego. Hendricks’s figures typically appear to be oblivious to art or art history, as if they are simply posing for the camera, revealing attitude more than inner self. However, his paintings are highly structured and sometimes conceptually formal and compositionally reductive. *Icon for My Man Superman*, in the present exhibition, is a case in point. The figure forms a curvilinear abstraction in silhouette against a flat background, and it also is in front of a faux frame, becoming a picture in front of a picture. The image of Superman bursts from the stomach of the figure like an abstract explosion in space. Nevertheless, the initial effect of the whole is of a defiant black man posing in a Superman shirt. What’s so compelling about a Hendricks painting is that it may be perceived on two levels: either as a sophisticated composition or as a social statement. The statement is about the irrelevance of black people to Superman, reflecting Bobby Seale’s statement, “Superman never saved any Black People.”

Hendricks makes a camera-conscious painting of a black man with the affect of an image outside the archetypal poses of art history. His other print in the exhibition, *Iconic Dexter*, is quite abstract, an image in three interrelated tones, simplified into a posterlike form that belies its compositional complexity. Hendricks’s people are not defiant; instead, they are comfortable in their skin, showing their world and their style. His perceptions are ultrakeen as he captures the essence of his people through how they pose, how they gaze, how they dress. Hendricks brings a cool, streetwise style to the look of the portrait. He has pioneered art that anticipated issues being explored by a younger generation of artists such as Michelene Thomas, Kerry James Marshall, Jeff Sonhouse, and Kahinde Wiley. Hendricks’s works show him to be one of the seminal painters of the last three decades.



Barkley L. Hendricks, *My Man Superman (Superman Never Saved Any Black People—Bobby Seale)*, 1969. Oil, acrylic, and aluminum leaf on linen canvas, 59 1/2 x 48. Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY

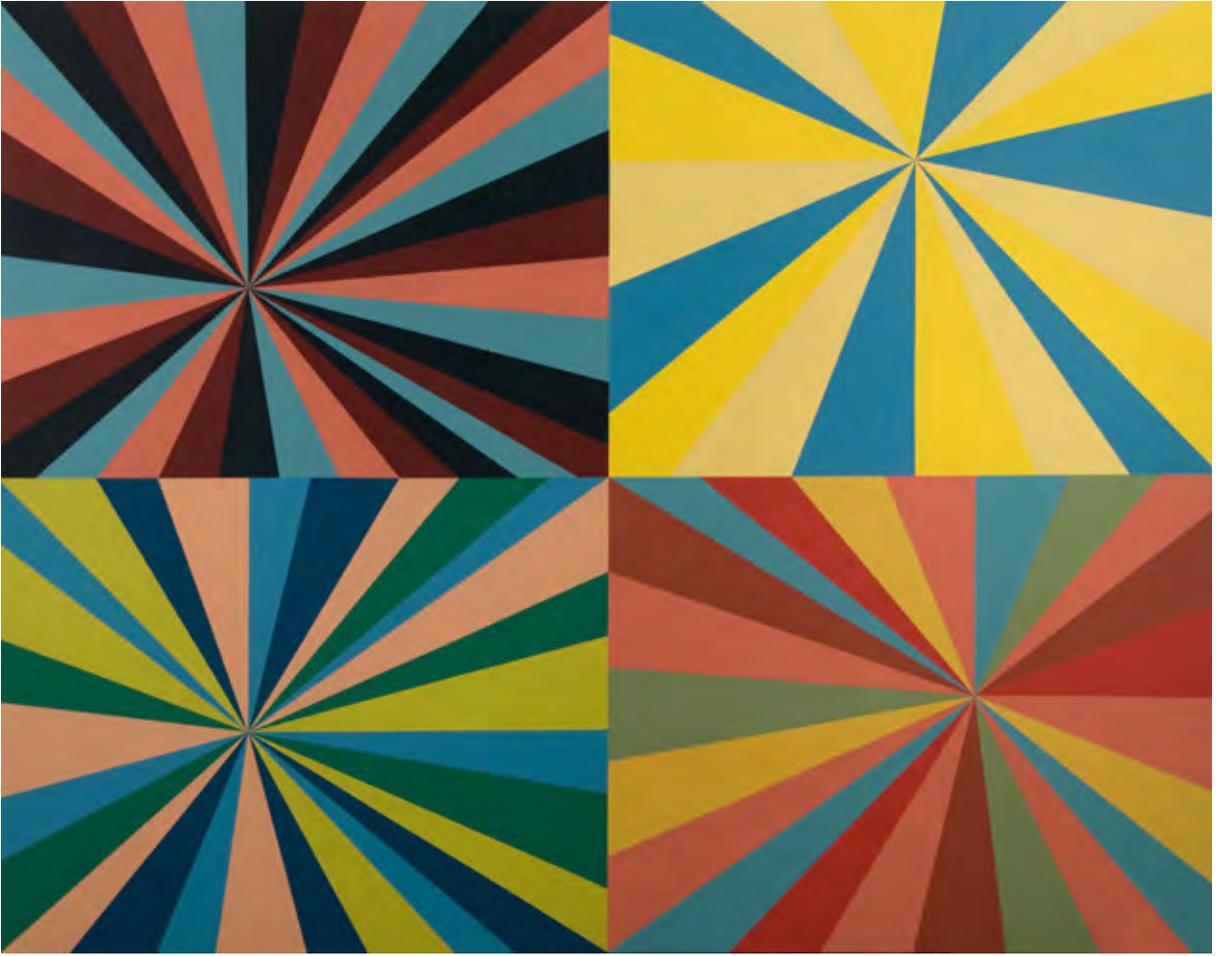
KALUP LINZY has come to wide attention in American art over the last decade with his innovative videos, first shown at the Studio Museum in Harlem, then at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, and the Brooklyn museums. A multidisciplinary artist, Linzy works in video, music, painting, and live performance. His work is satirical, bawdy, thrilling, almost beyond categorization. His mining of stereotypical black characters and queer life has expanded art and merged it with entertainment.

