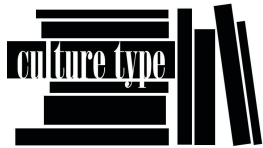


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Keith Duncan Brought Moments in Black History and the Culture of 'The Big Easy' to New York's Meatpacking District

by Victoria L. Valentine
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"The Wedding Reception" (2015) by Keith Duncan

EVOKING THE CULTURE of black New Orleans, the work of **Keith Duncan** is full of bold color and energetic movement. His images are often densely packed with people coming together for ritual gatherings or presents a confluence of symbolic images around a unifying theme.

"The Big Easy," his recent exhibition at Fort Gansevoort in the Meatpacking District of Manhattan, featured three bodies of work. The exhibition was anchored by several large-scale works accompanied by smaller paintings on fabric and works on paper.

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From Duncan's Storytelling and Satire Series (2015), "The Wedding Reception" and "The Funeral Repast" capture dense scenes full of activity that make it tough to distinguish which image is the celebration of love and partnership and which one documents a moment of loss and mourning.

The Times Picayune series (2013-16) explores the contrast between the New Orleans experienced by tourists and the real city, for better or worse, that is familiar to its residents. Works include "Majestic Messengers" and "The Black Saints Go Marching In." The latter gives a nod to the New Orleans Saints NFL team and the book "Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy" by Robert Farris Thompson.

A stroll through black history, the Black Plight series (2017) features works that span the Reconstruction, civil rights, and Obama eras and portray the likes of W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and the Black Panthers.

"I get a lot of my inspiration from stories. I am interested in storytelling. From novelists and books. ...I [also] credit the stories my father tells." — Keith Duncan



KEITH DUNCAN, "Funeral Repast," 2015 (acrylic on unstretched canvas with fabric, 71 x 108 inches). | Courtesy Fort Gansevoort

Using bold black lines to define his characters and their facial features, the style Duncan uses to render his subjects mirrors the approach of **Faith Ringgold**. He admires New Orleans artist **Willie Birch** and he has also been inspired by the **Gee's Bend quilters**. Duncan pays tribute to their Southern craft by incorporating a mix of fabric swatches as backgrounds for his paintings, and on the floors and ceilings of the spaces he envisions.

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Born in Plaquemines Parish, La., Duncan has a BFA from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, and earned an MFA in art education from Hunter College (CUNY). After living in New York City for more than a dozen years, he returned to his home state in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (2005), settling in New Orleans.

Discussing his work at the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, Miss., where his exhibition "Satire and Storytelling" was on view in 2017, Duncan talked about some of his influences and explained how the style of his work has evolved:

Inspiring Stories

"Being from the South, I get a lot of my inspiration from stories. I am interested in storytelling. From novelists and books. I get a lot of influence from things outside of the visual arts like music. ...The most important person I could say who inspires my work is my father. After I returned back from New York for 15 years, in talking with my father, he gives me all these stories about his childhood and about my childhood. It's a connection really to who I am. I credit the stories my father tells."

Action Figures

"I've always been interested in graphic design. Some people may call it animation art. Me and my brother Karl we was always first drawn to comic books. The way they would distort the body or the figure. The action and the movements of the figures was always something that really interested me first in my art."

Southern Feel

"The patterns really came into my work probably in 2010. I had a show I had to do in New York City. It was at The CUE Art Foundation. Willie Birch was really my mentor, one of the artists I really admire. Willie Birch told me about this show he wanted to curate for me in New York City. I wanted the work to have a Southern feel to it, so the pattern and the collage and fabric is something that I introduced into my work around that time. ...I wanted it to really connect to my roots. Looking at old Southern quilts, that was a big part of it and looking at the works of Faith Ringgold. If you're familiar with her work, she has a lot of storytelling and a lot of fabric and pattern as her background. That's when the work really started to change." **CT**

TOP IMAGE: KEITH DUNCAN, "The Wedding Reception," 2015 (acrylic on unstretched canvas with fabric, 93 x 137 inches). | Courtesy Fort Gansevoort

"Keith Duncan: The Big Easy" was on view at Fort Gansavoort, New York, N.Y., from Jan. 10-Feb. 23, 2019

BOOKSHELF

With illustrations by Willie Birch, "Roll With It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans" offers "a firsthand account of the precarious lives of brass band musicians in New Orleans. These young men are celebrated as cultural icons for upholding the proud traditions of the jazz funeral and the second line parade, yet they remain subject to the perils of poverty, racial marginalization, and urban violence..." Recently published, "Freedom's Dance: Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs in New Orleans," documents one of most prominent cultural traditions in New Orleans.

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Installation view "Keith Duncan: The Big Easy," Fort Gansevoort, New York, N.Y. Shown, From left, "Times Picayune #8," "Times Picayune #7," "Majestic Messengers." | Courtesy Fort Gansevoort

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KEITH DUNCAN, "Jim Crow Era," 2017 (acrylic on fabric mounted on canvas 22 x 28). | Courtesy Fort Gansevoort

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Installation view "Keith Duncan: The Big Easy," Fort Gansevoort, New York, N.Y. Shown, From left, "The Wedding Reception" and "The Repast." | Courtesy Fort Gansevoort

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KEITH DUNCAN, "The Second Line #1," 2010-11 (acrylic on paper, 36 x 48). | Courtesy Fort Gansevoort

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Installation view "Keith Duncan: The Big Easy," Fort Gansevoort, New York, N.Y. Shown, "Reconstruction Era" and "Black Inventors and Entrepreneurs Era." | Courtesy Fort Gansevoort

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