

EDGES OF AILEY

LABELS

BLACKNESS IN DANCE

Blaise Tobia

b. 1953; Brooklyn, NY

*Documentation of Ellsworth Ausby
performance, Union Square, 1978*

Ellsworth Ausby studio rehearsal, 1978

Archival inkjet prints

Courtesy the artist

Ellsworth Ausby

b. 1942; Portsmouth, VA

d. 2011; New York, NY

Untitled, 1970

Painted wood

Eric Firestone Gallery, New York

Ellsworth Ausby's sculpture *Untitled* (1970) was last shown at the Whitney in the 1971 exhibition *Contemporary Black Artists in America*, which featured seventy-five Black artists—most working predominantly in abstraction—and was organized by Robert Doty, a white curator. The show was prompted by the demands of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC), which sought to redress the glaring lack of Black representation and inclusion in American museums. The exhibition was controversial, partly due to disagreements about its organizing principles and participants, with the BECC and Black artists boycotting the show in response.

Recent scholarship offers another view onto the exhibition's legacy, contending that its absence of a single, coherent aesthetic of Blackness was generative for artists, like Ausby, seeking to move beyond the poles of separatism and segregation. Its varied works shared more in their specificities of form, like color and line, than in overt representational content. In this light, the exhibition laid out Blackness not as a monolith, but as an ever-expanding multiplicity—a tectonic shift in modernist narratives.

In the late 1970s, Ausby received grants to stage public performances from the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), a federal initiative from 1973 to 1982 that offered employment and funding to an estimated twenty thousand artists and art workers nationwide, including Ailey and the photographer Blaise Tobia. Ausby's performances brought together dance, music, poetry, and drama—at times accompanied by his own artworks like *Untitled*, captured by Tobia standing sentinel among the dancers, one of whom was hired from the Ailey company.

Lorna Simpson

b. 1960; Brooklyn, NY

Momentum, 2011

Two-channel video, color, sound; 6:56 min.
(looped)

Collection of the artist

Kandis Williams

b. 1985; Baltimore, MD

*Black Box, 4 points: Horton, Ailey, McKayle
contractions and expansions of drama from
vernacular—arms outstretched and entangle,
2021*

Photocopy collage and ink on paper

Mohn Family Collection

In her video *Momentum* (2011), Lorna Simpson resurfaces her early memory of performing in a ballet, specifically the image of herself as an eleven-year-old pirouetting in all gold. She mirrors and multiplies this vision through a formation of Ailey students who reenact this moment, switching between states of twirling and rest with only their footsteps audible. The artist wanted to satisfy her childhood desire to see herself from the audience while performing on stage, a vantage point that bridges larger concerns central to the Black dancing body—matters of representing, appearing, and witnessing.

In the context of dance, Kandis Williams has spoken of her approach to “line [as] the space, or the process, or the delineation between two points.” The artist makes this connection across dance histories and archives through collage that verges on choreography. In Williams’s manipulation of an image of Alvin Ailey and Carmen de Lavallade performing at Jacob’s Pillow, an incubator for modern dance in Massachusetts, is set against cutouts of extended limbs and drips of color redolent of the final sequence of dances in *Revelations* (1960).

From left:



Ralph Lemon

b. 1952; Cincinnati, OH

Alvin Ailey Dancing Revelations #3, 1999

Oil stick on paper

Collection of the artist

Jacob Lawrence

b. 1917; Atlantic City, NJ

d. 2000; Seattle, WA

Figure Study, c. 1970

Ink and pencil on paper

Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody

Barkley Hendricks

b. 1945; Philadelphia, PA

d. 2017; New London, CT

Dancer, 1977

Oil on canvas

Private collection

James Van Der Zee

b. 1886; Lenox, MA

d. 1983; Washington, DC

Dancer, 1925

Gelatin silver print

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of an anonymous donor
2001.38

VD))) 501

Senga Nengudi

b. 1943; Chicago, IL

R.S.V.P., 1975

Nylon mesh and sand

Exhibition copy

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; purchase with funds provided by the Acquisition and Collection Committee 2005.35

Studio Performance with R.S.V.P., 1976

Gelatin silver print

The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Committee on Media and Performance Art Funds 1120.2014



“To me, choreography is a spontaneous act. I wonder sometimes whether one can really teach choreography.” Alvin Ailey’s dances relied on his dancers being well-versed in a range of techniques—modern, jazz, and ballet, among others—so that he could choreograph in the spaces between those systems. This hybrid approach is shared by artists like Senga Nengudi, whose work and larger series *R.S.V.P.* exists between sculpture, performance, and photography. These sculptures of pantyhose and sand evoke the elastic nature of skin alongside the Black and feminine body. Often staged and choreographed for performances, the works are activated by the artist herself or with fellow collaborators, such as Maren Hassinger, whose dance training included ballet and Lester Horton classes.

Ailey’s sentiment on choreography also resonates in light of him being largely self-taught, an important yet overlooked aspect of his career. During the first half of the twentieth century, there were few dance schools and means of formal certification available, especially for Black dancers. These conditions were not exclusive to dance, as the histories of self-taught visual artists—and their robust presence in this exhibition—attest. Placing Ailey among Eldren Bailey, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Thornton Dial, Sam Doyle, Robert Duncanson, Palmer Hayden, Lonnie Holley, Clementine Hunter, Hector Hyppolite, Horace Pippin, Bill Traylor, Rubem Valentim, and Purvis Young offers an enriching frame for considering their unique approaches to creative self-determination.

Clockwise, from top:

Jennifer Packer

b. 1984; Philadelphia, PA

Not Yet Titled, 2024

Oil on canvas

Collection of the artist; courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

John Outterbridge

b. 1933; Greenville, NC

d. 2020; Los Angeles, CA

The Elder, Ethnic Heritage Series, 1971–72

Wooden hat forms, fabric, wooden beads, twine, metal, paint, and human hair

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from David Cancel and an anonymous donor 2022.189

Eldren Bailey

b. 1903; Flovilla, GA

d. 1987; Atlanta, GA

Dancers, 1960s

Concrete, plaster, paint, and steel

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Katherine Schmidt Shubert Purchase Fund 2023.0980

Richmond Barthé

b. 1901; Bay St. Louis, MS

d. 1989; Pasadena, CA

African Dancer, 1933

Plaster

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase 33.53



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

b. 1977; London, England

Fly Trap, 2024

Oil on canvas, two panels

Collection of the artist; courtesy the artist, Corvi-Mora, London, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



For Alvin Ailey, and painters like Jennifer Packer and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye—both of whom have created new paintings for the exhibition—fidelity to memory and freedom of imagination are central to their work. In Packer’s portraits, including this one of Ailey, the sitter’s public and private dimensions are given equal weight, granting her subjects a depth of intimacy and a dynamic sense of composure. Yiadom-Boakye’s dancers are character studies for people who do not exist, their graceful and enigmatic presence at once imagined, partly remembered, and vividly conjured.

All three artists have been described in terms of their “virtuosity,” reflecting their command of expression and skill. In the case of Packer and Yiadom-Boakye, this connection occurs through their careful handling of paint, while Ailey’s virtuosity emerges through his notion of the “total dancer”—the expectation that his dancers be fluent in matters of style, technique, and self-expression.