Linzy's best-known work is a series of videos satirizing the tone and narrative approach of television soap operas. He performs most of the characters himself, many of them in drag. He also performs many of the same characters onstage. Through his characters he explores such issues as vanity, family neurosis, racial stereotype, and materialism. Whereas the meaning of the subject matter of other excellent artists can be difficult to determine, Linzy's is the opposite, engaging his audience's ability to identify with his characters and narrative. The African American experience, good, bad, and comical, is at the essence of his art. From his early study of visual communication art (rather than filmmaking), Linzy learned to focus on popular media and narratives. His work relates to a tradition of African American TV humorists, such as Flip Wilson, Red Foxx, Richard Pryor, and filmmaker Tyler Perry. Linzy's work is distinguished by the clarity of his wit, his aesthetic, the poetry of his narrative, and a sense of sexual confusion and role reversal. Like the black comedians mentioned, he draws in his audience through wit. This is performance art of the self in many guises, telling as much about the characters as about our social mores. His aesthetic is not the one-liner but the short story: his characters tell about events and respond to situations or fantasized aspirations. Typically they put themselves in situations that fuel the audience's mirth. Linzy arranges his own lighting and effects for the shooting of his videos and creates his own makeup for each of his characters in exquisite detail. The strategy of his tableaux is self-reflection and unconscious self-deprecation. Linzy's characters are confident in their delusions and oblivious to the humor they reveal. Linzy's art is the duality of the vulnerability of his characters and their absurd conceit. His "sister Lucretia" reminds one of Flip Wilson's "Geraldine" in the TV shows of the seventies, yet there are significant differences between them. Whereas Wilson



