

# The Art of Other Suns

A consideration of work  
made in the wake  
of the Great Migration

By Sam Gordon



Alvin Baltrop, *Pier 52* (Gordon Matta-Clark's "Day's End" building cuts with two men), c. 1975–86, gelatin silver print, 6.25 x 9.25". Courtesy Alvin Baltrop Trust and Galerie Buchholz.

ESSAY

*"Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me."*

—Zora Neale Hurston

CBGB, New York City, 1996: It was the first time I had ever watched the life force that was Wesley Willis—the unclassifiable cult musician—perform, shouting, singing, rhapsodizing. After the show, I went next door and bought one of the remarkable pen-and-marker Chicago street drawings that had become his artistic calling card. In exchange, Willis offered me a head butt, his friendly salutation, making for an unforgettable transaction on the Bowery. Around that same time, as my eyes slowly opened to art thriving in unexpected places, I would often see striking pieces woven into the fabric of the street itself, along Astor Place—a series of bright orange, purple and green birds of paradise threaded through chain link fences, with red ribbon pulling together the geometry. This, as I came to learn, was the handiwork—frayed, weathered, flapping in the breeze—of Curtis Cuffie, who had developed a complex language of assemblage sculpture during many years of homelessness.

In 2017, I co-founded the gallery Gordon Robichaux and started working directly with the African-American "outsider" artists Frederick Weston and Otis Houston Jr. In our curatorial projects and exhibitions at the gallery, other little-known black artists began to come to our attention—designer Sara Penn, for example, and singer-artist Stephanie Crawford—sparking memories of Willis and Cuffie, those artists whose work had so radically reoriented my thinking in the '90s.

A year before opening the gallery, while working with the organization Visual AIDS on an exhibition, I'd met Raynes Birkbeck, whose fantastic drawings and sculptures also

made a lasting impression on me. In my research and work, I came upon other artists like him, who fell into a common racial-geographic grouping: Alvin Baltrop, whose mother, Dorothy Mae, gave birth to him in the Bronx in 1948 after moving there from Virginia; Joyce McDonald, whose parents Willie (High Yella) and Florence (Black Gal) McDonald, always known by their nicknames, came north from Alabama in 1945 after the war to Brooklyn's Farragut Houses, where McDonald was raised with her six siblings and still lives; Bruce Davenport Jr., who changed his name to Dapper Bruce Lafitte in honor of the Lafitte Housing Project in the Sixth Ward of New Orleans, where he grew up.

I came to perceive a larger historical context for all of these dynamic artists, a pattern that could be traced to the Great Migration—the movement of six million African Americans from the rural South to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West between 1916 and 1970. The upcoming exhibition "Souls Grown Diaspora," which will be on view at the nonprofit gallery apexart in New York from January 11 to March 7, 2020, is the culmination of my thinking about this phenomenon and all my looking over the years at its effects—a project that I hope will help bring into focus a generation of visionary contemporary African-American artists from throughout the United States and situate their work amid the broader cultural lineage of the Great Migration.

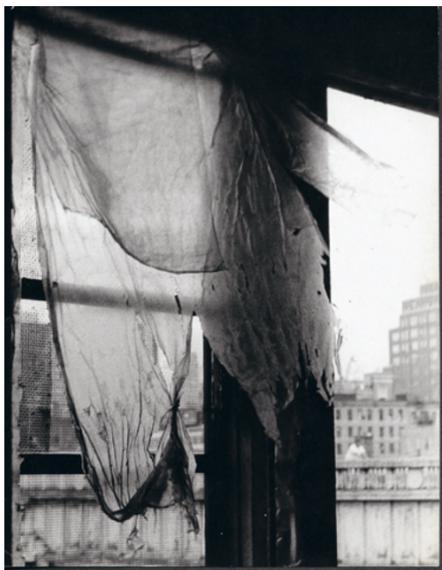
The show's title takes its inspiration from Atlanta's Souls Grown Deep Foundation, whose founder, William S. Arnett, worked for decades to help to identify and establish a group of pioneering black artists from the South—among them Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, Mary T. Smith, Hawkins Bolden and the women's collective Gee's Bend Quiltmakers (Arlonza Pettway, Annie Mae Young and Mary Lee Bendolph)—as essential to the understanding of developments in the history of American art. The name "Souls Grown Deep" originates from the last line of Langston Hughes' 1921 poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers": "My soul

has grown deep like the rivers."

