

Ogden Museum reopens Monday with must-see exhibits of African American abstract art

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PUBLISHED JUN 15, 2020 AT 11:45 AM | UPDATED JUN 15, 2020 AT 12:04 PM



John Barnes' sculpture "Doe Poppin'" refers to the practice of peeping at neighbors through window blinds, as demonstrated by Ogden curator Bradley Sumrall. PHOTO BY DOUG MACCASH

The Ogden Museum of Southern Art reopened Monday, June 15, after locking its doors for three months to help suppress the [coronavirus](#) contagion.

The Camp Street institution has taken measures to ensure visitor safety, with online ticket reservations, available masks, plastic barriers for desk personnel and new directional signs to help navigate the museum without undue interaction with other art lovers.



Elizabeth Snouffer inspects a wrought iron sculpture by Melvin Edwards PHOTO BY DOUG MACCASH

The O's exhibits have been in mothballs for 90 days, but some have emerged even more compelling than they might have been earlier. The two exhibits on the museum's fifth floor stand out.

"What Music is From Within: Black Abstraction from the Permanent Collection" is a selection of works by 14 black artists from across the South, including several well-known New Orleans artists. "Crossroads" is a solo show by nationally renowned black sculptor Melvin Edwards.

The two exhibits reaffirm the contributions of black contemporary artists to contemporary American culture. They also remind us that black artists have not always received their due in the art marketplace and museum world. The shows were certainly relevant when they were first installed. But as street demonstrations against police brutality and white supremacy have swept the world, they seem especially on point.

Dillard University professor John Barnes, whose sculpture is included in the group show "What Music is From Within," said the exhibits are "in sync with people reexamining the black community now and getting a sense of empathy."



'Agricole,' a suspended iron artwork by Melvin Edwards PHOTO BY DOUG MACCASH

“Art is more than just something to look at; it bridges understanding,” Barnes said.

Barnes’ subtly comical wooden sculpture titled “Doe Poppin” looks a little like disheveled venetian blinds. He said he was inspired by the New Orleans expression “door poppin’,” which means snooping on neighbors or listening in on gossip. Someone might be nosily peeking out from behind the blinds, he said.

“It’s about New Orleans and people’s interaction,” he said.

New Orleans sculptor Clifton Webb, whose work is also included in the “What Music is From Within” show, points out that modern artists such as Picasso, Brancusi and Miro not only used traditional African design as inspiration, they sometime just made “literal copies of the work.” Eventually, he said, the colors, patterns and shapes from various African nations permeated Western culture, though often in a “watered-down” state. Webb’s sculpture, titled “Totem,” is a sort of severe ceremonial staff adorned with marble blocks, and surmounted by a highly polished stylized silhouette of figures, derived from a traditional African model.

Webb said that in his work and the work of some other black artists, visible influences from African models blend with the less tangible tradition of artistic improvisation that persists to this day in jazz and abstract art.

“Those impulses are still going on,” he said. “You can’t learn them away.”

Twentieth-century European artists studied traditional art from various African nations for inspiration, but for some black artists, the inspiration is much more than a mode of abstraction — it’s heritage.

Artist Melvin Edwards, 83, was born in rural Texas, studied art at the University of Southern California and 50 years ago was the first black American sculptor to present a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. His medium is old-fashioned blacksmithing, which directly connects him with his background.

As Ogden curator Bradley Sumrall explained, Edwards discovered his great-great-great-grandfather had been a blacksmith in Africa, before being brought to America as a slave. Edwards' abstract wrought-iron sculptures embody that connection, which he further explored by buying a farm in Senegal. His extemporaneous wrought-iron sculptures, assembled from plow blades, rakes, horseshoes, railroad spikes and chain unite his experiences in the farm country of the South with experiences in Africa and the history of slavery.

But topicality isn't always necessary to make a cultural impact. A work by Washington, D.C., artist Sam Gilliam titled "Drape Work" in the "What Music is From Within" show has no subject matter whatever. The large, subtly colored sheet of canvas is hung on the wall in folds so that the highlights and shadows become part of the composition. "Drape Work" and paintings like it were a radical development that blended sculpture and painting as no one had before. Sumrall said that "Drape Work" is the most valuable piece of art in the Ogden's collection.

As a text panel with the artwork explains, in the 1960s, when civil rights issues protests were frequently in the news, Gilliam's brand of pure abstraction might have seemed irrelevant to some. But his radical loose canvasses made an indelible mark on art history and Gilliam broke barriers by being the first black American artist in the 1972 Venice Biennale international art festival.

New Orleans artist Ron Bechet's charcoal drawing titled "Pursuing Validity" in the "What Music is From Within" show is a knotted mass of organic shapes. Though there's no specific story being told, Bechet said the abstraction embodies experiences and emotions that reflect his background. Even though some art "doesn't tell an obvious story," Bechet said, that "doesn't mean it doesn't tell an even more important story." Bechet said his works embody "memories and the things I felt as a young black man growing up."

The fifth-floor shows demonstrate that despite a shared background, black artists employ every sort of art aesthetics, Sumrall said. The 20-year-old Ogden Museum has made it a policy from the start to spotlight art by black Americans, he said. The two fifth-floor exhibits now on display seem particularly prescient at this moment in American history.

The shows already represented "a conversation we should have been having," said Sumrall. Now, "they're even more at the forefront of the conversation."

The shows will be in place through July and maybe longer, as the museum returns to routine after its long hiatus. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Admission is \$13.50 for adults. Virtual versions of both exhibits can be found on [the Ogden website, ogdenmuseum.org](http://theOgdenwebsite.ogdenmuseum.org).