Kalup Linzy, *Conversations wit de Churen VII: L'il Myron's Trade*, 2009. Digital video on DVD, 9 min. 49 sec. Courtesy of Kalup Linzy

satirized black women through Geraldine, his own persona was separate. Ditto the late Red Foxx and Tyler Perry, who used black culture as a basis for satire on TV and in film. However, Linzy is not afraid to reveal himself through his characters: it is not simply a satire of Lucretia but of Linzy himself in drag. Linzy's art is not like a TV show or a movie; rather, it bridges a gap between imagery of popular culture and imagery of art, a seamless relationship between made-for-TV and performance art. His art also breaks down the barrier between an artistically informed eye and the perception of the non-art-conscious person on the street. His work not only brings black pop culture to performance art, it brings new audiences as well. Yet, as his art entertains, it also disturbs. At the center of our discomfiture may be the disorientation resulting from his cross-dressing: we enjoy the voyeuristic experience it provides, but we are uncertain of the persona and sexuality it reveals and challenges us to examine ourselves.



Odili Odita, *TV Eye*, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 90. Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY

**ODILI ODITA** emerged onto the art scene in the 1990s making paintings, photomontages, objects, and conceptual imagery in a variety of materials as he searched to create an art of new cultural fusion. His work in this exhibition exemplifies his abstract voice at a time when many thought abstract art a revered but closed book. Odita reopened its pages to explore new strategies for abstract meaning. His paintings are of zigzag patterns and color variations that tease and surprise. He explores a visual language of forms that pulsate with staccato colors. His paintings echo different environments yet elude specificity. His paintings, sometimes large, sometimes installations, have moved the concept of abstract art from formal analysis, expression, or reductivism into a realm of mass-cultural association. An

intercultural liminalism is at the center of Odira's abstractions. As has been often noted, Odira was born in Africa, grew up in the United States, where his father is a historian of African art, and studied art in some of the best institutions in the country. And has also often been noted, his work seeks to synthesize his cultural duality, involving imagery of African patterns, U.S. and world pop culture, fashion, advertisement, mass media, television, and science fiction. His work seems futuristic and scientific, but at the same time they are like vistas of contemporary world culture. His imagery reminds one at once of Madison Avenue and Timbuktu. His music-inspired rhythms span continents and may be just as easily associated with Philip Glass or Miles Davis as with Fela Kuti or Salif Keita. This transcontinental vision is not sterilized into "objectivity" or cultural avoidance but is the vision of an artist whose perception explores specific cultural codes—Kente cloth, tropical colors, African patterns, persistence of rhythm through the lens of the black experience—developed from a fundamentally African platform. Yet his imagery is not parochial or ethnic but a reinterpretation of symbols in a way that reveals them to be metaphysical, like codes in a new cosmogony. Odira's art reflects the pulse of the African landscape discharging its energy into cyberspace. His palette changes with moods or intention more than from formal visual logic. Yet, if his formal choices are personal, his imagery is identifiably public. He is a highly personal artist whose imagery reveals a universally shared mnemonic. Odira's art is not about the formalist issues of Kenneth Noland or Barnett Newman, nor about the optical illusions of, say, Bridget Riley or Victor Vasarely, although his work is informed by all of these. Conceptually, his work may be closer to that of Mark Rothko, finding in abstraction mood and a sense of place. His visual codes form a new international cultural synthesis and a framework in which people of different cultures and classes may find a common aesthetic. His art is about the ability of the individual to identify his or her world through commonly shared cross-cultural associations.

KARYN OLIVIER is a conceptual artist whose work has come to prominence over the last decade. Her media include sculpture, installation, public works, photography, and video, through which she explores social interaction with familiar objects and spaces. Her work involves the changing character of intimacy as it fluctuates between a personal and a social experience.