Purvis Young

b. 1943; Miami, FL

d. 2010; Miami, FL

Love Dance, c. 1991

House paint on mylar, mounted on wood, with
wood frame

Souls Grown Deep Foundation



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

b. 1977; London, England



A Knave Made Manifest, 2024

Oil on linen

Collection of the artist; courtesy the artist, Corvi-Mora, London,
and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

BLACK SOUTHERN IMAGINARY

Thornton Dial

b. 1928; Emelle, AL

d. 2016; McCalla, AL

Shadows of the Field, 2008

String, twine, synthetic cotton batting, wood, burlap, sheet metal, cloth rags, nails, staples, and enamel on canvas on wood

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; gift of Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2014 2014.548.4

In *Shadows of the Field* (2008), Thornton Dial transforms wood planks and cotton batting into a bird's eye view of a cotton field. The artist has described his work as a recuperation of place, one grounded in pride and possibility: "I was part of the capture, lonely in those times. No freedom. But I was still flying like a bird. Inside me, picking up things, life always running good. I always had that mind, the dream of life, vision, that I could go up in the world."

The acts of remembering, recasting, and reconsidering run through the works in this section, just as Ailey's "blood memories" of Black Southern life and culture resonate in his dances. Reminiscent of Dial, Kevin Beasley's

handling of cotton and resin results in a landscape seemingly aglow in memory's amber. Works by Elizabeth Catlett, Sam Doyle, and William H. Johnson honor the people who sustain the land, while Beverly Buchanan and David Hammons pay homage to the self-constructed homes in which they dwell. All give form to the flourishing of Black life, imbued by a shared reverence for the region, or what Hammons called "Delta Spirit." The rich imaginary of the South extends beyond geographical boundaries, exerting a strong influence on artists from elsewhere including Horace Pippin and Carrie Mae Weems.

Clockwise, from top left:



Horace Pippin

b. 1888; West Chester, PA

d. 1946; West Chester, PA

School Studies, 1944

Oil on fabric

National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Meyer P. Potamkin in honor of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art 1991.42.1

Knowledge of God, 1944

Oil on canvas

Collection of Leslie Miller and Richard Worley

Cabin in the Cotton, c. 1931–37

Oil on cotton, mounted on composition board

The Art Institute of Chicago; purchased with funds provided by Thomas F. Pick and Mary P. Hines in memory of their mother Frances W. Pick 1990.417

From left:



William H. Johnson

b. 1901; Florence, SC

d. 1970; Central Islip, NY

At Home in the Evening, c. 1940

Oil on canvas

Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld

John Biggers

b. 1924; Gastonia, NC

d. 2001; Houston, TX

Sharecropper, 1945

Oil on canvas

Los Angeles County Museum of Art; purchased with funds from the Ducommun and Gross Endowment and the Robert H. Halff Endowment
M.2022.41

From left:

Beverly Buchanan

b. 1940; Fuquay-Varina, NC

d. 2015; Ann Arbor, MI

Orangeburg County Family House, 1993

Paint, marker, garland, necklace, wood chips, bark, buttons, bottle caps, license plate, film canister, thumbtacks, clay pot, glass bottle, thread, and glue on wood

Private collection

White Shacks, 1987

Wood and paint

Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody

Clockwise, from back:

Beverly Buchanan

b. 1940; Fuquay-Varina, NC

d. 2015; Ann Arbor, MI

Old Colored School, 2010

Wood and paint

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Hortense and William A. Mohr
Sculpture Purchase Fund, 2017 2017.270a, 2017.270b

White Shacks, 1987

Wood and paint

Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody

Family Tree House, 2009

Wood and paint

Cameron Art Museum, Wilmington, NC; Claude Howell Endowment for the
purchase of North Carolina Art

Clockwise, from left:

Beverly Buchanan

b. 1940; Fuquay-Varina, NC

d. 2015; Ann Arbor, MI

House from Scraps, 2011

Wood and copper

Nevada Museum of Art, Reno; purchase with funds from deaccessioning
2020.14.01

Tom's House, 1995

Wood and tin

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Alexandra Wheeler
2019.427

Lillington, NC Harnett Co., 2007

Foamcore and paint

Brooklyn Museum; William K. Jacobs, Jr. Fund 2017.32.2

Kevin Beasley

b. 1985; Lynchburg, VA

Haze, 2023

Polyurethane resin, raw Virginia cotton, marker transfer, and fiberglass

Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York



Sam Doyle

b. 1906; St. Helena Island, SC

d. 1985; St. Helena Island, SC

Frip, St. Helena's Best, 1970s

Paint on roofing tin

High Museum of Art, Atlanta; T. Marshall Hahn Collection 1997.66



Carrie Mae Weems

b. 1953; Portland, OR

Sea Islands series, 1991–92

Gelatin silver prints

Untitled, 1992

Untitled, 1992

Untitled, 1992

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Carrie Mae Weems and P.P.O.W. 97.97.1, 97.97.2, 97.97.3

Al Loving

b. 1935; Detroit, MI

d. 2015; New York, NY

Untitled, c. 1975

Mixed media

Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody



Purvis Young

b. 1943; Miami, FL

d. 2010; Miami, FL

Ocean, 1975

Paint and wood on composition board

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; gift of Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2014 2014.548.19



Fon peoples



Male Drum, 19th–20th century

Female Drum, 19th–20th century

Wood, hide, pigment, cane, and cord

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; gift of Robert H. and Ruth S. Smith, 1982 1982.495.1, 1982.495.2

From left:

Hale Aspacio Woodruff

b. 1900; Cairo, IL

d. 1980; New York, NY

African Headdress, c. 1931–46 (printed 1996)

Linoleum cut with chine collé

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of E. Thomas Williams, Jr. and Auldlyn Higgins Williams 98.22.1

Loïs Mailou Jones

b. 1905; Boston, MA

d. 1998; Washington, DC

Africa, 1935

Oil on canvas board

The Johnson Collection, Spartanburg, SC

Rotimi Fani-Kayode

b. 1955; Lagos, Nigeria

d. 1989; London, England

Adebiyi, c. 1989

Chromogenic print

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; purchase with funds contributed by the Photography Council 2017.34

Noah Purifoy

b. 1917; Snow Hill, AL

d. 2004; Joshua Tree, CA

Untitled, 1970

Wood, leather, brass, and copper

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase 71.170



Many Alvin Ailey dance classes feature live percussion in multiple West African styles. Meant to structure a call and response between the body and music, the drumming allows for each dancer's own expression to come to the fore. As Ailey's notebooks document, the rhythmic beat of drums could teach not only movement but also a larger shared history.

