

FORT GANSEVOORT

BURNAWAY

Keith Duncan: Bayou Classic, Fort Gansevoort

By Daniel Fuller – April 14, 2021



Keith Duncan, Southern University Marching Band, 2020; acrylic with fabric on canzas, 68 x 108 inches, Image courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.

When I was a kid, my father and I would watch anything on television that involved a ball and two teams fighting over it. One of our favorite days was on the final Saturday of November when Grambling State and Southern University would face off in The Bayou Classic. My dad worshiped at the altar of Eddie Robinson, the head football coach of Grambling for fifty-six years, who turned the small college into a football powerhouse. For me, it was all about the pageantry, the accouterment that surrounded the game. Unofficially dubbed the “Black Super Bowl,” NBC treated a national audience to glimpses of the whole experience. Cameras caught press conferences, fashion shows, the Thanksgiving Day Parade, Greek shows and step teams, and 70,000 students, alumni, and fans tailgating. But the moment everyone waits for, to quote the Nick Cannon classic, Drumline: “When the first half is over, the show begins.”

With a 225-member unit in lockstep behind him, the drum major marches out to the 50-yard line of the Mercedes-Benz Superdome. He high steps out with all the stoicism of a general. Everyone is at attention. He stops at mid-field and begins peacocking, whirling and gyrating, leading into a

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series of body rolls. Then with clinical slow motion, he begins to dip his shoulders backward towards the turf. Knees buckle, his back is parallel to the ground. His head sinks physically, defying gravity against the spinal cord's structural will until his hat rests in the grass for what feels like an eternity. Baton in the right hand, he thrusts his fist repeatedly in the air. Jaws drop every time, and there is a familiar little second of shocked silence before it is shattered by an eruption of applause. The noise grows louder and louder. It is a religious experience. Welcome to halftime.



Keith Duncan, Grambling State University Dance Team 1, 2020; colored pencil and marker on paper, 24 x 18 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.

In his new exhibition on Fort Gansevoort's website, New Orleans-based artist Keith Duncan channels the mass of power that is the Battle of the Bands, a spectacle so awe-inspiring you would almost be forgiven for forgetting The Bayou Classic has a second half yet to play. Duncan depicts the drum majors and drum lines from both the Grambling State World Famed Tiger Marching Band and The Southern University Human Jukebox, as well as the Southern Fabulous

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Dancing Dolls, with an almost cartoonish, audacious style. He navigates a delicate balance, presenting something grandiose, with so much pomp and sophistication, in such a sincere and inviting way. Their chiseled faces are defined with heavy outlines, bathed in luxuriant saturated color, squished between their feathered Shakos and their two-toned crisp, military-style uniforms (cerulean for Southern, gold for Grambling). It's odd to see these figures so breathtakingly still. Halftime is a grind. Each team sprints through eight minutes of their routines. Taxed well beyond endurance, they carry on, pausing for a single lungful of air; that's when Duncan seems to have caught them. Even when isolated in space, the band members appear as part of a larger kinetic beauty, an impossibly large group of teammates moving with absolute precision. Each maneuver a formative page in a novel about beauty and power and opulent Blackness.

You get the feeling that Duncan clearly had fun painting these bands. You get the feeling Duncan would have given anything to be a part of one of these bands. More than the game itself, for many, the Battle of the Bands is the summit of the day. Each of Duncan's flashpoints are responding to the moment. He captures their tone, intonation, showmanship, balance, sharpness, accuracy, and style. Each figure has this mask of intense concentration of athletes cut directly from limestone—one for all, together creating music to leave the earth to.

With the drummers and dancers so front and center, it is almost easy to miss Duncan's figures' ornate and decorative backgrounds. After fifteen years in New York City, Duncan returned home to New Orleans in 2005, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. To immerse himself back into the South's culture, he began taking inspiration from the Gee's Bend Quiltmakers. Gee's Bend artists are distinctly Southern, working on scarcity and necessity transforming recycled fabrics into one of the most vital parts of American art history. Since returning to New Orleans, Duncan has energized his surfaces and backgrounds by painting directly on patterned fabrics. Sometimes this takes the form of floral print fabric or dated wallpaper. Set against these backgrounds, the figures feel like nobility.