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Keith Duncan

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Keith Duncan grew up on the west bank in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana. The land of the staunch segregationist Leander Perez, a stone throw from the city of New Orleans. Growing up, Duncan heard many stories, particularly from his father, about Louisiana culture; Congo Square, Louis Armstrong, and the place of his birth, Charity Hospital, the now closed hospital of historical significance in the lives of so many New Orleanians, celebrities and politicians, living and dead.

Duncan is an original. He is a formally trained artist who studied at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge and Hunter College in New York City, where he lived for many years. Early on Duncan learned how to use humor as a tool in tempering his viewer's reality. It allowed him to navigate his artistic expression through unpopular subjects. Duncan is a comedian, a trickster, a shaman that unflinchingly tells us in his paintings what he feels is important and what he wants his public to know.

Since returning home to Louisiana from New York in 2007, Duncan has created two substantial bodies of work. The first one is titled *A Message to the Press, Surreal Paintings by Keith J. Duncan*. This body of work chronicles New Orleans folk culture, based on those stories told by his father. The subject matter ranges from memories of hurricane Betsy, Camille and Katrina, to Barack Obama being elected President of the

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United States. These works are acrylic paintings on rectangular shaped birch-wood, approximately 48 by 48 inches, all executed in 2009. Here, the figures depicted have a cartoonish, flat quality, outlined with an expressive black line.

The new body of work is a continuation of the *A Message to the Press* series, but represents a great leap forward. These new works are approximately 8 by 6 feet.

They are constructed of patterned textile fabric glued to clean cotton fabric, creating an appliqué sensibility as found in the African American patchwork quilting tradition. The flat, painterly figures in expressive black lines overlap patterned textile and cotton fabric, creating a rhythmic, improvisational, all over painterly sensibility.

Duncan's works are narrative, autobiographical, figurative, political and layered in personal symbolism and metaphors. His use of folklore speaks directly to his sense of place and history. With his understanding of form as language, Duncan is constantly in dialogue with his neighbors, as well as with the art-world. Through his mastery of process and content, he allows this dialogue to take place across class and race. Upon being asked if he had a particular audience he created for, Duncan replied that he creates for everyone.

I personally see Keith Duncan as an "Art Romantic"; he creates art that is spiritually and intellectually engaging. Until now, Duncan's work has for the most part been overlooked. He gets very little support in terms of being included in art shows or artist residency studio programs or sales. Although he constantly finds himself in financial hardship, he continues to create, believing in what he does as a calling. At this time, in our commercially driven society, artwork such as Duncan's is considered not sellable. It is reflective of an America that too many people want to deny. Duncan's reward is that his majority audience openly celebrates his efforts to chronicle their experiences.

The gatekeepers of High Art too often tend to reward artists less on content and more on technique, and I would say particularly artists of color. I see Duncan's work as a shadow that will not go away, that has all the visual references of the dominant art culture, yet reflects a world whose existence is not acknowledged. Unfortunately, artwork of this nature is for the most part given credibility long after its creation, if it does survive. The events of 9-11, Katrina, the election of Barack Obama and the Gulf Oil Spill have added a new meaning to art with content in America. With that said, Keith J. Duncan is an artist of his time. This new body of work is a testament to this moment.