

# Beer with a Painter: McArthur Binion

“I don’t come from art history, and even though I’m involved in the mainstream art world, I didn’t come from this.”

by [Jennifer Samet](#) April 18, 2020

McArthur Binion, “DNA:Black Painting: 1” (2015), oil paint stick, graphite, and paper on board, 84 x 84 x 2 inches (all images courtesy of Modern Ancient Brown, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

CHICAGO — When arranging my Chicago visit with McArthur Binion, I was told that he prefers to meet at 2 pm, when he’s completed his work time in the studio. I was also told that his drink of choice was Topo Chico — not beer. Sure enough, he is well-supplied with dozens of glass bottles of the sparkling water. His studio is comfortable, spacious, and raw, in the way that old New York lofts used to look. Binion acknowledges that having a space like this is one of the charms of living in Chicago, after his earlier decades in New York.

At a few points during our conversation, Binion peers out the window, surveying the goings-on at the school across the street. It’s important to leave before the school’s chaotic dismissal time, he tells me, when the street becomes terribly congested. But when the designated time approaches, it is clear there’s still more to talk about. Binion decides it is okay to let go of the plan, settles in, and even digs out some very vintage photographs of himself and his friends to share with me.

There is something about the way he gradually eases his regular strictures and relaxes into our time together that relates to my understanding of his painting. Binion’s work employs the structure of a grid and repetitive mark-making, as

well as serially repeated imagery.

However, his work invites a close reading, revealing details almost impenetrable in reproduction. What we first perceived as a rhythmic grid is revealed to be slightly irregular lines, shaped and built up by hand with oil stick crayons. Get close enough to look into, and through, the dense, material paint layers, and very personal pieces of Binion's history are revealed: collaged photocopies of his birth certificate and passport, pieces of his address book, and images of his hands.

He exposes a childhood and an artist's life that was lived both inside and outside of the art world. Our assumptions and expectations of a "minimalist" vocabulary, its art historical origins, and its regularity, are subtly disrupted. He unveils — through repetition, the use of the hand, and the painting's underlayers — visceral truths of being a Black man, which our society might prefer to keep buried.

Binion was born in Macon, Mississippi in 1946. He received his BFA from Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, in 1971; and his MFA from the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, in 1973. Recent group exhibitions featuring his work include *Black Refractions: Highlights from The Studio Museum in Harlem*, a traveling exhibition that originated at the Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco (2019); *Beyond Infinity: Contemporary Art After Kusama*, Institute of Contemporary Art Boston (2019); and *Expanding Narratives: The Figure and the Ground*, Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago (2018).

His work was the subject of a solo exhibition at the Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, in 2018. A solo show is forthcoming at the Museo Novecento, Florence, Italy, in the fall of 2020. His work has been shown by Kavi Gupta, Chicago, and Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. He is represented in

New York by Lehmann Maupin (also Hong Kong and Seoul); and in Chicago by Richard Gray Gallery, where a solo exhibition, originally scheduled for April, will be presented at Gray Warehouse in the fall of 2020.

McArthur Binion, "DNA:Work" (2019), oil paint stick and paper on panel, 84 × 84 inches (image courtesy Richard Gray Gallery, New York and Chicago)

**Jennifer Samet:** *Can you tell me about your path, as a young adult, to becoming a painter, and early experiences with art?*

**McArthur Binion:** I was born in Mississippi, and we moved to Detroit when I was four years old. I'm one of 11 children; I'm in the middle. We all lived in a two-bedroom house. But the interesting thing is that I discovered places in that house to be alone. I feel like I have worked my whole life to be alone.

I have a speech block, which is now called a stutter. I say it's just how I talk. But it was very hard growing up, in a tough family, in a tough neighborhood. It made me an early developer. I learned, early on, how to fight, if a kid ever made fun of me. This started when I was really young, like six or seven years old. I skipped school for the first time when I was seven. My friend and I went to the first shopping mall in the world, the Northland Center, in Southfield, Michigan. There were no other black kids there. We were stealing everything in sight. No one said anything. When we were done, we got on the bus and went back to school, like nothing ever happened.