Olivier's works, which hover on the border between crafted and found objects, elicit nostalgia, sentiment, and historical memory. They are architectural in the sense that they inspire an appreciation of functionality and an understanding of new kinds of space. Although her objects are identifiable, each one bears a sense of abstraction in how it rearranges our perception of space beyond its literal reality. Some of her works are installations of objects (e.g., toys, playgrounds, fences). At other times she makes videos of the urban language (e.g., billboards, signs, buildings). Often in her work there are social contrasts and abrupt transitions: industrial to rural, rich to poor, refined to shabby, all positing experiences of psychological and sociological differences, changes, or growth. This is also evident in the atmosphere of the environment of opposites she creates: light to dark, day to night, or natural to artificial light. Olivier's work is often about dwelling: how and where people live and in the contrasts in the dwellings and furnishings that form the spaces they occupy or make for themselves. Her works reinterpret space and objects, making furniture into architecture, trash into decoration, or kitsch into icon. Her exterior installations, such as swings and carousels, have a sense of child's play yet are like precursors to adulthood. It is as if they were foundations for civilization created from found objects, improvisation, and vernacular cultures. Olivier's sculptures are meticulously crafted and engineered: furniture is well made and fitted to architectural environments; playground swings and slides are well designed; machines such as carousels work properly. Her aesthetic is less about what is discarded and more about imaginative recycling, beginning, perhaps, with the skills



Karyn Olivier, *Favelas and 2x4* from the series *Double Vision*, 2009. C-print, 3 3/4 x 5 3/4. Courtesy of Karyn Olivier

learned from childhood play. Her sense of the city, whether she takes us into it through a video or across a playground, is perceived in her oeuvre as building through play. Her work is about the spaces and objects that form urban anthropological evolution. A sense of time is a significant catalyst in her work: child's play to adulthood; transformation from the basic to the complex; objects recycled from one function to another; things transformed from new to old; forms evolving from detritus to the precious. Olivier's art is an ecological evolution through time and space.

Olivier is represented in the present exhibition by five photographs showing aspects of urban dwelling. In *Double Houses* we see identical houses side by side, a duplication and anonymity yet subtly suggesting by their lack of conspicuous manicure separate individualities within. Her *Favelas* show the density of the teeming inner city, underscored by the wood slab attached (although part of the photograph) to the side, an image of the dilapidated inner city. *Black Sculptures* show the persistence of African imagery and the maintenance of dignity in the picket fence and garden even in a limited and perhaps inappropriate space.



Faith Ringgold, *The Bitter Nest IV: The Letter*, 1988. Acrylic on canvas, printed, tie-dyed and pieced fabric, 94 1/2 x 84 1/2. Courtesy of the Artist and ACA Galleries, New York, NY

FAITH RINGGOLD began her artistic career as a painter more than fifty years ago and is now one of America's most renowned artists. Over that time she has done paintings about her life experiences, travels, the civil rights movement, and a great variety of other topics of our time. In addition, Ringgold has been a forceful voice for feminism over the last four decades. Her *American People* paintings (1963–67) and *Black Light* series (begun in 1967) sought to examine how traditional color values could be modified for black subjects. From there she explored traditions of “women’s work” in fabric, first in collaboration with her late mother and then in her *Story Quilts*, which have become her signature statement.

Her work includes textiles, sewn fabric, weaving, quilting, embroidery, beadwork, and other kinds of needlecrafts. She has also written and illustrated more than seventeen children's books and has been actively involved with childhood and adult education in schools, museums, and other institutions. Her books, including *Tar Beach*, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*, *The Dream of Martin Luther King*, and *Cassie's Word Quilt*, tell stories to capture the imagination of children and adults alike. Issues of child's play, children's naiveté, intuitive tendencies, and raw experiences permeate her work. She came to prominence during the civil rights era of the 1960s, with ionic paintings such as *Die*, which expressed the violence and turmoil of race relations. She has remained committed to investigating in her art issues of race, including eliminating the color white from her palette for a time. Ringgold is a narrative painter, telling allegories in forms that are inventive, sometimes provocative or strident, at other times highly personal and somber. Her work is not didactic or preachy but allegorical. Although she was born and bred in Harlem, New York, Ringgold's work has always shown a connectedness to the African American South through some of its vernacular narratives. And so the transition in her work from painting to quilt making is culturally natural, since the latter is a historic medium of visual art in the African American South, especially among women. Joining the long tradition of African American quilt makers, Ringgold makes painted story quilts, combining painting, quilted fabric, and storytelling. Her work tells stories of today as much as of the past. Yet quilt making before Ringgold had been essentially an art separate from painting and considered a craft and therefore secondary. Ringgold has brought quilt making foursquare into the concept of painting and in so doing merged a stream of African American culture with issues of contemporary art. During the time of slavery, when education for blacks was outlawed and blacks were not supposed to read and write, the African American quilt became the source of black history. Ringgold's work picks up on that tradition and takes it in new dimensions. Her work tells stories, often historical, sometimes personal, with an irony revealed through complex changes in pictorial space and tension between, on the one hand, modernist pigment surfaces and gestures and, on the other, traditional techniques and pictorial arrangements. Ringgold's work also retains a sense of play, childlike charm, and simplicity that suggest freedom, never naiveté, even as her imagery is sometimes drawn as if by a naïf. *The Bitter Nest IV: The Letter*, her work in the present exhibition, describes a population of just about every kind of person, every race, color, size, and status, all seemingly posing for a camera shot. Made of a complex arrangement of squares and grids, *The Bitter Nest* is also an abstract pattern of rhythms and scintillating glimpses of light, resulting in shifts of perception.