"Souls Grown Diaspora" follows a subsequent wave of artists—many self-taught; others of whom studied at Pratt, the School of Visual Arts and the Fashion Institute of Technology; all of whom encountered racism and marginalization in their careers. The exhibition, the design of which is inspired by the traditions of yard art and quilting, will include a wide range of media: painting, drawing, photography, sculpture, textiles and jewelry, alongside a collection of archival ephemera and research materials. Because over half of the artists make and record music as part of their art practices, the exhibition will also include a soundtrack.

"Souls Grown Diaspora" offers a structure for considering the work of a group of 10 disparate contemporary artists, some of them personally interconnected, all of whom explore vernacular traditions and engage actively with other contemporary artists of their day. Looking collectively at these diverse artists—some dearly departed, many still actively creating, some living with HIV, others sober and in recovery, variously identifying as straight, bisexual, gay and trans—a number of themes emerge. Baltrop's and Weston's championing of the use of vernacular photography naturally leads toward an embrace of social media, by Weston himself, and by Houston Jr., and McDonald, who create work across multiple platforms and accounts. Handwritten words and texts populate many of the artworks—conveying humor, urgency, abstraction and politics with everyday language. Other themes in the exhibition, such as the home as studio, the street as studio, public housing, SROs, homelessness and mental health issues, are especially important given the tremendous impact of these subjects on the lives and work of these artists. What follows are brief biographical and professional sketches of each participant, along with images of their work, presented as a kind of exhibition within the pages of a magazine—a nod to the unconventional forums within which many of these artists have worked.

## Alvin Baltrop (1948–2004)



Alvin Baltrop, *Piers (open window)*, c. 1975–86, gelatin silver print, 7.5 × 9.5".  
Courtesy Alvin Baltrop Trust and Galerie Buchholz.

A photography prodigy, Alvin Baltrop began shooting pictures of his friends and peers at a young age, moving on to famous subjects like Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael. He joined the Navy in 1969 and served in Vietnam, where he photographed fellow sailors. While a student at the School of Visual Arts in the early 1970s, Baltrop began to photograph life along the West Side Piers—sunbathers, the gay cruising scene, criminal activity, the crumbling contours of the historic piers themselves. “I soon grew determined to preserve the frightening, mad, unbelievable, violent and beautiful things that were going on at the time. To get certain shots, I hung from the ceilings of several warehouses utilizing a makeshift harness, watching and waiting for hours to record the lives that these people led...and the unfortunate ends that they sometimes met.” Baltrop shared an interest in the piers with other artists of the day: Gordon Matta-Clark, David Wojnarowicz and Joan Jonas all performed artistic interventions at the piers. Baltrop’s work, however, would not gain recognition until after he died. As the critic Douglas Crimp once noted, “He photographed constantly at the Hudson River piers from 1975 to 1986, and the thousands of negatives from that project constitute his chief photographic legacy. He risked much to work there. In order to spend more time at the piers, he gave up his job as

a taxi driver and became a self-employed mover.... In spite of the remarkable documentary and aesthetic value of what he accomplished, Baltrop was almost completely unsuccessful at getting his work exhibited during his lifetime.” But since his death, his work has increased dramatically in visibility—on the walls now in the permanent collection of the expanded Museum of Modern Art, for example, and in a critically celebrated retrospective at the Bronx Museum that remains on view through February 9, 2020.

## Raynes Birkbeck (b. 1956)



Raynes Birkbeck, *19*, 2004, mixed media on paper, 8.5 × 11".  
*Lester, Energy Field*, 2010, ink and acrylic on paper, 17 × 20". Artworks:  
Courtesy the artist and Situations, NY.

