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HBCU marching bands seem to float off the canvas in Keith Duncan's paintings at the Ogden

'I saw the drum majors as like these African Warriors dancing in front of the king or queen, and a pageantry, a royalty of ceremonious splendor.'

By Dave Walker, February 27, 2025



Keith Duncan is shown with one of his 'Battle of the Bands' paintings at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art.

New Orleans was entering peak drum-major season when “Battle of the Bands” arrived at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art.

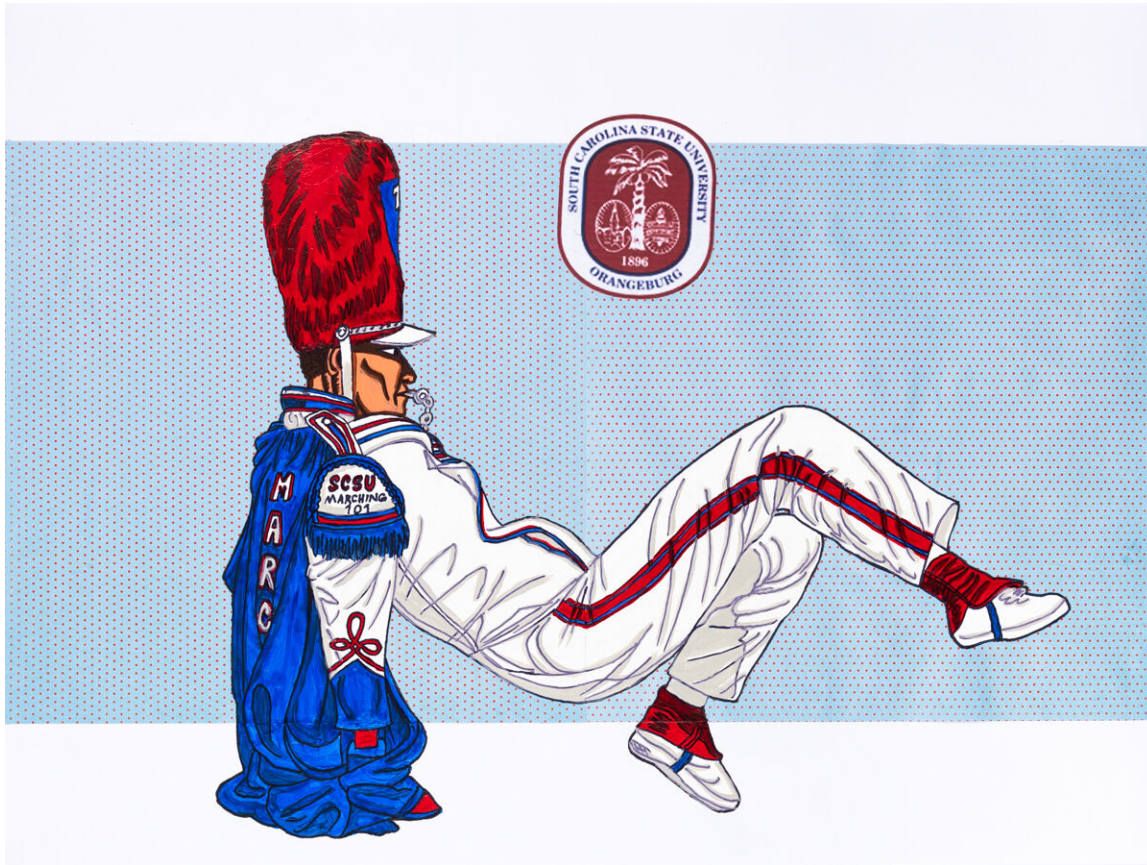
In the exhibition, on view through Aug. 10, local artist and educator Keith Duncan captures, in paint and fabric, heroically stylized performers from 15 Historically Black College and University marching bands.

If you visit on March 5, the day the Ogden reopens after its traditional Mardi Gras break, the sounds the musicians and the younger versions of themselves created on the nearby traditional parade route may still be echoing under the Pontchartrain Expressway overpass. The memories of those sounds and the spectacle of the bands in motion on the street will definitely be rekindled whenever you go.

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The colors and joy of the moment



Wrote artist Keith Duncan: 'I saw the drum majors as like these African Warriors dancing in front of the king or queen, and a pageantry, a royalty of ceremonious splendor.'

The vivid colors, acrobatic poses and the alternately focused and joyful expressions on the subjects' faces reference the comic-book superheroes of Duncan's youth that partly inspired his eye.

"In my childhood, we would collect comic books, me and my brother," said Duncan, born in Charity Hospital and later a product of Louisiana State University and Hunter College in New York City.

"Looking at the poses and the figures, I was Superman, he was Batman ... I was Thor and he loved Iron Man," Duncan said.

Another influence: the startlingly modern designs of the Gee's Bend, Alabama, quilters. And, as a college student at LSU, visits to Southern University football games — more for the halftimes than the football action on either side.

Breaking out

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Keith Duncan says his style is influenced by the comic books he loved as a child and the football banners he painted.

The paintings are executed on drop-cloth fabric fastened to the walls, a throwback to when he and his brother would paint the banners that their high school football team would bust through when taking the field.

“These banners always stayed with me,” Duncan said. “It was an easy way, I guess, to store the work, but also I was always one to not want to create work that was very traditional or conventional with the framing, and I always wanted to break out of that.”

So breaking out is what the “Battle of the Bands” figures do. Often arrayed in groups of three, musicians and dancers float in the air above more grounded figures, all popping off wallpaper-like background fabric centered in each work.

Each group painting contains the school’s crest. Each is accompanied by a stand-alone image of the band’s drum major.

On wall text, Duncan says, “I saw the drum majors as like these African warriors dancing in front of the king or queen, and a pageantry, a royalty of ceremonious splendor.”

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A painting from the 'Battle of the Bands' series, by Keith Duncan.

In a recent gallery interview, he added: “We know what the drum major stands for. He’s the leader. They conduct the band, they keep it in line. They also get the crowd excited and enthusiastic about seeing the band come on the field. So they have a major role.”

More than just musicians

Duncan has played several major roles for the Ogden. That’s his towering drum major on the museum’s lakeside exterior wall, for example.

“Keith has been a big part of our family here at the Ogden for a long time,” said Bradley Sumrall, the Ogden’s curator of the collection. “He’s been around, working closely with our education department. He has another very large, beautiful piece in our permanent collection. For years, he’s just been such a part of this community. Not just the Ogden but the New Orleans art community, the New Orleans cultural scene. So I’ve always wanted to work with him, and then this body of work arose and I said, ‘Man, we have to do something.’”

“These are more than just musicians. These are cultural icons, each and every one of them.

“One group of figures may be small, another one might be really large, and what that does for me as a viewer, and I think for others as well, is that it doesn’t capture a single moment on the field, but it captures your whole experience. It’s like that whole performance distilled into a single canvas.”

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The exhibit's catalog, featuring all the images in the exhibit plus essays and an interview with Duncan, is sold in the Ogden's museum store and online at shop.ogdenmuseum.org. When it (literally) folds here, the exhibition will tour, via the Art Bridges Foundation, to institutions geographically proximate to some of the HBCUs represented in the paintings.

"I think that just shows the power of this subject matter and the power of Keith's artwork," Sumrall said. "But it's also perfect timing. I think HBCUs have never been more important, in modern times, than they are right now."