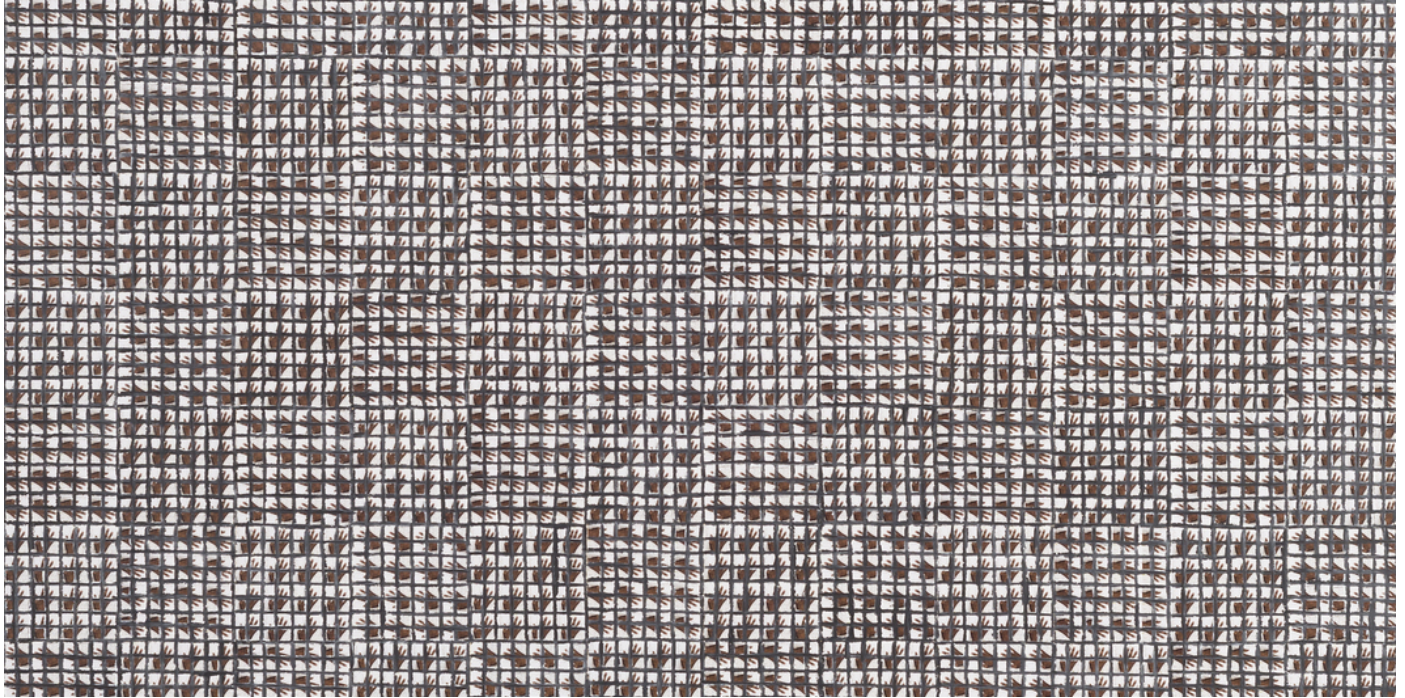


McArthur Binion

January 25, 2019 • McArthur Binion on memory and narrative in abstraction



McArthur Binion, *Hand:Work*, 2018, oil stick and paper on board, 72 x 48 x 2".

In an extension of what Lawrence Alloway called “systemic painting”—abstraction with a simple, methodical organizing principle based on repetition and difference—and an expansion upon the medium’s potentialities, McArthur Binion’s four-decade practice combines gridded, gestural strokes, created in his signature wax crayon, with biographical elements. Here, the Chicago-based artist discusses developing upon the narrative and materiality of his earlier output for his latest exhibition of oil-stick canvases, “Hand:Work,” on view at Lehmann Maupin in New York through March 2, 2019. The exhibition is presented in conjunction with “Binion/Saarinen: A McArthur Binion Project” at the Cranbrook Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

I FIRST HAD THE IDEA to use hands in my art about two years ago. Hands are a place of origin—when you're a kid you trace their outlines, and as parents we stamp our children's handprints when they're born. They're ubiquitous; yet, at the same time, there aren't two that look alike. In addition to photographs of my hand, in this exhibition there are a couple of works with copies of my birth certificate and photos of the house where I was born, because hands make a house and fingerprints serve as identification. Copies of these personal ephemera, the markers of our personal DNA, are tiled in succession, and they become the base layer of the paintings, which I then go over and mark with crayon and oil sticks.

I began my career as a writer. When I started making art, I already had my narrative but had to develop my hand, my tools. I went to grad school for art at Cranbrook Academy, met Dan Flavin and Ronald Bladen, and when I came over to New York, the idea among my peers and the generation slightly older was that painting was an old man's game. I bought into this at the age of twenty-seven, and I was ready to work and to train my hand for the next thirty, forty, fifty years. Now that I'm seventy-two, I qualify. By now, there's nothing in my way to prevent me from getting into myself, the pleasure is having the ability to work.

All my work is autobiographical, in a way. Growing up, we lived in a two-bedroom house, and I was one of eleven children—there was always noise, never any space for yourself. I don't listen to anything when I'm trying to work. As a black man, there's this assumption: black man, abstraction, jazz. OK, fine. The thing is, what's wrong with that formula for me is that I'm not influenced by jazz—I come from the same place as jazz.

An earlier body of work, the canvases I called "DNA Studies," incorporated pages from my address book, all those names and numbers I've had in one book for over twenty years. When I was working on those I was reliving every

day of my life. Every name, every face—it's emotional; you think of things, and you feel things. I was fortunate to be able to leave New York after twenty years here, an environment where making work has become quite difficult. I've been in Chicago since '92 and in the same studio for twelve years. I have a rigorous work schedule. I want to contain emotional rawness with discipline, give it structure, and give structure to my day. I haven't been in therapy in decades; these days, my therapy is the paint wall. Anything I need to solve, I solve while I'm working.

I tend to develop the next project while working on the current one, as I'm convinced that each new body of work comes out of a previous one. So the next project is merging the hands with the address books. Many young artists find their hand first and develop their heads later, but for me the narrative and the medium have merged together.

— As told to [Hiji Nam](#)