Raynes Birkbeck lives and works on the Upper West Side in an intergalactic war zone of a bedroom, full of mazes and battleships, that serves as a staging ground for his science-fiction-inspired writing and artworks. His belief that there are four multilayered dimensions in time, all happening at once, features largely in his work, which falls into a tradition of black speculative fiction going back as far as W.E.B. Dubois’ short story “The Comet” and continuing through the work of Octavia Butler and

Samuel Delany. Birkbeck’s idiosyncratic practice blends the supernatural and the everyday with the goal of revealing to the viewer, as he says, “the beauty, the power, the love and the need of nature or a higher power. [That] even in the most mundane and commonplace things, ‘the Force’ is always present. That the existence of nature and god are evident due to the fact that all things are made up of atoms and thus are created by, maintained, destroyed, resurrected and governed by nuclear forces, states, conditions and laws.” A mystic and chronicler of epic stories, Birkbeck, who was born in the Bronx with family roots in the Deep South, is a Henry Darger–like character, if Darger had been into bathhouses and the bear scene. This past fall, he debuted a solo exhibition at Situations on the Lower East Side; a documentary trailer on the artist will be screened during an evening program at apexart in January.

## Stephanie Crawford (b. 1942)



Stephanie Crawford, *Still Life with Green Vase*, 2016, watercolor on paper, 15 × 22". Courtesy the artist.

“At some point, I realized that I don’t want to paint a masterpiece. I want to be one,” Stephanie Crawford likes to say. Born in Detroit, with family in Tennessee and other parts of the South, Crawford became part of a group of friends—which include Frederick Weston, Shyvette Williams and the fashion designer Claude Payne—that made a splash in the house-

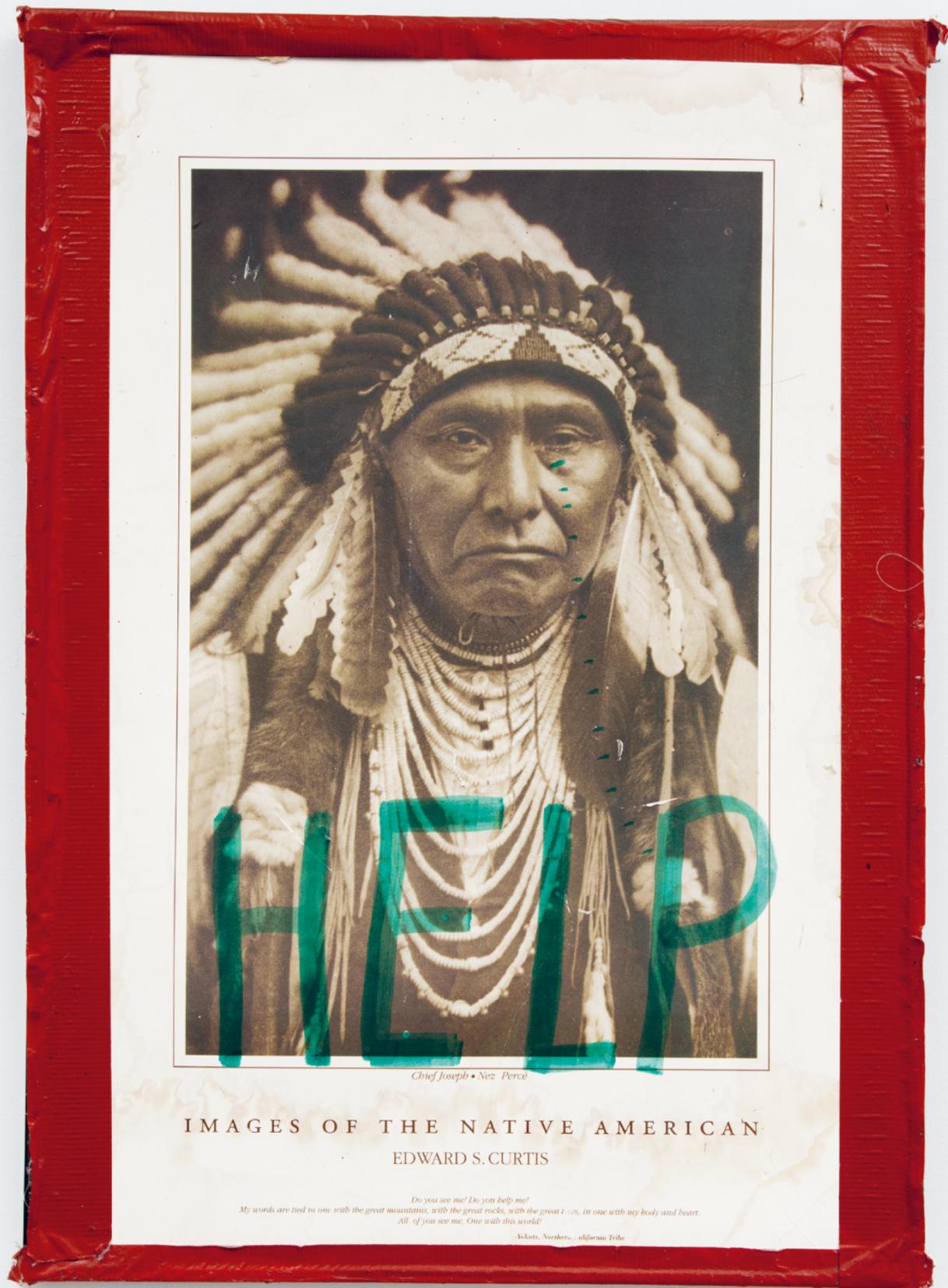
party scenes in Detroit, Chicago and New York for their innovative fashion and music. Crawford eventually moved to New York in the 1970s, and at 36, got a scholarship to pursue an MFA at Pratt, where she became close with the influential East Village trans artist Greer Lankton. She then turned her focus to jazz—the music of modernity and self-invention—becoming well known in the ’80s as a singer who bridged the world of blues and drag, performing at the Blue Note in the Village and the Pyramid Club on Avenue A. The artist Tabboo!, who performed regularly at the Pyramid as well, describes Crawford as “the Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington of the queer world.” From 1989 to 1996, she taught jazz vocals in Paris and received the prestigious award “Django D’Or” for Best International Jazz Vocalist in 1993. A practicing Buddhist, Crawford now lives in Oakland, where she continues to perform and teach. “Teaching was how I was able to survive,” she says.

