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Exhibition Review

‘The Great Migration’ of Southern Sensibilities and Charm: *Souls Grown Diaspora* at apexart

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Souls Grown Diaspora, curated by Sam Gordon, is an exhibition celebrating a group of powerful artists with personal narratives from a particular point and time in American History, the migration of African Americans from southern states to the ‘north’^[1] from 1917 to 1970, *The Great Migration*^[2]. The artists that emerged during this time work(ed) in various mediums, with variety of art practices used, and each work seems to emit its own unique tune. The works, once living in the same space, curated together create a beautiful eclectic symphony of art (of course, the exhibition soundtrack, songs by the artists specially selected for the show, playing in the gallery space also helped to set this mood).

Souls Grown Diaspora was selected from one of the two international curatorial open calls that apexart, the well-known Lower Manhattan based art non-profit^[3], holds every year^[4]. Before going to the exhibition, or after, whenever at your leisure, you have the opportunity to read Gordon’s winning proposal^[5], which states in a clear and precise away, that the ten artists he has selected, while each being a part of “The Great Migration”, took their own and unique path. It is because of these various ‘routes’, at times overlapping but uniquely their own, that makes this exhibition so colorful and refreshingly different.



Souls Grown Diaspora, January 11 - March 7, 2020.
Image courtesy of apexart.

When you first enter the gallery space, the mood is set immediately by music that is playing throughout the space. Unlike any other exhibition I have been to, *Souls Grown Diaspora* has its own soundtrack of curated songs by artists Frederick Weston, Wesley the music may seem odd, even out of place. Yet the artworks in the show almost sing on their own, and rather than being a distraction, it helps the viewer get into the headspace of these artists, many of which perform and even use the objects on view in their performances.

Perform anywhere *preach*, share your truth and message whenever and however you can. This philosophy is seen repeatedly throughout the show and the New York-based artist Otis Houston Jr. illustrates this philosophy perfectly. Otis Houston Jr., a self-taught artist, has performed and created sculptural installations under the Triborough Bridge on FDR Drive since 1997. While we are not able to teleport while in the gallery, we are able to have a small taste of it works like *Advertisements*, 2008-18. To see the artist live in action, the exhibition will be hosting “Sound & Vision” on March 7, a performance and record release event featuring the artists Otis Houston Jr., Dean Spunt, and Frederick Weston.



Otis Houston Jr., *Police Told a Lie*, 2018, Mixed Media, Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist / Image courtesy of apexart

In the middle of the gallery space is a long row of vitrine, giving us a glimpse in the overwhelming busy, colorful, exciting lives of each of the artists. The contents are layered, yet still legible, making what usually is seen as dry and academic display case, quickly glanced at before your eyes move back to the walls, an exciting part that you end up going to again and again. And when you do, you see how the lives of these artists, while viewing the photography Alvin Baltrop, who during the 1970s photographed in and around the West Side Piers, capturing the now infamous gay cruising scene that took place there. Or the wall of fabric remnants and items of clothing by Sara Penn, a small echo of her Tribeca store “Knobkerry”, one of the first stores of its to sell elaborate textiles from around the world and recreated the latest fashion trends with them.

But I don’t have to imagine when looking at the friendship and artwork of Frederick Weston and Stephanie Crawford. Crawford, who was well-known in the 1980s for fantastic jazz performances, now enjoys teaching music and painting and drawing the types of tokens of affection she would receive from her adoring fans (*Chocolates #1*, 2017, Watercolor on paper).

Adjacent to Crawford’s work is artworks by one of those fans, Frederick Weston. His collages of Crawford appropriately titled, *Presenting Stephanie Crawford (#2)*, each collage a tribute to a New York underground performing legend.

Moving my gaze to look at Weston’s other collages, my eyes quickly scan up and down the silhouette of figure that is compiled of muscular good looking male bodies and faces, almost a map of the body one might desire to have or possess in a more intimate setting.



