

FORT GANSEVOORT

KEITH DUNCAN

Keith Duncan: Bayou Classic

March 04 – April 17, 2021

**An online exhibition
in conversation with
Franklin Sirmans**



Keith Duncan, *Grambling State University Marching Band*, 2020,
Acrylic with fabric on canvas, 74 x 108 inches.

Beginning March 4th, Fort Gansevoort will present *Keith Duncan: Bayou Classic*, an online exhibition featuring new drawings and paintings in which the artist pays tribute to a grand New Orleans tradition inextricably linked to the wider sweep of Black cultural heritage in America: established in 1974, the Bayou Classic is an annual football game between two of Louisiana’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Southern University and Grambling State University. The highlight of this event is the Battle of the Bands, a resplendent halftime show in which the marching bands of the two schools compete to deliver the most sensational performance. For Duncan, the pageantry and ceremonial elements that are hallmarks of the HBCU band performances are contemporary analogs for African American traditions. The drum majors and musicians depicted in his work in brilliant, vibrating hues, are “symbols of African warriors dancing in front of the king or the queen, like a pageantry of ceremonious splendor.” The artist further explains, “I saw them in that light and it’s part of our heritage beyond New Orleans.” Indeed, thousands of supporters of the Bayou Classic travel from across the nation to participate in the various festivities that unfold around the event; a multi-generational audience of students, alumni, and relatives gathers for this moment, paralleling an all-encompassing family reunion. For many, “the Classic” is an essential tradition that helps to preserve the mission of the HBCUs, which were established to nourish the talent and brilliance of African American people in a mutually supportive environment.

Keith Duncan: Bayou Classic features a conversation with the artist and Franklin Sirmans, curator, writer, and director of the Perez Art Museum Miami. “The work that we are talking about, that has to do with the marching bands obviously comes from New Orleans. It’s very specific to the tradition and history there,” Sirmans notes. He also highlights the importance of bringing this work to a larger audience, stating, “It’s about a level of communication and you have come to a place where you’re able to communicate with the work in the sphere of the white cube just as easily as you have in other environments.” Sirmans has long explored the topics of sports and music in relationship to wider cultures through surveys such as *Fútbol: The Beautiful Game* (2014) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and *One Planet Under a Groove: Contemporary Art and Hip Hop* at the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

About the exhibition

Duncan’s engagement with the resplendent quality of the HBCU bands is captured in the exhibition’s two central large-scale paintings, *Grambling State University Marching Band* (2020) and *Southern University Marching Band* (2020). In each of these works, the respective bands’ leading drum majors are flanked by percussionists, drummers,

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and horn players, all superimposed onto wallpaper so that the patterns and shapes of their uniforms and choreographed poses are dramatically reinforced. By layering his mediums, Duncan not only nods to the collaging tradition that is a through-line of Black artmaking, but also gives his paintings a three-dimensional quality that amplifies the movement of his figures.

The new drawings and paintings on view in *Bayou Classic* find Duncan simplifying his visual language, departing from the somewhat surrealistic approach of earlier works. Here, he focuses upon a more deceptively matter of fact approach to the lines of the human body and emotive qualities of facial features. The silhouettes of Duncan's musicians, band leaders, and athletic dancers are contoured with hard lines in such drawings as *Southern University Dance Team 1* (2020) and *Grambling State University Dance Team 2* (2020). Drum majors are shown front and center, each framed by a black painted rectangular border as they sound their whistles, captured with the exhilaration of their starring roles. Throughout the new series on view, in paintings like *Grambling State University Drum Major 1* (2020) and *Southern University Drum Major 2* (2020), Duncan deploys negative space to direct the viewer's attention to the stature and identity of each member.

In the introduction to his book *Bayou Classic*, author Thomas Aiello writes of the first of these events in 1974, "The Bayou Classic wasn't just a football game. It was a happening...a culmination of sorts – a theater for a variety of different cultural, political, and athletic negotiations that gave the game its meaning, its significance." As the Bayou Classic has continued and gained national recognition, Aiello's words carry special significance that resonate in the works of Keith Duncan.

Keith Duncan was born in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana in 1967. He received a BFA from Louisiana State University, and an MFA from Hunter College (CUNY) New York, NY. The CUE Arts Foundation New York presented a solo exhibition of his work, followed by inclusion of all works from the exhibition in Prospect.2 by curator Dan Cameron. Further solo exhibitions include the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, Mississippi and Corridor Gallery, Brooklyn, NY. Duncan was included in Thelma Golden's "Black Romantic" exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2002. Further selected group exhibitions include the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans, LA, Paul and Lulu Hilliard University Art Museum in Lafayette, LA, Art in General, David Beitzel Gallery, Rush Arts Gallery, Williamsburg Music Center, Brooklyn, NY, Bronx River Arts Center, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Pontiac, MI, Tustin Center, Philadelphia, PA, and the Artist Center & Gallery, Richmond, VA. His work is included in the permanent collections of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art and the New Orleans Museum of Art.