## Curtis Cuffie (1955–2002)



Curtis Cuffie, *Barbie with Binoculars*, c. 1999, mixed media and le balai citoyen, 14.75 × 2 × 4". Courtesy Carol Thompson Collection. Photo: Gregory Carideo.

In the ’80s and ’90s, Cuffie’s jerry-rigged in assemblages were a fixture on the Bowery and Cooper Square. He became known for the odd grace and mysterious humor of these impromptu sculptures and installations, built from pieces of fabric, loose wires, scavenged furniture and toys, old clothes and other found materials, and displayed on fences, outdoor walls and sidewalks.



Otis Houston Jr., *The Chief*, 2010, marker and tape on found framed print, 28 x 20". Courtesy Gordon Robichaux, NY. Photo: Gregory Carideo.

His sculptures were often removed by the city or destroyed by the elements, but he would quickly replace them, over the years building an audience of devotees. His work eventually found its way into the art world, included in group shows at American Primitive, Exit Art and Flamingo East, where it often sat beside that of other emerging artists such as Rachel Harrison, Lucky DeBellevue and Rob Pruitt. Cuffie—who was born in Hartsville, South Carolina, and came to Brooklyn at the age of 15—became friends with David Hammons, who was a fan. “When curators would come from Europe,” Hammons told *The New York Times*, “I would always take them to see Curtis’ work or introduce them to Curtis, just to frighten them.” His work was shown at the American Visionary Art Museum, in Baltimore, and was supported by the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, which made him an artist in residence. He died of a heart attack in 2002 at the age of 47.

## Otis Houston Jr. (b. 1954)

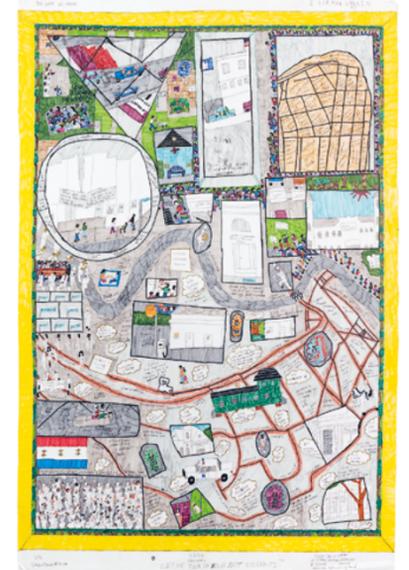


Otis Houston Jr., *Untitled (Portrait)*, c. 2004, c-print. Courtesy Gordon Robichaux, NY. Photo: Ejlal Feuer.