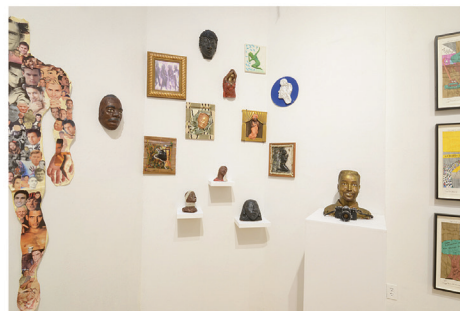
Stephanie Crawford and Frederick Weston
Courtesy of the artists / Image courtesy of apexart

All the works on view are refined yet casual, showing multiple levels and degrees of skill, that can only be gained through years of practice. Thoughtfulness. An awareness of materials and self that many artists today do not have the life experience, or self-awareness, to bring.

It is this self-awareness that makes it possible for these 10 artists to project the same sentiment. It doesn’t matter if anyone is watching, it doesn’t matter if anyone cares. This artwork, any and all performances was and is for them. To satisfy that nagging feeling that drives every artist to first create.

They also all seem to possess that southern charm of making treasure out of what others may discard, an old shoe, a broken necklace, and repurposing it to make something spectacularly new. Looking at the far back gallery wall of female figures created painted, assembled together from broken items and random scraps, into tools of purpose, objects to be admired, an artwork to be hung on a wall.

Women, in history and society, are like the objects that Reverend Joyce McDonald has used in her works, broken and discarded, but she in her feminine wisdom realizes these objects still have a purpose and deserve to be loved and adored. Like in her piece *Precious As A Pearl (Pearl Girl Collection)*, 2005, created with air dry clay, wood, mod podge, costume pearls, and her mother’s broken pearl necklace.



Reverend Joyce McDonald
Courtesy of the artist / Image courtesy of apexart

apexart

Seeing these wide-ranging types of works, some that are active during performance, the strongest feeling one has when leaving the show is: confidence. The artists performed wherever they wanted to perform. Don't have a space? No problem, there is an empty sidewalk. Want to create an outdoor installation for your neighborhood to enjoy? Whose stopping you? Go out and do it. Want to create? You do not need to go to Blink Art Materials and buy the most expensive tools to create a masterpiece, sometimes all you need glue, paper, a few old magazines, and your imagination.

While to some this may seem like obvious artistic ingenuity, but for me it reminds of the habits and traits I gained from my southern mother and living my teen years in Georgia, using every part of any and everything, waste nothing; and being completely unabashed about it.

Sam Gordon is a New York-based artist and curator. In 2017 he and Jacob Robichaux founded Gordon Robichaux, a gallery and curatorial agency in New York City's Union Square. Recent curatorial projects include *The Frieze Library: Volume One*, *Frieze*, New York, 2019, and *Contemporary Drag*, NADA, New York 2017. Gordon's own painting, drawing, photography, and video work was regularly presented in numerous solo and group exhibitions at Feature Inc. from 1997 - 2013. His work is included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY), the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, MN), and the Tang Museum (Saratoga Springs, NY). In addition to his curatorial and artistic practice, Gordon has taught at the California Institute for the Arts, Rhode Island School of Design, and The University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Souls Grown Diaspora, curated by Sam Gordon on view at apexart through March 7

Gordon Robichaux will present Matt Paweski and Frederick Weston at the upcoming fair, Independent New York (March 6 - 8)

Upcoming Events: SOUND & VISION: OTIS HOUSTON JR., DEAN SPUNT, FREDERICK WESTON, Saturday, March 7, 2020, 6:30 pm, in conjunction with *Souls Grown Diaspora*

^[1] "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."- Sam Gordon,

^[2] *Souls Grown Diaspora*, curated by Sam Gordon, Press Release,

^[3] "About", <https://apexart.org/about-us.html>, Accesed February 26, 2020.

^[4]Calvo, Irene. "STEVEN RAND, APEXART FOUNDER: "THE CURRENT DEFINITION OF ART AND ART RELATED ISSUES IS UNLIMITED"; <https://www.callforcurators.com/blog/steven-rand-apexart-founder/>, Accessed February 26, 2020.

^[5] Gordon, Dam. "Souls Grown Diaspora: Proposal", October 2018. Accessed February 26, 2020. https://apexart.org/images/gordon/Gordon_Proposal.pdf.