Black artists—working in a myriad of mediums and contexts, often blurring the lines between them—have explored the ways that African diasporic ritual, movement, and other traces have persisted and evolved even in American and European settings. Noah Purifoy, a co-founder of the Watts Tower Arts Center in Los Angeles, was among a group of local Black assemblage artists who reworked found materials imbued with

sociopolitical significance. Loïs Mailou Jones, an influential figure in the Harlem Renaissance, Négritude, and the Black Arts Movement, spent several years in Haiti, sieving its cultural motifs through her modernist takes on West African masks and Haitian markets. Nigerian-born Rotimi Fani-Kayode, who emigrated to England during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70), integrates the baroque, the queer, and the Yoruba into his spiritual portraits of tender masculinity. Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite merges vodou deity Erzulie Dantor, protector of mothers and children, with Christianity's Madonna and Child in *The Congo Queen* (1946). Inspired by Hyppolite's life, Geoffrey Holder later designed and choreographed *The Prodigal Prince* (1967) for the Ailey repertory.

Hector Hyppolite

b. 1894; Saint-Marc, Haiti

d. 1948, Port-au-Prince, Haiti

The Congo Queen, 1946

Enamel, oil, and graphite pencil on cardboard

The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Bareiss
852.1956

Lois Mailou Jones

b. 1905; Boston, MA

d. 1998; Washington, DC

Marche-Haiti, 1982

Watercolor

Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; gift of Floyd W. Coleman

Clockwise, from left:

Loïs Mailou Jones

b. 1905; Boston, MA

d. 1998; Washington, DC

Veve Voudou II, 1963

Mixed media

Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

David Driskell

b. 1931; Eatonton, GA

d. 2020, Hyattsville, MD

Bahian Ribbons, 1987

Acrylic on canvas

Estate of David Driskell; courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York

Ruben Valentim

b. 1922, Salvador, Brazil

d. 1991, São Paulo, Brazil

Untitled, 1956–62

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros through the Latin American and Caribbean Fund in honor of Lissette Stancioff 876.2016

David Driskell

b. 1931; Eatonton, GA

d. 2020, Hyattsville, MD

Festival Bahia, 1985

Gouache and mixed media on paper

Estate of David Driskell; courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York

Ritual, liturgy, and other modes of Black spirituality unfold as multisensorial experiences. Through a blend of song and melody, individual and collective movement, and striking visual elements, these practices strive to commune with the divine and summon heightened states of feeling: ecstasy, rapture, exaltation, and grace.

While Katherine Dunham and Alvin Ailey incorporated Brazilian candomblé, Haitian vodou, and various traditions of Black Christian churches into their dances, visual artists turned to abstraction, collage, and assemblage as means of picturing the sacred. Loïs Mailou Jones abstracted symbols that typically invoke the deities of Haitian vodou. A dentist, priest, and artist, Rubem Valentim distilled candomblé into sacred geometries at once pared down and dynamic. In a similar fashion, David Driskell—an art historian and artist, who traveled extensively throughout Bahia in 1983, 1985, and 1987—interpreted candomblé’s vibrancy through its shimmering movements, inspired by the swirling ribbons and garments of its practitioners.

BLACK SPIRITUALITY

Benny Andrews

b. 1930; Plainview, GA

d. 2006; Brooklyn, NY

The Way to the Promised Land
(Revival Series), 1994

Oil on canvas with painted fabric collage

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery



Charles White

b. 1918; Chicago, IL

d. 1979; Los Angeles, CA

Preacher, 1952

Pen and ink and graphite pencil on board

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase 52.25



From left:

Palmer Hayden

b. 1890; Widewater, VA

d. 1973; New York, NY

Spirituals (Dreams), c. 1935

Watercolor and graphite pencil on paper

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Drawing Committee 2015.270a–b

VD))) 510

Purvis Young

b. 1943; Miami, FL

d. 2010; Miami, FL

Our Father, 1997

Paint on composition board and wood, mounted on wood

Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, NH; Scheier Fund and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation 2021.52

James Van Der Zee

b. 1886; Lenox, MA

d. 1983; Washington, DC

Choir Boy, 1937

Gelatin silver print

The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; gift of The Sandor Family Collection, Chicago 2000.11.13

Rotimi Fani-Kayode

b. 1955; Lagos, Nigeria

d. 1989; London, England

Every Moment Counts (Ecstatic Antibodies), 1989

Chromogenic print

Walther Collection, London

Clementine Hunter

b. 1886; Cloutierville, LA

d. 1988; Natchitoches, LA

Cane River Baptism, c. 1950–56

Oil on paperboard

The Johnson Collection, Spartanburg, SC

Making dances ranked as the highest of aspirations for Alvin Ailey, who said, “It’s life itself. Dance is life. Movement is life. When you can’t move, you’re dead. It’s the height of expression to me, being able to say something to audiences that’s part of themselves.” Creation has long been a bridge between aesthetic and spiritual pursuits, buttressed by an awareness of forms and forces beyond oneself.

Artists reflect often on moments of illumination, whether in the reverie of song, as in Palmer Hayden’s dream-like scene, or in the midst of rituals of devotion, like Clementine Hunter’s figures partaking in baptism. Purvis Young changed the course of his life after a

heavenly vision, which came to him one morning while in prison. Recounting the experience that would lead him to begin painting, he said, “I woke up and the angels came to me and I told ‘em, you know, ‘Hey man this is not my life,’ and they said they were gonna make a way for me.”

William Greaves

b. 1926, New York, NY

d. 2014, New York, NY

Excerpts from *First World Festival of Negro Arts*, 1966

Video, color, sound; 4:28 min. (looped)

Courtesy William Greaves Productions, Inc.

Jacob Lawrence

b. 1917; Atlantic City, NJ

d. 2000; Seattle, WA

Tombstones, 1942

Opaque watercolor on paper

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase 43.14

VD))) 509

Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller

b. 1877; Philadelphia, PA

d. 1968; Framingham, MA

Te Adoremus Domine, 1921

Painted plaster

Danforth Art Museum, Framingham, MA; gift of the Meta V.W. Fuller Trust
2006.282

BLACK MIGRATION

Nikki Giovanni

b. 1943; Knoxville, TN

Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea (We're Going to Mars), 2002

Courtesy the artist and HarperCollins

At right:

Alma Thomas

b. 1891; Columbus, GA

d. 1978; Washington, DC

Mars Dust, 1972

Acrylic on canvas

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from The Hament Corporation 72.58

Paul Waters

b. 1936; Philadelphia, PA

Beautiful Life, 1969

Oil on cut linen collage on canvas

Eric Firestone Gallery, New York



Ellen Gallagher

b. 1965; Providence, RI

Ecstatic Draught of Fishes, 2022

Oil, pigment, wax, palladium leaf, and paper
on canvas

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of The George Economou
Collection 2023.74

VD))) 508

Amid the unjust and unbearable conditions of enslavement and its wake, many Black artists and thinkers have wondered where else Black life could thrive. Imagining new worlds offered one possibility, appearing in the cultural paradigms of the Black Atlantis and Afrofuturism. Ellen Gallagher's aquatic and alien-like beings—based on African Fang carvings and created with palladium leaf—seem to inhabit an underwater terrain, at once fossilized and futuristic. The artist hearkens to the Black Atlantis, a mythical underwater world founded by the unborn children of enslaved women thrown overboard along the Middle Passage.