I went to Wayne State University in Detroit. I majored in creative writing, and wrote poetry. But I dropped out of school and came to New York. I got a job as an associate editor of the Harlem magazine *Haryou-Act*. I was basically a glorified errand boy. One day I was sent to deliver a package at the Museum of Modern Art. That was my first time at an art museum. It wasn't part of my experience to go to an art museum. In Mississippi, my address was Route 1, Box 2. In the 1950s, if you were into art, you would be called "queer" or

“funny.”

McArthur Binion, “DNA:Work” (2019, detail), oil paint stick and paper on panel, 84 × 84 inches (image courtesy Richard Gray Gallery, New York and Chicago)

**JS:** *Were there particular pieces at the museum that made an impact?*

**MB:** At the MoMA, I saw Abstract Expressionist paintings. I saw Jasper Johns. I didn’t know who they were, or what they were, but the scale of the work impacted me. I had never looked at an art book, but I was a young writer and I had taste. The other thing I remember was that the museum had put the work of the only Black painter on view — Wilfredo Lam — next to the coat check. They kept him in the slums.

On that visit, I realized that painting was something philosophical. I gravitated towards the work right away, and realized that experience changed my life. But it took me two years to get up enough nerve to take a drawing class. I could see; I was already a young revolutionary; I had dropped out of school; I had gone to Europe. I had begun to develop my voice. But now it was time to develop my hand. Most young artists who train, get their hand first, and then develop their head. But I went to art school to develop my hand. That became a really interesting, curious position.

I went to the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. I think it’s one of the only art schools that makes sense, because they treat you like an artist. They don’t tell you what to do. There are no classes with smart people telling you “yes” or “no.” When I was there we had 350 acres, 10 departments, and 140 students. There were artists in residence for every department, and they would do a critique every Friday. The artists in residence have studios there and live in an environment designed by Eliel Saarinen (Eero Saarinen’s father). I met Dan Flavin and Ron Bladen when I was in graduate school. In 2018-19, I returned there to do a show called *Binion / Saarinen*.

McArthur Binion, "Hand:Work" (2019), ink, oil paint stick, and paper on board, 72 x 48 x 2 inches

**JS:** *You moved to New York after school. Who were your friends in those early days?*

**MB:** I moved to New York in 1973. Judy Pfaff was my first New York friend. She was the smartest artist I ever met. Her work was beautiful, coming off the wall, on the floor, everywhere. There were only three bars in Soho at the time, and we would be the only people there talking about art. We were fresh out of graduate school — she from Yale and me from Cranbrook. We had moved to New York to compete.

In those days, you didn't just finish grad school and suddenly you were a painter. You had to take five or 10 years to earn the right to be a painter. Now you've got people just out of school showing and making money.

I got a loft in Tribeca before it was called Tribeca. Dan Flavin and Ron Bladen and I would meet at Max's Kansas City the first Monday night of every month, which was the hottest night in New York. My studio was at West Broadway and Reade. A whole floor cost \$145 a month, including heat. And you could get a job as a laborer slinging sheet rock for \$100 a day. You could work four days a month and you got your rent and food. It was a time when you could have a part-time job and be a full-time artist. You could dream, and be, and take your time, and develop, and figure this thing out.

McArthur Binion, "Hand:Work" (2019, detail), ink, oil paint stick, and paper on board, 72 x 48 x 2 inches

At 26, I got a job in New Jersey at Ramapo College. I was teaching with Joanna Pousette-Dart. I could have gotten tenure, but instead I quit. I didn't teach from 1975 until 1993, when I came to Chicago. I felt like it interfered with being an

artist. In the 1980s, I drove a cab, because I could make more money than I could teaching. The best teachers give away paintings every day they talk to students. I wanted to keep my paintings to myself.

At that time, the art world was much smaller and the highest priced artist was probably Robert Rauschenberg, whose work was selling for around \$20,000 in the 1970s. There were only three or four art stars. And I had noticed that the academics had a lower ceiling in terms of the sale of their work than the full-time working artists.

David Novros, who was married to Joanna Pousette-Dart, came to my studio to see the work and, a few months later, he sent his friend Brice Marden. Paula Cooper walked up five flights to see my work because Brice asked her to. Dealers and museum people were honored to come to our studios. Now, you've got artists begging dealers. I remember Dan saying one night, if they want to find out about your work, they'll come find you. I was like, "Okay cool." The work speaks for itself. That's how I was trained. I never called a dealer.