Otis Houston Jr. can frequently be found creating art, performance and social commentary at his long-held spot at the entrance to the FDR Drive at 122nd Street. Over the years, he has come to occupy and claim this marginalized stretch of the FDR as gallery, studio and public forum. Since 1997, following his mother’s death and a period of incarceration, Houston Jr. has set up shop weekly at this self-anointed soapbox under the Triborough Bridge, where he stages impromptu performances and displays an arrangement of signage, drawings and

found-object assemblages that critique racism, poverty and addiction, and also celebrate health, education, happiness and freedom. As he says, “We not in the same boat, but we all in the water.” The works of Houston Jr., who calls himself “Black Cherokee,” are made primarily with discarded objects that he collects and then manipulates in his East Harlem apartment of 30 years, or in the basement of the office building where he works in Midtown Manhattan. The handwritten slogans on his placards, banners and found paintings are playful and pointed—epigrams, concrete poetry and activist exhortations like “EDUCATE YOURSELF,” “HE AIN’T DID NOTHING BUT BEING A NEGRO.” They distill social issues into word forms that constantly shift in meaning, visual power and politics. His works made with found objects often stand in for the body, referring back to his own physicality in the highway performances. The sculptures also emphasize his democratic approach to art-making: his use of direct address, discarded objects, fruits and vegetables from his fridge, paperbacks from his personal library, flowers from the corner store, all flow from his insistence that the artist “use what he’s got.” Houston Jr. has performed at Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens and has shown his work at Canada and Gordon Robichaux, where he is currently represented.

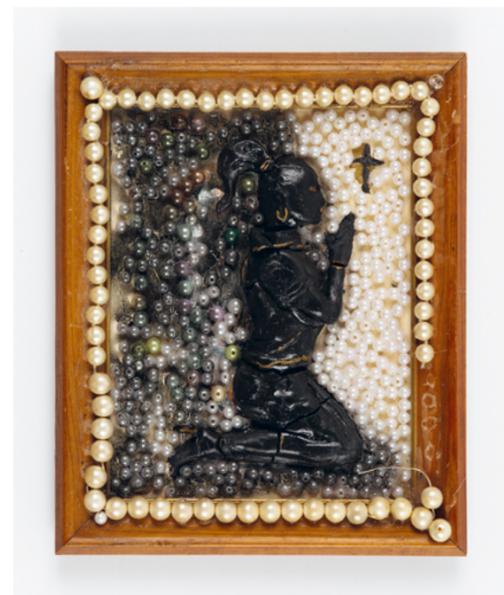
## Dapper Bruce Lafitte (b. 1972)



Dapper Bruce Lafitte, *Let Me Talk to Your Art Students*, 2017, archival ink on acid-free paper, 60 x 40". Courtesy Fierman.

Self-taught artist Dapper Bruce Lafitte bears the self-bestowed name of the housing project where he grew up in the Sixth Ward of New Orleans. Lafitte's work reflects his connection and loyalty to the street, public art, community rebuilding and the sub- and folk cultures of the Sixth Ward. His vernacular drawings often capture flows of vast numbers of people—marching, dancing, playing football. In 2005, the Lafitte Housing Project was severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina (it was later demolished), and Lafitte relocated to New York. To most of his drawings, he adds handwritten tags, in pen or marker, that comment on the images or on his state of mind: "IM NO SAINTS FAN," "THE GAME WAS CHANGED," "RUN AND RUN FAST," "A BLUE THROW DOWN," "NEED A LIFT FOLKS." In 2017, the art critic Jonathan Goodman wrote of the work: "Lafitte's colorful drawings keep alive the awareness that the marginal matters, consisting as it does of real people whose suffering counts." In recent years, he caught the attention of the writer and curator Diego Cortez, an early champion of Basquiat, and his work was included in the second Prospect New Orleans, a citywide contemporary art triennial, in 2012. Most recently, the work was exhibited at Fierman on the Lower East Side.

## Reverend Joyce McDonald (b. 1951)



Reverend Joyce McDonald, *Precious as a Pearl (after shingles)*, 2009; air-dry clay, wood, Mod Podge, costume pearls, Mother's broken pearl necklace; 12 × 9.75 × 1". Courtesy the artist.



*My Dad Willie McDonald*, 1998; air-dry clay, house paint, Mod Podge, Father's fabric shirt and camera; 13 × 11.5 × 12". Courtesy the artist. Photos: Gregory Carideo.