During the advent of space exploration in the late sixties and seventies, Alma Thomas—who avidly followed NASA's missions on radio and television—painted *Mars Dust* (1972) as she heard broadcasts of the vehicle Mariner 9 encircling the planet during a dust storm. Thomas uses abstraction to render this celestial world, with her tessellations of color suggesting the planet's surface as seen from above. The painting is paired with Nikki Giovanni's poem "Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea (We're Going to Mars)" (2002), offering a historical context and speculative ground for Black people to seek this interstellar realm.

Martin Puryear

b. 1941; Washington, DC

The Rest, 2009–10

Bronze

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Gretchen and John Berggruen 2014.350



From left:

Purvis Young

b. 1943; Miami, FL

d. 2010; Miami, FL

I Love Your America, late 1970s

Paint on mylar, mounted on found painting

Souls Grown Deep Foundation

Samella Lewis

b. 1923; New Orleans, LA

d. 2022; Torrance, CA

Migrants, 1968

Linocut on paper

The Johnson Collection, Spartanburg, SC

Purvis Young

b. 1943; Miami, FL

d. 2010; Miami, FL

Black People Migrating West, late 1970s

Paint and poster board, with wood frame

High Museum of Art, Atlanta; museum purchase and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection 2017.80

William H. Johnson

b. 1901; Florence, SC

d. 1970; Central Islip, NY

Moon over Harlem, c. 1943–44

Oil on plywood

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; gift of the Harmon Foundation 1967.59.57

Artists such as William H. Johnson, Samella Lewis, and Purvis Young chronicle the shifts, moods, and stories associated with the Great Migration—from the anguish and worry about leaving worlds behind, to the hope for what lay ahead, to the realization that one’s new home would come with its own challenges. A number of these works point to the racial violence that led Black Americans to flee Southern states, from Hale Woodruff’s depiction of a lynching to Theaster Gates and Lonnie Holley’s inclusion of firehoses—often used by law enforcement against protestors during the civil rights movement.

Other works view the prospects of self-determination as more promising, suggesting a growing sense of possibility. Martin Puryear’s bronze sculpture *The Rest* (2009–10) alludes to this horizon, expressed by the artist as “the idea of escaping into an unknown future, of traveling to safety, of taking dreams of advancement with you.” For someone like Alvin Ailey, this meant not being limited to becoming a sharecropper like his forebears, but imagining other paths for himself, such as the one he charted through dance.

William H. Johnson

b. 1901; Florence, SC

d. 1970; Central Islip, NY

Street Life, Harlem, c. 1939–40

Oil on plywood

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; gift of the Harmon
Foundation 1967.59.674

Purvis Young

b. 1943; Miami, FL

d. 2010; Miami, FL

Here I Come, Freedom, late 1970s

Paint on mylar, mounted on found painting

Souls Grown Deep Foundation

Theaster Gates

b. 1973; Chicago, IL

Minority Majority, 2012

Decommissioned fire hoses and vinyl on plywood

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Barbara and Michael Gamson 2016.262

Lonnie Holley

b. 1950; Birmingham, AL

Sharing the Struggle, 2018

Wood rocking chairs and fire hoses

Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody



BLACK LIBERATION

Joe Overstreet

b. 1933; Conehatta, Mississippi

d. 2019; New York, NY

Purple Flight, 1971

Acrylic on constructed canvas with metal
grommets and cotton rope

Eric Firestone Gallery, New York



Joe Overstreet

b. 1933; Conehatta, Mississippi

d. 2019; New York, NY

Purple Flight, 1971

Acrylic on constructed canvas with metal
grommets and cotton rope

Eric Firestone Gallery, New York



David Hammons

b. 1943; Springfield, IL

Untitled, 1992

Human hair, wire, metallic mylar,
sledgehammer, plastic beads, string, metal
food tin, panty hose, leather, tea bags,
and feathers

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds
from the Mrs. Percy Uris Bequest and the Painting and Sculpture
Committee 92.128a-z

VD))) 507

David Hammons

b. 1943; Springfield, IL

Untitled, 1992

Human hair, wire, metallic mylar,
sledgehammer, plastic beads, string, metal
food tin, panty hose, leather, tea bags,
and feathers

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds
from the Mrs. Percy Uris Bequest and the Painting and Sculpture
Committee 92.128a-z

VD))) 507

Sam Gilliam

b. 1933; Tupelo, MS

d. 2022; Washington, DC

Untitled (Black), 1978

Acrylic, yarn, and cut canvas on stained canvas

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Suzanne and Bob Cochran 94.161

Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller

b. 1877; Philadelphia, PA

d. 1968; Framingham, MA

Mold for Crusaders for Freedom, 1962

Plaster with mold release agent

Danforth Art Museum, Framingham, MA; gift of the Meta V.W. Fuller Trust
2006.310



Giving form and vision to liberation offered a continual way forward for Alvin Ailey, as for the artists behind this trio of works. Around 1851 Robert Duncanson, a free Black landscape painter, depicted the dividing line between two worlds—the North and the antebellum South—in a single vista. Both regions benefited from and depended upon the institution of chattel slavery for financial, industrial, and agricultural profit. At the time freedom for Black people was contingent upon where they stood in relation to this line, which in Duncanson's work separates slaveholding Kentucky from the free state of Ohio.

During the Civil War, the political cartoonist Thomas Nast created allegorical illustrations of uplift and domestic harmony, visualizing the hope and promise awaiting the formerly enslaved following the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Nearly a century later, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller engraved the profiles of abolitionists Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman into a plaster mold, highlighting them as beacons during the civil rights movement. These artworks anchor the continuum of Black creativity that Ailey and the other artists assembled have upheld, strengthened, and reimagined—a crucial matter of sustenance and political necessity.

Thomas Nast

b. 1840; Landau, Germany

d. 1902; Guayaquil, Ecuador

Emancipation of the Negroes—The Past and the Future (from “Harper’s Weekly”), 1863

Wood engraving

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1929
29.88.4(10)

Robert Duncanson

b. 1821; Fayette, NY

d. 1872; Detroit, MI

*View of Cincinnati, Ohio from Covington,
Kentucky, c. 1851*

Oil on canvas

Cincinnati Museum Center



James Little

b. 1952; Memphis, TN

Stars and Stripes, 2021

Oil and wax on linen

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from
Marcia Dunn and Jonathan Sobel 2022.207



Alvin Ailey’s ascendance as a gay Black man was not without its pressures. He once admitted, “The agony of coming from where I came from and then dancing on the Champs-Élysées . . . On one hand, the darkness where you feel like you are just nobody, nothing. And the other hand, you are the king, you’re on top of the world.” The work of running his company weighed heavily on him and compounded struggles that he faced in private. His nervous breakdown in 1980 and diagnosis of bipolar disorder attest to the sacrifices he made to realize his visions.

Artists have often attended to the facets of Blackness—that is, the realities and concerns of Black life—through the color’s myriad forms,

underscoring its chromatic force. Rashid Johnson’s *Untitled Anxious Men* (2016) channels Black male interiority through its visceral treatment of tile, wax, and melted soap. James Little ebonizes America’s national symbols in *Stars and Stripes* (2021), using encaustic to achieve precision of line, wax, and pigment—a nod to his father’s and grandfather’s work as bricklayers. Glenn Ligon’s coal dust, text-based paintings obscure and absorb words from the 1953 essay “Stranger in the Village” by James Baldwin, who was a key influence on Ailey. In the text, Baldwin describes having a difficult time in a Swiss village as the lone Black man, an experience he equated with life as a Black man in America.