WILLIAM T. WILLIAMS has been at the forefront of American abstraction since the late 1960s and remains one of the most important artists of our time. He has developed form and color from perception as much as from formalism. He invents his own iconic images and makes variations on them in shape and color, sometimes creating images like visual anagrams and orthographic encoding. Over the last four decades his work has shifted in several distinct ways, but an overarching worldview of abstraction and variation remains at its core. His paintings of the 1960s and 1970s explored iconic forms from the center. In his paintings of that time, what at first appears to be a central diamond shape or rhombus is never really that, but a rhomboid (trapezoid or kite shape), ever varying and often augmented by another related rhomboid in a different color or a negative form, completing the vertical composition of the whole and revealing it to be a larger but fractured rhomboid, which, seen diagonally, becomes a rectangle. Spiraling forms weave in and out, locking the center to the rectangular border that forms the edge, then spring back in bombardment. The fracturing of these forms changes the space, so while the whole is a complexity of rhomboids, its parts break the picture plane into complex dimensions of space. Williams's art suggests energy gravitating from a central core, like nuclear fission, to edges or boundaries from which they reverberate (i.e., a rhomboid exploding within a parallelogram). Energy released from the center returns to the core and then goes back to the edge in a continuum. His was a new kind of kinetic energy in painting with complexities of visual energy, ever evolving, never allowing the eye to stabilize the image as a whole. His work would change markedly in the ensuing decades while retaining a foundation of the iconic image created through complex visual fission. Williams's paintings of the 1970s explored shifting planes with colors and lines dissecting one another and moving in counterpoint. In the 1980s the shapes became more organic and the space deeper. A great complexity of what could be mistaken for patterns came to prominence in this period. But more than patterns they are cultural notations: music notations, African symbols, and Islamic calligraphy reinterpreted into a new, holistic, gestural language. In the late 1980s–90s we see Williams's work take another dramatic direction as the forms became more three-dimensional. The central rhomboid became conical, circular shapes became spherical, and spiraling movement of explosions added humor and a cartoonlike drama, which revealed a new kind of random structure resulting from the explosion of order, like a kind of quantum physics. The new century found Williams bringing graphic gesture to the fore, sublimating explicit shapes and substituting a color-field aura. His works on paper in this exhibition are excellent examples of this phase of his work. Solid forms are transformed into filters, their underlying solidity



© William T. Williams, *Congo Peacock*, 2008. Acrylic on paper, 40 x 26.  
Courtesy of William T. Williams

implied like visual silence, as the graphic gestures play freely, and one senses that the whole would fall apart without that which is suggested beneath. The gestures include wide-ranging imagery, from West African symbols, fauna, music, and graffiti to Asian and Islamic calligraphy—imagery the artist has explored in his work over many years. With an intellectual discipline of steel and abstract imagination, Williams constructs complex geometry to bear the spiritual essence of his imagery and to make some of the strongest, most original, and most beautiful paintings of our time.