**JS:** *I know the writer Ntozake Shange was your partner; can you tell me about your involvement in the Black Arts Movement?*

**MB:** Yes, we were together in the 1970s and we had a daughter: Savannah Shange Binion. She just published her first book and she's a professor at University of California, Santa Cruz. We would have downtown parties in our duplex apartment. Every day, every conversation we had was about art. We spent time with Cecil Taylor in those days. The writer Thulani Davis was a close friend of ours, and she is still my friend. Thulani and I started a publishing platform together, called "After:Still."

New York, in the late 1970s, was just beginning to accept that there was a new Black Arts Movement. What we did in the 1970s and the 80s historically will make the Harlem Renaissance look small. But it's hard to sustain the

accomplishments you make early in your career. Ntozake had written a Broadway hit play at 27 years old.

McArthur Binion, "Ghost Rhythms for Thomecat: Two" (2015), oil paint stick and paper on board, 48 x 36 x 2 inches

**JS:** *I'm curious about your use of marking crayons and oil stick crayons. I also wonder about your use of the grid, and why it has been the vehicle for work that is autobiographical and emotive in content?*

**MB:** What I learned, when I came to New York in 1973, was to make something your own — like Dan Flavin with the lights. So I started using marking crayons back then, which later became paint sticks. This is long before Jean-Michel Basquiat, or Richard Serra, who saw the work at Artists Space, where I had a show in 1973. If you weren't making acrylic or oil paintings in the 1970s, you were out of it. People would ask "crayon on what?"

As for the grid, I don't see it as "grid." I see it as "shape." By repeating the shape, it allows me to swing. It's like the rhythm section in music. I can come in with the emotional content of who I am and lay down the joy and the paint, or whatever I'm laying down that day.

For the past eight years, I haven't been listening to anything while I'm in the studio; I don't listen to music. And I don't read anything, except newspapers and art gossip magazines. So there's nothing coming in, while I'm there. It's all going out, from me, into the work. It's been really intense, and now I'm ready to start letting things in.

McArthur Binion, "Ghost:Rhythms" (1974), oil paint stick and wax on aluminum, 72 x 48 x 2 inches

**JS:** *I noticed that on your studio wall is written "Ghost Willie," and you have a*

*series of works that refers to ghosts. Can you tell me about that?*

**MB:** He was my brother who died. Do you know what "haints" are? They are ghosts that you recognize. There is a painting about my brother called "Ghost Rhythms for Thomecat: Two," 2015. It was purchased by the American Academy of Arts and Letters and they gave it to the Detroit Institute of Art.

My first *Ghost:Rhythms* painting, which I made in the 1970s, was the first painting where I felt I had history behind me. It was my first painting about the South. As a young artist, sometimes you make paintings that are ahead of you. And that was one of them. It's in a great collection in Chicago.

**JS:** *A recurring series of paintings, DNA:Work, incorporates collages from copied pieces of your address books. Can you tell me about this series, and other subjects that you're dealing with now?*

**MB:** Whenever I feel like home cooking, I do the *DNA:Work*. I always will. The *DNA:Work* incorporates entries from my address book. If you look through my address book, it's a motherfucker: Romare Bearden, James Baldwin, Ishmael Reed. Bearden was my oldest daughter's godfather. I was always social. One of my closest painter friends is Stanley Whitney, who I met originally through Judy Pfaff. He was at Yale one year ahead of her.

You had to have people's addresses and phone numbers to get in touch. This is before the internet. Communication was by telephone, face to face, or by US mail. One of the last people I entered in my address book was Kerry James Marshall.

In the work that was in my 2019 show at Lehman Maupin, I used photographs of my own hands in the painting. I am fortunate to be ambidextrous; I use both of my hands. I build the work up slowly, in layers. After the red paintings I'm making right now, I'm going to return to the Hand: Work series. I'm also going



to use the image of a lynched man. I've used this image over the years, but not a lot. It's about time right now.