Rashid Johnson

b. 1977; Chicago, IL

Untitled Anxious Men, 2016

Ceramic tile, black soap, and wax

Collection of the artist



Glenn Ligon

b. 1960; Bronx, NY

Stranger in the Village #12, 1998

Enamel, oil, acrylic, gesso, coal dust, and glitter
on cotton

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of the artist and purchase with funds from Joanne Leonhardt Cassullo and the Dorothea L. Leonhardt Fund at the Communities Foundation of Texas and the Painting and Sculpture Committee 98.55

Sam Doyle

b. 1906; St. Helena Island, SC

d. 1985; St. Helena Island, SC

Frank Capers, 1970

Paint and marker on wood

LeBe, 1970s

Paint on tin

Souls Grown Deep Foundation

“I’m trying to hold up a mirror to our society so they can see how beautiful they are, Black people, you know?” Alvin Ailey’s words reflect the tenacity of Black resistance against the backdrop of history and the many independence movements that galvanized his work. Artists such as James Van Der Zee of the Harlem Renaissance, Jeff Donaldson and Wadsworth Jarrell of AfriCOBRA, and Faith Ringgold of the Black Arts Movement also aligned themselves, to varying degrees, with the political urgencies of their time.

Ailey also remarked how “the success of the dance has always seemed to [him] to depend upon how personal it is . . . exposing some part of yourself.” The imperative of Black liberation was multifaceted and complicated by his own queer identity, the acknowledgment of which would have left him vulnerable to the prevailing homophobia of the period. To be Black, gay, and prominent among Ailey’s generation and those before it—as were James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, and Bayard Rustin—was to be confronted with a compounding stigmatization that would have likely compromised all aspects of their lives, including their sense of belonging. The generation after Ailey, among them Joseph Beam, Julius Eastman, Essex Hemphill, and Marlon Riggs, would be more open with their sexuality, with many turning to art as a means of activism and subversion in the early stages of the AIDS crisis.

Wadsworth Jarrell

b. 1929; Albany, GA

Together We Will Win, 1973

Acrylic and foil on canvas

Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco



Clockwise, from top:

Wadsworth Jarrell

b. 1929; Albany, GA

Revolutionary (Angela Davis), 1972

Screenprint

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from
Kenneth Alpert 2020.152

Jeff Donaldson

b. 1932; Pine Bluff, AR

d. 2004; Washington, DC

Soweto/So We Too, 1979

Mixed media

Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody

James Van Der Zee

b. 1886; Lenox, MA

d. 1983; Washington, DC

Marcus Garvey Rally, 1924

Gelatin silver print

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Manny and Skippy Gerard
2003.416

Faith Ringgold

b. 1930; New York, NY

d. 2024; Englewood, NJ

United States of Attica, 1971

Offset lithograph

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of ACA Galleries in honor of
Faith Ringgold 2017.163

Alternating, from left:

Melvin Edwards

b. 1937; Houston, TX

Lynch Fragment series, 1960s–
Steel

Utonga, 1988

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; gift of Clara Diament Sujo, 1991
1991.71

Chitungwiza, 1989

Katutura, 1986

Cup of?, 1988

The Museum of Modern Art, New York; purchase 245.1990, 242.1990, 243.1990

Maren Hassinger's *River* (1972/2011) echoes the instruments of bondage through its woven ropes and metal chains that coil and bend like a running river. Melvin Edwards's *Lynch Fragments* series (1960s–) also uses hardware as its means of rendering powerful yet open-ended metaphors. Edwards noted, "There are some elements like chains, [and] people love to jump to slavery and oppression—that can be, but nobody remembers why chains were invented . . . I know that that's the human invention of a stronger kind of rope. Everything else is implication."

Created for a 1926 revival of Eugene O'Neill's play *Emperor Jones* (1920), Aaron Douglas's woodblock prints—titled *Bravado* (1926),

Flight (1926), and *Surrender* (1926)—envision the rise and fall of its Black protagonist, Brutus Jones. After being jailed for murder, Jones escapes to an island in the Caribbean, crowns himself as emperor, and frees the place of its colonial powers. Douglas's visual language, a bridge between ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and Sub-Saharan African sculpture, underscores the play's emphasis on freedom's horizon and elicits a deeper and broader set of associations beyond that of American and European enslavement.

Alternating, second from left:

Aaron Douglas

b. 1899; Topeka, KS

d. 1979; Nashville, TN

Bravado, 1926

Flight, 1926

Surrender, 1926

Woodcuts

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; promised gift of Crystal McCrary and Raymond J. McGuire to the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and The Studio Museum in Harlem P.2022.3.3, P.2022.3.1, P.2022.3.2

Maren Hassinger

b. 1947; Los Angeles, CA

River, 1972 (re-created 2011)

Mixed-media installation with steel chains
and rope

The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; gift of the artist 2012.34



BLACK WOMEN

At left:

Mickalene Thomas

b. 1971; Camden, NJ

Katherine Dunham: Revelation, 2024

Rhinestones and acrylic paint on canvas
mounted on wood panel

Collection of the artist

At right:

Emma Amos

b. 1937; Atlanta, GA

d. 2020; Bedford, NH

Judith Jamison as Josephine Baker, 1985

Acrylic on canvas

Ryan Lee Gallery, New York

This newly created work by Mickalene Thomas is an homage to Katherine Dunham, a choreographer who held a doctorate in anthropology, known to Alvin Ailey and many others as the matriarch of Black dance. Drawing from both art history and popular culture, Thomas often juxtaposes histories, mediums, and materials to center the presence of Black women. Her scintillating surfaces are collaged—with a treatment at once graphic, archival, and staged—and adorned with sequins, rhinestones, and other embellishments.

Adjacent to this work is Emma Amos's dynamic portrait of Judith Jamison, an iconic Ailey dancer and choreographer who joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1965 and led the company from 1989 to 2011. Amos has depicted Jamison as performer Josephine Baker, whose dazzling presence—whether on the stage, for the camera, or in the media—took Paris and Europe by storm, paving the way for others like Jamison to enter and expand on these domains. By merging the two women, Amos highlights their importance as shared and mutually reinforcing.

Mary Lovelace O'Neal

b. 1942; Jackson, MS

Race Woman Series #7, 1990s

Mixed media on canvas

Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco



Kara Walker

b. 1969; Stockton, CA

African/American, 1998

Linoleum cut on paper

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; promised gift of the Fisher
Landau Center for Art P.2010.339

VD))) 505

At left:



Karon Davis

b. 1977, Reno, NV

Dear Mama, 2024

Plaster strips, plaster, metal, wire,
and glass eyes

Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York

Reflecting upon the realities and pressures faced by Black women, the contemporary scholar Saidiya Hartman wrote that “we must never lose sight of the material conditions of [their] existence or how much [they have] been required to give for our survival.” Alvin Ailey lived out a similar imperative, recognizing in Black women a sense of boldness, wisdom, and strength. One woman Ailey was particularly close to was Carmen de Lavallade, who appears here in a portrait by her husband, Geoffrey Holder, that captures her commanding presence. De Lavallade introduced Ailey to the Lester Horton company in 1949, danced with him for various productions, and co-led his first international tour in 1962 to Asia and Australia.