## ARTISTS' BIOGRAPHIES



**Terry Adkins** (b. 1953). An installation artist, musician, and activist, Adkins makes site-inspired imagery and staging. His Lone Wolf Recital Corps is a unit with revolving membership that has premiered works at Institute of Contemporary Art, London; New World Symphony Miami; MoMA P.S. 1, New York; ICA Philadelphia; and Rote Fabrik, Zurich, among others. *Meteor Stream* is an ongoing cycle of site-inspired recitals inspired the abolitionist John Brown that began in 1999 at the John Brown House in Akron, Ohio. *Meteor Stream* covers the time from Brown's raid on a U.S. armory on October 16, 1859, to his execution by hanging that December 2 at Charlestown. In 2009 Adkins's Lone Wolf Recital Corps premiered *Hiving Bee Song Cycle* at the American Academy in Rome in conjunction with *Meteor Stream*. His many awards include the Metropolitan Museum of Art Rome Prize and the 2008 James Baldwin Fellow in the Visual Arts. Terry Adkins is professor of art at the University of Pennsylvania.



**Sonya Clark** (b. 1967). Clark has exhibited in over 250 venues throughout her career. Internationally, her work has been exhibited and collected by institutions such as the Musées d'Angers in France; Goetlicher Gallery in Austria; the Museu de Arte de Brasilia, Brazil; the Maxwell Gallery, Canberra, Australia; the Natal Society for Art in Durban, South Africa; and the Montreal Museum of Decorative Art, Canada. Nationally her work has been viewed at the Bellevue Art Museum, Washington; the Boise Art Museum, Idaho; the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston; the Indianapolis Museum of Art; the Fowler Museum, University of California at Los Angeles; Newark Museum of Art, New Jersey; the Museum of Art and Design, New York; and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C. She has earned numerous awards, including a Pollock-Krasner, a Civitella Ranieri Fellowship, a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship, a Rockefeller Fellowship in Bellagio, Italy, and USA Fellow, 2011. She was recently honored with a Distinguished Mid-Career Artist award from her alma mater, Cranbrook Academy of Art. Sonya Clark is professor and chair of the Department of Craft and Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.



**Melvin Edwards** (b. 1937). Edwards has had solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the New Jersey State Museum, Trenton. A thirty-year retrospective of his sculpture was held in 1993 at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York. His works are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, both in New York City. His sculpture has been highlighted internationally in major exhibitions from Paris to Japan. He has been the recipient of a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, a Fulbright Fellowship to Zimbabwe, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. Mel Edwards is professor emeritus of Rutgers University.



**Sam Gilliam** (b. 1933). Gilliam's work has been exhibited internationally and is represented in the collections of such institutions as the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Cleveland Museum of Art; the Detroit Institute of Arts; the Tate Gallery, London; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, all in New York; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, both in Philadelphia; the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and the National Gallery of Art, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Phillips Collection, and the Renwick Gallery, all Washington, D.C. He has had honored many commissions, grants, awards, and honorary doctorates. A major retrospective of Gilliam's work was held at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 2005, and he was named the 2006 University of Louisville Alumnus of the Year. Gilliam taught for nearly a decade in the Washington public schools, then at the Maryland Institute, College of Art, and the University of Maryland, and for several years at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. In addition, Gilliam still devotes time to conducting workshops, participating in panels, and delivering lectures in this country and abroad.



**Barkley L. Hendricks** (b. 1945). Hendricks's work is included in the collections of the Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina; the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. The first exhibition presenting Hendricks's career in painting, *Barkley L. Hendricks: Birth of the Cool*, with works dating from 1964 to the present, was organized by Trevor Schoonmaker at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University (spring 2008), traveled to the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Santa Monica Museum of Art, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Hendricks is professor emeritus, Connecticut College.