McArthur Binion, "Stuttering:Standing:Still (LDM Two) VI" (2013), ink, oil paint stick, and paper on board, 72 x 96 x 2 inches

For the painting "Stuttering:Standing:Still (LDM Two) VI," (2013), which is dedicated to the musician Lawrence Douglas "Butch" Morris, I commissioned a piece of music by the composer Henry Threadgill. I'm going to propose, if it is acquired, that the composition must be part of the piece. It was the first time I thought about doing a collaborative work like that. One of the reasons I'm a painter is that I didn't want to collaborate. I wanted to do everything myself.

I am planning to go to Lisbon soon, and I expect to make a conscious transition in my work there. There are so many places I can move it to. I'm going there fully for the purpose of writing my own story. I'm going to work on paper, which is my first love. I hope to make ten or fifteen drawings a week for four months. In the morning I'm going to do work on paper, in the studio. In the afternoon, I'll have a light lunch, and go to the same cafe and write something every day. I'm looking for at least a sentence every day. Maybe later on, I'll get a paragraph. But I hope for one clear sentence.

I have a fountain pen I haven't used for a while. It's beautiful. I don't want to sound like a conceptual artist — but I have this beautiful paper, and maybe the actual pieces will be the text. So, for a while, it's going to be about "my life as a painter." Maybe there will be a little color, but maybe not.

McArthur Binion, "Stuttering:Standing:Still (LDM Two) VI" (2013, detail), ink, oil paint stick, and paper on board, 72 x 96 x 2 inches

**JS:** *Did you have a particular connection to Lisbon?*

**MB:** I have a very romantic relationship with Lisbon. My wife Carla and I have been married for about 27 years. When we started to have a family, I finally had to have a tenure-track teaching position. For the first time in my career, my practice was at the bottom of my list of responsibilities. I didn't have the time or the money to pursue it as I would've liked to. When I took my first sabbatical, I took it in Lisbon, and I became an artist again. Every time I think about it I get a chill and start to cry. It was before the Euro, and the American dollar was 200% of what the Portuguese dollar was. So I was able to live there with my family; the kids went to a great school, and we had a nice apartment and I had a great studio. That propelled me. Because of that experience, I began to push to where I am today.

I want to formulate the story of how I became who I am. Three of my older siblings are still living and I am interviewing them. I want to gather all the information I can, so I can put down in language this story.

McArthur Binion, "DNA:Study: VIII" (2014), ink, oil paint stick, and paper on board, 96 x 72 x 2 inches

**JS:** *I know you've used the phrase "writing your own story" to talk about your work. Can you tell me what that means to you?*

**MB:** I've tried to read a couple things that have been written about me. But, often I get to a place and there's something wrong. There is something about the language that has nothing to do with the work. I want to say, "Please, just look at the work." When I'm looking at other work, I always think about what the work can give me. You've got to start the conversation from that.

I work on instinct. The *Under:Conscious* drawings that will be shown at Richard Gray Gallery — I consider to be the under-conscious of my work. They are about raw intelligence, as opposed to academic intelligence. I'm looking for something that's beyond language.

These days, most people look at painting on a screen. There's no emotional content, no smell, no sensory experience. I have supported a number of younger artists over the years, and I go to their studios to see their work. I never look up the work first online. I want to go and see what it really is, and what kind of message it can give me.

McArthur Binion, "DNA:Study: VIII" (2014, detail), ink, oil paint stick, and paper on board, 96 x 72 x 2 inches

I've realized over time that, as a person who stutters, non-verbal communication was a driving force in becoming a painter. It wasn't long ago that I realized that about myself. Nowadays, when you start art school, you have to have everything already figured out. But I figured these things out over time.

I don't come from art history, and even though I'm involved in the mainstream art world, I didn't come from this. I figured it out. I knew I wanted to be an artist forever. Ninety percent of people who go to art school, after 10 years, are not making art. Money and fame are an aside. I'm troubled by some young artists who think the work is about them. It's not. It's about the work. You can't lose sight of that. Because you have to do this for another 40 or 50 years.

I know where I'm headed. We have a house and property about an hour and a half outside of Chicago, and my new studio will have a 45-foot work wall. All I see are trees, and all I hear are birds. After I do the work on writing my story, I'm going to have this whole body of new "me." And I'm going to pursue it. I enjoy what I do, but it's not like I am having fun making art. I never did that. This is who I am, every hour; it's the complexion of who I am.

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