Karon Davis’s newly created sculpture of Judith Jamison dancing in *Cry* (1971) reflects Ailey’s ode to “all Black women everywhere—especially our mothers.” Davis, a child of performers and a former dancer who once aspired to join the Ailey company, is known for sculpting Black dancers mid-pose in white plaster. Through her dynamic figures, the artist reframes the whiteness of her chosen material—a nod to classical statuary—in light of Black vigor and virtuosity.

Geoffrey Holder

b. 1930; Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

d. 2014; New York, NY

Portrait of Carmen de Lavallade, 1976

Oil on canvas with artist frame

Roth Collection

Beauford Delaney

b. 1901; Knoxville, TN

d. 1979; Paris, France

Marian Anderson, 1965

Oil and egg tempera emulsion on canvas

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; J. Harwood and Louise B. Cochrane
Fund for American Art 2012.277

Lois Mailou Jones

b. 1905; Boston, MA

d. 1998; Washington, DC

Jennie, 1943

Oil on canvas

Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; gift of the IBM Corporation

Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller

b. 1877; Philadelphia, PA

d. 1968; Framingham, MA

Mother and Child (Secret Sorrow), c. 1914

Bronze

Danforth Art Museum, Framingham, MA; gift of Mrs. Robert MacPherson
1975.16

AILEY'S COLLABORATORS

Antonio Lopez

b. 1943; Utuado, Puerto Rico

d. 1987; Los Angeles, CA

Juan Ramos

b. 1942; Caguas, Puerto Rico

d. 1995; New York, NY

*Slideshow of photographs from Studio 54 opening night,
1977*

Slide projection

The Antonio Archives

Romare Bearden

b. 1911; Charlotte, NC

d. 1988; New York, NY

Bayou Fever series, 1979

Courtesy the Estate of Romare Bearden and DC Moore Gallery, New York

Alvin Ailey and Romare Bearden—whose wife, the dancer and model Nanette Rohan Bearden, established a contemporary dance company in 1977—first collaborated in 1976 for a tribute to Duke Ellington. In addition to creating sets and costumes for other choreographers' dances including Dianne McIntyre's *Ancestral Voices* (1977) and Talley Beatty's *The Stack-Up* (1982), Bearden also designed set pieces for Ailey's *Passage* (1978). The following year, he created the *Bayou Fever* series (1979) of narrative collages as a springboard for a dance he hoped Ailey would choreograph. Though the dance was never realized, Bearden's vivid characters and worlds evince a shared sensibility with Ailey. Narrative descriptions accompany most of the collages, telling a story rooted in the Louisiana bayou, while their myths, rituals, and imagery resonate with a larger Black diasporic imaginary—one given tone and texture through Bearden's distinct material alchemy.

“There’s so much music in Romie’s work,” Alvin Ailey said of artist Romare Bearden. “There’s so much blues, spirituals; there’s so much gospel. There’s so much Mobile, Alabama, so much New Orleans, so much Mahalia Jackson.” Ailey recognized the visual timbre, connective sweep, and depth of association that Bearden’s use of collage made possible, akin to his own eclectic manner of choreographing bodies in space. The distinct way that Bearden sourced images, sampled popular culture, and referenced a range of modern artists echoed Ailey’s approach to dance—equally sonorous, sensual, and socially inspired. Both artists held the highest of regards for Black culture in the South, admiring the region’s cultivation and understanding of art as an abstraction, a spiritual concern, a contention with historical events and civil liberties, and a vessel for feeling.

The Bayou, 1979

Collage, ink, pencil, and acrylic on fiberboard

1. The scrim—places the action and locale of “Bayou Fever” in the Louisiana bayou, near New Orleans.

The Father Comes Home, 1979

Collage on fiberboard

2. The Father—Comes home from work, meets flower people who dance & hand him flowers for his wife.

Wife and Child in Cabin, 1979

Collage, pencil, and acrylic on fiberboard

3. The Wife—Is alone in her cabin awaiting the return of her husband. A *lullaby dance* as she is putting the baby to sleep in the crib, however, there are ominous signs—a *train whistle* when none was due until later in the night—a *shadow* that crosses the cabin . . . Then the baby has developed a fever.

The Herb Woman, 1979

Collage and acrylic on fiberboard

4. The Herb Woman—Takes care of the health of the persons in her locale of the bayou, mostly with roots, herbs and magic potions.

The father, on entering, and learning of the baby's illness calls the Herb Woman. The Herb Woman indicates the child needs spikenard root tea and the magic root that only the Indians can find. The Father and The Herb Woman leave—the Herb Woman for the spikenard, the Father to find his Indian friend, "Spotted Deer," whom he hopes will lead him to the Magic Root.

The Mother Hears the Train, 1979

Collage and acrylic on fiberboard

5. Now enters the Dreaded Swamp Witch and her two
Blue Demons.

(End Part 1.)

The Swamp Witch, 1979

Collage and acrylic on fiberboard

The Blue Demons, 1979

Collage, acrylic and pencil on fiberboard

The *Swamp Witch* advances on the Mother—Dance of the *Blue Demons*— the mother is terrified.

The Wart Hog, 1979

Collage on fiberboard

6. The Wart Hog enters—He is a bully. Does a *raucous dance*, leaping, jumping, rolling.

The Lizard, 1979

Collage, acrylic, and pencil on fiberboard

7. The Lizard: Comes crawling in on his stomach—does a *squirming* dance.

The Hatchet Man, 1979

Collage, acrylic, and pencil on fiberboard

8. The Terrible Hatchet Man—Enters and does a fierce dance—all the cohorts of the Swamp Witch together. The Swamp Witch moves on the Mother *throwing gray confetti*—a sure sign of *Death* in *New Orleans*.

Romare Bearden

b. 1911; Charlotte, NC

d. 1988; New York, NY

Bayou Fever series, 1979

Courtesy the Estate of Romare Bearden and DC Moore Gallery, New York

The Buzzard and the Snake (The Conjur Woman), 1979

Collage on fiberboard with attached string and safety pin

9. The Conjur Woman—Stand at the door with her pet buzzard, her calling card, a skull—her ropes that she can turn to vipers. She is enemy to the Swamp Witch.

(End of Part 2)

Earth and the Magic Drummer, 1979

Acrylic, collage, and pencil on fiberboard

BAYOU FEVER -2-

The Conjur Woman by various stratagisms drives out the Blue Demons—*The Wart Hog—The Lizard, all in dance*. When the Terrible Man confronts her she turns herself into a *beautiful seductress* and when he comes to seduce her, the Conjur Woman sets *him on fire*. The Swamp Witch rushed at the Conjur Woman shooting blue & green lights which the Conjur woman reflects back blinding the Swamp Witch. The Conjur Woman now leaves.