**Kalup Linzy** (b. 1977). Linzy is an American video and performance artist who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Born in Florida, Linzy graduated from the MFA program at the University of South Florida in 2003. He also attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture video art workshop and in 2005 received a grant from the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation. Linzy was named a Guggenheim Fellow in 2007. Because of his video satires of soap operas, he made his debut appearance on the daytime television soap opera *General Hospital* on July 13, 2010, with an invitation from James Franco.

Linzy's work has been reviewed in *The New York Times*, *Art in America*, and *Artforum*.



**Odili Odita** (b. 1966). Odita was born in Enugu, Nigeria, and raised in Ohio. Over a period of more than ten years, he has developed a body of abstract painting. Odita represented the United States in the 2007 Venice Biennale and has exhibited at many museums and galleries, including the Michael Stevenson Gallery and the Michael Stevenson Gallery, both Cape Town, South Africa; Galerie Schuster, Frankfurt, Germany; the Miami Art Museum, Florida; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, Florence Lynch Gallery, and the Jack Shainman Gallery, all in New York; the Kunsthalle, St. Gall, Switzerland; and the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, and the Herbert and Mildred Lee Gallery, both Waltham, Massachusetts. His many awards include a Tiffany and a Joan Mitchell Foundation Award. Odili Odita is associate professor of Art, Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia.



**Karyn Olivier** (b. 1962). Olivier makes sculpture, installations, and video. Olivier has exhibited nationally and internationally at such venues as the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center; the Uferhallen (Berlin); World Festival of Black Arts and Culture (Dakar, Senegal); The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston; the Wanås Foundation (Knislinge, Sweden); the Gwangju and Busan Biennials (Korea); The Whitney Museum of Art at Altria, MoMA P.S. 1, the Sculpture Center (all in New York); and The Mattress Factory (Pittsburgh). Olivier has been the recipient of many awards and grants including a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, a Joan Mitchell Foundation Award, the William H. Johnson Prize, an Art Matters grant, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Award, and a project grant from the Creative Capital Foundation. Her art is at the nucleus of conceptualism, utilitarianism, and icon making. Karen Olivier is associate professor of art, Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia.



**Faith Ringgold** (b. 1930). Ringgold has won numerous awards, and her work is in the permanent collections of the Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, all in New York City. She is also represented in many other museums and urban spaces around the world. Ringgold earned the 2011 College Art Association of America Distinguished Feminist Award. She has been a seminal artist in the creation of a form that blends painting and crafts, namely, quilt making. Ringgold is professor of art at the University of California, San Diego.



NOBETH VANG

**William T. Williams** (b. 1942). Williams is a recipient of numerous awards, including a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, two National Endowment for the Arts awards, and a Joan Mitchell Foundation Award. He is also a recipient of the Studio Museum in Harlem's Artist Award in 1992 and the James Van Der Zee Award from the Brandywine Workshop for lifetime achievement in the arts in 2005. Most recently, he was the recipient of the 2006 North Carolina Governors Award for Fine Arts, the highest civilian honor the state can bestow. Williams is represented in numerous museum and corporate collections, including the Fogg Art

Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts; The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas; the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut; the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Arthur Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, all in New York; the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; and the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Williams is the 2011 recipient of the Alain Locke International Award from the Detroit Institute of Arts. He is professor emeritus of Brooklyn College, New York.



SAM FRUTCH

## ABOUT THE CURATOR

Artist, curator, critic, and educator Keith Morrison (b.1942) received his BFA (1963) and MFA (1965) from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Primarily a painter and printmaker, Morrison has also published critical essays which have appeared in numerous catalogues, periodicals, edited volumes, and museum publications. He represented the US as art critic to the 2008 Shanghai Biennale. Exhibitions he has curated include: *The Curator's Eye III* (National Gallery of Jamaica, 2008); *Metaphors/Commentaries: Contemporary Artists in Cuba* (Ludwig Foundation, Havana and San Francisco State University Gallery, 1999); *Art and Ethnography* (with Tim Burguad, de Young Museum, San Francisco, 1998); *American Prints at the Brandywine Workshop* (USIA, 1988); *Myth and Ritual*, Touchstone Gallery Washington, 1986; *Evocative Abstraction* (Nexus Gallery, Philadelphia, PA., January, 1986); *Art in Washington and its Afro-American Presence: 1940-1970* (Washington Project for the Arts, Washington DC, 1985); *Directions by Contemporary African American Art* (Washington Project for the Arts, 1982); *Black Experience in Art* (Bergman Gallery, University of Chicago, 1971); *Jacob Lawrence's Toussaint L'Ouverture Series* (DePaul University, Chicago, 1969). He has held faculty appointments and has been academic dean at a number of distinguished universities and art schools. Morrison is currently professor of painting and drawing at Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia. For more information, see <http://www.keithmorrison.com/>.