The Reverend Joyce McDonald is a visionary artist and great-grandmother who performed as a teenager with a girl group at the Apollo Theater. Her revelatory artwork and activism have much in common with that of Sister Gertrude Morgan and Sister Mary Corita Kent, who also used art to convey a message of strength, hope and power. McDonald says that her sculpture, made from ceramics and found objects, tracks her "path from the shooting gallery to the art gallery." Using humble materials like clay, tinfoil and dirt, she sculpts portraits of her loved ones: her father, mother and sister Janet McDonald—the author of *Project Girl*, her 1999 memoir about their time growing up in Brooklyn's Farragut Houses—have all been subjects. McDonald's portrait of her father, Willie McDonald (an amateur photographer, who would develop and print in her kitchen and who died of a heart attack at the age of 54, in 1977) is a large gold bust made of clay and his clothing. McDonald has been a coordinator and speaker for her church's AIDS ministry and assistant director of its children's choir. She is dedicated to street ministry and has told her story on television, radio, in print and online. Her artwork was featured on the front page of *The New York Times* Weekend Arts Section in 2016 in Holland Cotter's feature article "Art From the Age of AIDS," and in 2015 was projected onto the facade of the Guggenheim Museum for "Day With(out) Art."

## Sara Penn (b. 1927)



Sara Penn, Knobkerry vest (detail). Courtesy Ruth Marten Collection. Photo: Gregory Carideo.

Sara Penn was born in Pittsburgh. Her grandmother's family did missionary work in Alabama. "I realize," Penn has said, "that I reflect my great-grand aunt, Sadie Lee in Pleasant Valley, Alabama, who followed Booker T. Washington's idea of skilled training for newly freed slaves. She taught quilting and sewing. She opened a training school that grew to have over 200 students." Penn is best known for the Manhattan store she opened in the 1970s, Knobkerry, one of the first establishments in the U.S. to sell ethnographic art, objects and clothing from all over the world. The store, which migrated from the East Village to SoHo and then TriBeCa before closing in the '90s, was a favorite among artists, musicians, writers and designers in the '70s and '80s. Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Ntozake Shange, Yves Saint Laurent (who would go on to imitate her custom designs in a major fashion show) were all regulars at various times. Mick Jagger is said to have bought pieces. David Hammons self-curated a 1995 show of his work, intermingled with store items, at the location on West Broadway. As an African-American female business owner, Penn did more than just break barriers with her influence and reach; with Knobkerry, she created a global context for a thriving scene of black and/or radical artists and thinkers, a legacy that remains largely unknown outside certain circles. "I do all the buying for the shop, and I will pass up a bargain or a bestseller in a minute to retain the originality of our display and our collection," she once said. "I think black designers, like black musicians, should dig into their origins for [their] inspirations. It would help to 'signpost' our current quest for identity and bring something different to Western fashion."

## Frederick Weston (b. 1946)



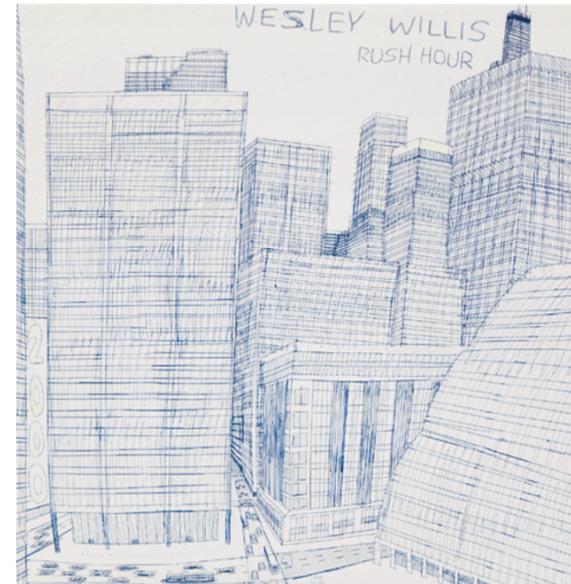
Frederick Weston, *Tommie's Smile*, 1979, mixed media on dot matrix print, 14 × 8.5". Courtesy Gordon Robichaux, NY and Collection Armyan and Christine Meleo Bernstein. Photo: Adam Kremer.