10. We hear a drumming. Enters the Magic Drummer. He drums in.

*The Swamp Witch, Blue-Green Lights and Conjur
Woman, 1979*

The Conjur Woman, 1979

Collage and acrylic on fiberboard

11. *Earth*. After a dance, Earth calls—

Star (Star from the Heavens), 1979

Collage and acrylic on fiberboard

12. Star from the heavens to do a dance cleansing
the cabin.

The Magic Root (Spotted Deer and the Father), 1979

Collage and acrylic on fiberboard

12a. In the deep Bayou—Father & Spotted Deer find the magic root. He returns & the Herb Woman also comes with her roots. The Herb Woman & Earth attend to the [child].

Past-Present-Future and Beautiful Dreams, 1979

Collage and acrylic on fiberboard

13. The king of PAST*Present & Future enters with his attendant—He denotes the child's heritage.
14. Beautiful Dreams enters with a basket of wonderful dreams for the baby.

Wisdom, 1979

Collage and acrylic on fiberboard

15. *Wisdom* enters dancing a pavanne.

The Emperor of the Golden Trumpet, 1979

Collage and acrylic on fiberboard

16. A trumpet is heard. The ominous shadow crosses the cabin once more. The Emperor of the Golden Trumpet enters, does a jazz dance.

All Come Back, 1979

All Come Back, 1979

Collage and acrylic on fiberboard

17. Finale: All the participants reenter—Everyone was on the way to Mardi Gras. The Emperor of the Golden Trumpet goes to the moon to play for everyone as they go to the train taking them to New Orleans. The Conjur Woman flies away.

Nelson E. Breen

b. 1945; New York, NY

Excerpts from *Bearden Plays Bearden*, 1980

Featuring Dianne McIntyre's *Ancestral Voices* (1971) and Alvin Ailey, James Baldwin, Romare Bearden, and Albert Murray

16mm film, color, sound; 17:26 min. (looped)

Courtesy the artist

BLACK MUSIC

Archibald John Motley, Jr.

b. 1891; New Orleans, LA

d. 1981; Chicago, IL

Gettin' Religion, 1948

Oil on linen

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest, by exchange 2016.15

VD))) 503

Thornton Dial

b. 1928; Emelle, AL

d. 2016; McCalla, AL

Soul Train, 2004

Clothing, tin, rope carpet, bicycle horn, oil, enamel, spray paint, and epoxy on canvas, mounted on wood

Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH; purchase through the Evelyn A. and William B. Jaffe 2015 Fund 2021.11.3

From far left:

Betye Saar

b. 1926; Los Angeles, CA

I've Got Rhythm, 1972

Mechanical metronome with wood case, plastic toy, American flag pin, paint, and paper collage

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 99.87a–b

Charles Gaines

b. 1944; Charleston, SC

Sound Box: Nina Simone and Billie Holiday, 2021

Poplar, rubber, felt, MP3 player, vinyl records, speaker, remote control, and rechargeable battery

Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody

Jean-Michel Basquiat

b. 1960; Brooklyn, NY

d. 1988; New York, NY

Hollywood Africans, 1983

Acrylic and oil stick on canvas

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Douglas S. Cramer 84.23



The surrounding works by Terry Adkins, Charles Gaines, Kerry James Marshall, Archibald Motley, Bill Traylor, and Thornton Dial are inspired by the centuries-long sweep of Black music, iterative and transformative in equal measure. Musicality appears through color, as in Traylor's vivid blue; texture, in Dial's material thickening; and commemoration of artists, as in Marshall's memorial and Gaines's activation of musicians such as Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, whom Ailey greatly admired. Music, even in its most abstract form, can still be sensed through a work's conceptual contours, as in Adkins's drum and parachute—inert yet somehow on the brink of action.

The entertainment industries of music, Hollywood, and theater were important pathways for Black artists to make a living. These opportunities, however, often forced them to confront, subvert, and redress histories of stereotypical representations and exclusion, a reality grappled with by Jean-Michel Basquiat through the crossing out of words and Betye Saar's assemblages.

Kerry James Marshall

b. 1955; Birmingham, AL

Souvenir IV, 1998

Acrylic, glitter, and screenprint on paper on tarpaulin, with metal grommets

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 98.56

VD))) 502

Ralph Lemon

b. 1952; Cincinnati, OH

Untitled (On Black music), 2001–07

Ink and watercolor on notebook paper,
41 drawings

Walter with record player, 2005

Video, color, sound; 1:53 min. (looped)

Collection of the artist

Untitled (Miles Davis), 2006

Ink and watercolor on paper

Hudgins Family Collection

Emerging from the floodplain region where the Yazoo River and Mississippi River meet, the Mississippi Delta blues distilled personal experiences and collective longings into raw melodies of sorrow, strife, love, and perseverance. Alvin Ailey brought this spirit into the first dance he choreographed for his company, *Blues Suite* (1958), and subsequent works like *Roots of the Blues* (1961) and *Been Here and Gone* (1962).

Ralph Lemon has spent more than twenty years visiting and traveling through the Mississippi Delta where he has researched local histories, folkways, and everyday life in an experimental process that combines choreography, ethnography, visual art, and writing. In 2002, he met local legend Walter Carter, a former sharecropper who became Lemon's creative inspiration, partner in play, and friend.

From left:



Terry Adkins

b. 1953; Washington, DC

d. 2014; Brooklyn, NY

Other Bloods (from The Principalities), 2012

Drum, rope, zebra pelt, and parachute

Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Bill Traylor

b. 1854; Benton, AL

d. 1949; Montgomery, AL

Untitled (Man in a Blue House), n.d.

Graphite pencil and poster paint on paperboard

The Johnson Collection, Spartanburg, SC

Ralph Lemon

b. 1952; Cincinnati, OH

Bongos and Djembe, 1999

Oil stick on paper

Collection of the artist

Beauford Delaney

b. 1901; Knoxville, TN

d. 1979; Paris, France

Charlie Parker Yardbird, 1958

Oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; gift of the James F. Dicke Family 2013.89.3

Jazz has exerted a deep influence on modern dance and abstract art—all three forms magnetized by the pull of spontaneity and experimentation. Alvin Ailey, whose choreography mixed technique and tradition, was drawn to jazz for its ability to simultaneously master and free itself of meter, progression, and melody. He set several of his dances to the works of luminaries like Alice Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Keith Jarrett, Jay McShann, Charles Mingus, Charlie Parker, and Mary Lou Williams.

Sam Gilliam approaches swing, one outgrowth of jazz, with the precision of hard-edge painting, relying on striking colors and corners to signal both rhythm and rupture.

By contrast, in Norman Lewis's hands, jazz plays out as amorphous forms floating amid jagged lines and washes of color, creating a field of vision never at rest, always flitting and skittering across the surface. Beauford Delaney—known for his energetic, richly textured paintings—visualizes the sounds emanating from the saxophone of Charlie “Bird” Parker, a tour de force of bebop and Kansas City jazz, and the inspiration for Ailey's dance *For ‘Bird’—With Love* (1984).