## CHECKLIST

*All measurements given in inches; height precedes width, which precedes depth.*

- Terry Adkins, *Bishop*, 2011. 4 photographs as a set of one, 24 x 36
- Sonya Clark, *Long Hair*, 2007. Digital print, 96 x 28 x 24. Courtesy of Sonya Clark
- Sonya Clark, *Parting*, 2006. Digital print, 90 x 90. Courtesy of Sonya Clark
- Melvin Edwards, *Bara Niase Tugge*, 2008. Welded steel, 14 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 6 3/4. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY
- Melvin Edwards, *Because of Struggle*, 1992. Welded steel, 15 x 15 1/2 x 15. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY
- Melvin Edwards, *Botanical*, 1990–93. Welded steel, 18 x 12 1/4 x 9. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY
- Melvin Edwards, *Degga Woloff*, 2011. Welded steel, 11 1/2 x 9 3/4 x 5 1/2. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY
- Melvin Edwards, *Djeri Djef Papa Tall*, 2008. Welded steel, 11 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 5. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY
- Sam Gilliam *David*, 2011. Mixed media, 89 x 67 x 17. Courtesy of Sam Gilliam
- Barkley L. Hendricks, *Iconic Dexter*, 2008–9. Archival pigment inkjet print overprinted with metallic gold and cured silkscreen ink, 60 x 42. Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY
- Barkley L. Hendricks, *My Man Superman (Superman Never Saved Any Black People—Bobby Seale)*, 1969. Oil, acrylic, and aluminum leaf on linen canvas, 59 1/2 x 48. Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY
- Kalup Linzy, *Conversations wit de Churen VII: Lil Myron's Trade*, 2009. Digital video on DVD, 9 min. 49 sec. Courtesy of Kalup Linzy
- Odili Odita, *TV Eye*, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 90. Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY
- Karyn Olivier, *3 Black Sculptures* from the series *Double Vision*, 2010. C-print, 5 x 9. Courtesy of Karyn Olivier
- Karyn Olivier, *Favelas and 2x4* from the series *Double Vision*, 2009. C-print, 3 3/4 x 5 3/4. Courtesy of Karyn Olivier
- Karyn Olivier, *God's Army* from the series *Double Vision*, 2010. C-print, 5 x 6 1/2. Courtesy of Karyn Olivier
- Karyn Olivier, *Twin Cities (Pittsburgh/Rio)* from the series *Double Vision*, 2010. C-print, 4 1/4 x 8 1/2. Courtesy of Karyn Olivier
- Karyn Olivier, *Double Houses* from the series *Double Vision*, 2005. C-print, 11 x 14. Courtesy of Karyn Olivier
- Faith Ringgold, *The Bitter Nest IV: The Letter*, 1988. Acrylic on canvas, printed, tie-dyed and pieced fabric, 94 1/2 x 84 1/2. Courtesy of the Artist and ACA Galleries, New York, NY
- William T. Williams, *River Cry*, 2008. Acrylic on paper, 40 x 26. Courtesy of William T. Williams
- William T. Williams, *Congo Peacock*, 2008. Acrylic on paper, 40 x 26. Courtesy of William T. Williams





University Museums  
OLD COLLEGE GALLERY  
**MECHANICAL HALL GALLERY**  
MINERALOGICAL MUSEUM