Frederick Weston, born in Memphis and raised in Detroit, hugs you twice when you meet him, a double-hug greeting he learned in his HIV support group and day program. Having trained in menswear design and marketing at the Fashion Institute of Technology, he draws heavily from mood boards and patternmaking body maps as primary genres for his art. His elaborate collages are culled from binders full of pictures that he cuts out of magazines and has archived for years in his apartment. From a very young age, Weston began collecting and organizing a seemingly infinite variety of visual materials that he found to have both personal and cultural significance: images of money, food, skin, holiday and religious imagery; toiletry and pharmaceutical packaging; photographic prints; fabric swatches; duplicates of almost everything made with Xerox machines. He uses his idiosyncratic, encyclopedic system to process and cope with what he sees as an overly hierarchal, category-obsessed material world. He embraces collage for its immediacy, as a fluid form of tactile poetry. "I like using materials kids have access to, like when I saw Matisse's *Swimming Pool*, I thought, 'Oh, he just cut paper. I can do that.'" New York nightlife—dancing at Paradise Garage and the 10th Floor, working the coat check at Stella's Bar in Times Square—has also fortified Weston with subjects, narratives and chosen family. He is represented by Gordon Robichaux, where he has had numerous shows and his work has been featured in panels, exhibitions and readings organized by Visual AIDS, the Whitney Museum, the Leslie-Lohman Museum, Artists Space and La Mama La Galleria.



Frederick Weston, *Body Map 2*, 2015, mixed media on paper, 65 x 32". Courtesy Gordon Robichaux, NY. Photo: Gregory Carideo.

## Wesley Willis (1963–2003)



Cover of Wesley Willis' LP *Rush Hour* (Alternative Tentacles Records), recorded 1993, released 2000.

During childhood, Willis developed an interest in art, and in 1988, he was featured in a Chicago public-access documentary titled *Wesley Willis: Artist of the Streets*. As a musician, he filled his albums with funny, profane, outlandish statements about topics ranging from crime and fast food to imagined battles with superheroes, along with praise for his idols in music and Hollywood. Willis produced hundreds of highly detailed ink-pen drawings of Chicago street scenes, which he sold on those same streets for small amounts, usually less than \$100. He grew up in Chicago's projects, one of ten children in a turbulent family with roots in Georgia. Diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1989, he began his underground career in the outsider music tradition, with songs sung over the auto-accompaniment feature on his keyboard. Admired by well-known musicians like Henry Rollins, Mike D and Jello Biafra, he gained a cult following in the 1990s and fronted his own punk rock band, the Wesley Willis Fiasco. His work has been exhibited at Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art in Chicago, alongside the work of Curtis Cuffie, and at Delmes & Zander in Cologne, Germany.

In 1994, I was in a mixed-media painting class at the Rhode Island School of Design with Kara Walker. I'll never forget a comment she made about her journey as an artist, from Atlanta to RISD—"up North to freedom." She was kidding, in the way her work often kids, but it marked the first time I had considered the historic phenomenon of that mass migration. Gathering the work of these 10 artists into an exhibition acknowledges their individual practices while also placing the artists within an important larger social context. By foregrounding the lasting effects of the Great Migration on the timeline of American contemporary art, I hope the exhibition helps piece together a collective narrative, one that serves as an entry point into the lives and practices of often overlooked visionary artists. Whether self-taught or trained, each artist has merged the urban environment and deep family histories from the American South into a new Pan-African identity and aesthetic. Effectively channeling their personal experiences and ideas into a dialogue with larger social issues, the artists of the Souls Grown Diaspora are deeply linked individual and conceptually.

Having worked on the margins of the art world for most of their careers, some of these artists are now entering into contemporary dialogue through the attention of young curators and galleries, or their work has begun to reach a much greater level of attention posthumously. But as the exhibition will underscore, these artists have always been in conversation with the vanguard artists of the day and have never thought of their work as less vital or important because of its development outside the bounds of the mainstream. In the words of Stephanie Crawford: "I think it's time for some kind of declaration here and to toss the dice of truth and everlasting beauty. I am an absolutely extraordinary 76-year-old African American post-op transgender vocal jazz musician. And I have lived long enough to tell it. Or rather sing it. I am no longer ashamed. Or afraid of you. My life story as a gay transgender person of color is at once painful, sublime, ridiculous, heart-stoppingly beautiful and ultimately victorious."

*Additional contributions to this essay were made by Svetlana Kitto, Jacob Robichaux and Graham Bell.*