

apexart

2019-20 NYC Proposal

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Souls Grown Diaspora submitted by: Sam Gordon

"Souls Grown Diaspora" is an exhibition dedicated to documenting, preserving, and promoting the work of leading contemporary visionary African American artists from the wider United States. "Souls Grown Deep" from which this show takes its name, was originally inspired by a 1921 poem by Langston Hughes titled "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," the last line of which is "My soul has grown deep like the rivers". The Souls Grown Deep Foundation helped to establish visionary African American artists from the South as important figures within the dialogue of contemporary art. Such artists as Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, Mary T. Smith, Hawkins Bolden, and the collective of women who comprise the Gee's Bend Quilters have been embraced by curators and institutions as essential to understanding developments in the history of art.

"Souls Grown Diaspora" follows the migration North to urban centers such as New York, Chicago, and Detroit to showcase a Souls Grown Diaspora, a next wave of self-taught artists that address a wide range of revelatory social and political subjects. Alvin Baltrop's vernacular photography captured the heyday of the West Side Piers and parades of men. Raynes Birkbeck's drawings, paintings, and sculptures delve into multi-layered, orgiastic narratives. Stephanie Crawford well known in the 1980s Downtown New York scene of the Pyramid Club as a fantastic chanteuse, also painted intimate portraits of her friends and lovers. Curtis Cuffie became well recognized in the 1990s for his street installations downtown, including around Astor Place and the East Village. Still today, Otis Houston Jr creates his art and performance from a spot under the entrance to the FDR drive at 122 Street.

Dapper Bruce Lafitte drafts elaborate drawings and paintings depicting his ever shifting persona and the world of New Orleans. Joyce McDonald's sculpture from ceramics and found objects track in her words, "her path from the shooting gallery to the art gallery". Sarah Penn was well known for her Tribeca shop, "Knobkerry", where she presented work by David Hammons, and in turn the entire shop was a total artwork in itself. Frederick Weston creates elaborate collages culled from binders full of imagery he cuts from magazines, archived for years until finding their way into collages. Last but not least, the legendary Wesley Willis, a 1990s alternative music sensation, playing shows CBGB's, while displaying his intricate drawings of Chicago cityscapes in their gallery next door.

Showcasing the work of these ten artists would be an important step in acknowledging their individual practices, as well as exploring the larger ideas of a Souls Grown Diaspora. The Great Migration, the movement of six million African-Americans out of the rural Southern United States to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West that occurred between 1916 and 1970 is made evidence here through the lens of art and the wide range of artists and artworks that compose this exhibition. A collection of research material would be included in vitrines and a performance series could accompany the show during its run.

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