Norman Lewis

b. 1909; New York, NY

d. 1979; New York, NY

Phantasy II, 1946

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of The Friends of Education of
The Museum of Modern Art 528.1998



Sam Gilliam

b. 1933; Tupelo, MS

d. 2022; Washington, DC

Swing 64, 1964

Acrylic on canvas

Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody



Clockwise, from top left:

Roy DeCarava

b. 1919; New York, NY

d. 2009; New York, NY

Elvin Jones, 1961

Gelatin silver print, mounted on board

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Sherry DeCarava 2014.134

Lyle Ashton Harris

b. 1965; Bronx, NY

Billie #21, 2002

Dye diffusion transfer print (Polaroid)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Photography Committee 2002.563

Norman Lewis

b. 1909; New York, NY

d. 1979; New York, NY

Jazz, 1943–44

Lithograph on wove paper

Estate of the artist

Gordon Parks

b. 1930; Fort Scott, KS

d. 2006; New York, NY

Music—That Lordly Power, 1993

Gelatin silver print

Gordon Parks Foundation

Hale Aspacio Woodruff

b. 1900; Cairo, IL

d. 1980; New York, NY

Blind Musician, 1935 (printed 1998)

Woodcut

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Auldlyn Higgins Williams and E. Thomas Williams, Jr. 2004.631

Roy DeCarava

b. 1919; New York, NY

d. 2009; New York, NY

Coltrane and Elvin, 1960

Gelatin silver print

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Photography Committee 98.12.3

AFTER AILEY

Missa Marmalstein and other makers unknown

Block 1871 of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, 1987

Mixed media

National AIDS Memorial

VD))) 504

**Kate Elswit and Harmony Bench (Moving Data), with
Antonio Jiménez-Mavillard and Tia-Monique Uzor**

Generations of Embodied Knowledge: The Alvin Ailey
American Dance Theater's Dance Artists, 1958–2023
(Radical Accounting series), 2024

**Kate Elswit and Harmony Bench (Moving Data), with
Antonio Jiménez-Mavillard and Tia-Monique Uzor**

Global Architectures: The Alvin Ailey American Dance
Theatre, City by City and Year by Year, 1958–89,
(Radical Accounting series), 2024

**Kate Elswit and Harmony Bench (Moving Data), with
Antonio Jiménez-Mavillard and Tia-Monique Uzor**

Repertory as Living Dance Museum: The Alvin Ailey
American Dance Theater's Performance History,
1958–89 (Radical Accounting series), 2024

AILEY'S INFLUENCES

Carl Van Vechten

b. 1880; Cedar Rapids, IA

d. 1964; New York, NY

Portraits of Alvin Ailey, 1955

Exhibition copies

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University,
New Haven, CT

Carl Van Vechten

b. 1880; Cedar Rapids, IA

d. 1964; New York, NY

Portraits of Alvin Ailey, 1955

Exhibition copies

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University,
New Haven, CT

VIDEO TOMBSTONES

Sphinx maquette for Metropolitan Opera production of
Antony and Cleopatra, 1966

Painted plaster

Metropolitan Opera Archives, New York

Fandango / Rheingold Presents, danced by the Lester Horton Dance Theater, directed by Alex Runciman, 1955
Video, color, sound; 29 min. (looped)

Camera Three: Tribute to Lester Horton, directed by
Nick Havinga, 1963
16mm film, color, sound; 28:20 min. (looped)

Lester Horton Collection, Library of Congress, Music Division, Washington, DC

Spirituals, danced by Pearl Primus, 1950
Video, color, sound; 1:14 min. (looped)

Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival Archives, Becket, MA

Excerpts of Pearl Primus dancing, 1981
Video, color, sound; 19:09 min. (looped)

WMHT-NY, Troy, NY

Excerpts from *An African American Dance Forum*,
directed by James Briggs Murray, 1983
Video, color, sound; 5:38 min. (looped)

Schomburg Center, New York Public Library, New York

Performed by the Katherine Dunham Company:

Choros, filmed by WDR Fernsehen, 1960

Video, black-and-white, sound; 1:57 min. (looped)

Cumbia, filmed by WDR Fernsehen, 1960

Video, black-and-white, sound; 2:08 min. (looped)

Shango, footage by Ann Barzel, 1947

16mm film transferred to video, black-and-white; 0:42 min. (looped)

Katherine Dunham Collection, Library of Congress, Music Division, Washington, DC

Negro Ballet, 1948

Video, black-and-white, sound; 1:21 min. (looped)

British Pathé, London

Washerwoman, 1956

8mm film transferred to video, black-and-white; 0:48 min. (looped)

Katherine Dunham Collection, Library of Congress, Music Division, Washington, DC

Urban Social Dance, Jamaica Fieldwork, footage by
Katherine Dunham, 1936

16mm film transferred to video, black-and-white; 0:54
min. (looped)

Katherine Dunham Collection, Library of Congress, Music Division,
Washington, DC

Katherine Dunham at home in Martissant, Haiti, 1962
Video, black-and-white, sound; 5:59 min. (looped)

Courtesy the artist's estate

Katherine Dunham on *Shango*, 2002
Digital video, color, sound; 1:40 min. (looped)

Katherine Dunham Collection, Library of Congress, Music Division,
Washington, DC

Excerpt of Carmen de Lavallade and Geoffrey Holder dancing in *House of Flowers* (1954), featured in *Ethnic Dance: Roundtrip to Trinidad*, directed by Greg Harney, 1959
Film, color, sound; 1:17 min. (looped)

Excerpts from *Carmen and Geoffrey*, directed by Nick
Doob and Linda Atkinson, 2005
Video, color, sound; 14:23 min. (looped)

Nobody Knows, danced by Ted Shawn, 1938

Video, color, sound; 1:21 min. (looped)

Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival Archives, Becket, MA

Primitive Mysteries (1931), choreographed by Martha Graham, directed by Dwight Godwin, 1964
Video, black-and-white, sound; 7:20 min. (looped)

El Penitente (1940), choreographed by Martha Graham, directed by Dwight Godwin, 1964
Video, black-and-white, sound; 19:41 min. (looped)

Martha Graham technique demonstration, 1975
Video, black-and-white, sound; 17:02 min. (looped)

Martha Graham Dance Company Archives, New York

Excerpt of Jack Cole dancing from *Lydia Bailey*, directed
by Jean Negulesco, 1952
Film, color, sound; 6:16 min. (looped)

Jack Cole performing *Sing, Sing, Sing* on *Perry Como's
Kraft Music Hall*, September 30, 1959
Video, black-and-white, sound; 5:10 min. (looped)

Excerpt from *Carmen Jones*, directed by Otto Preminger, 1954
Film, color, sound; 5:10 min.

Courtesy 20th Century Studios, Inc.

Excerpts from *On the Road with Duke Ellington*, directed
by Robert Drew, 1967

Video, color, sound; 14:06 min. (looped)

Library of Congress, Washington, DC

Excerpt from *Porgy and Bess*, directed by Joe Layton, 1961
Video, black-and-white, sound; 1:41 min. (looped)

Maya Deren

b. 1917; Kyiv, Ukraine

d. 1961; New York, NY

Talley Beatty

b. 1918; Shreveport, LA

d. 1995; New York, NY

A Study in Choreography for Camera, 1945

Video, black-and-white; 3 min. (looped)

Anthology Film Archives, New York