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She Married an Artist, and Now Finds Comfort in His Work

By Hilarie M. Sheets

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Merele Williams, a lawyer by training, was sick of dating doctors and lawyers. She set her sights on meeting an artist, and at a party in 1991, she did. Chatting with the sculptor and musician Terry Adkins, Ms. Williams gave him a thorough grilling on his bona fides. Mr. Adkins, in turn, scoffed at her preferences in art. That night he proposed, and nine months later they were married.

They lived, with their two children, in a Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, brownstone surrounded by Mr. Adkins's work and filled with collections of African art, musical instruments and pieces by his peers. Long admired within New York circles of African-American artists and curators like Thelma Golden and Kellie Jones, Mr. Adkins had been gaining broader recognition — including being chosen for the 2014 Whitney Biennial and the 2015 Venice Biennale — when he died from cardiomyopathy in 2014 at the age of 60.

Today, Ms. Williams-Adkins is committed to preserving her husband's legacy and last year brought his estate to the Lévy Gorvy gallery. A survey of his sculpture — often refined hybrids of found objects that were used as props in his musical performances — is on view through Feb. 17 in “Terry Adkins: The Smooth, The Cut, and The Assembled.”



A painting of the daughter of Lorna Simpson by Turiya Adkins. Cole Wilson for The New York Times

The show was curated by Charles Gaines, one of several artists close to Mr. Adkins. They traded works and Mr. Gaines is represented in the Adkins's home, along with many others. A print by Glenn Ligon based on Afro-centric coloring books leans on a credenza near a vivid blue abstract print by Mr. Adkins, who liked the way both Yves Klein and George Washington Carver used the color. Woodcuts by David Driskell, a scholar of African-American art who taught Mr. Adkins at Fisk University, hang in the dining room near prints of women's heads by Lorna Simpson (whose daughter modeled for a painting in the living room by Turiya Adkins, following in her father's footsteps by studying art at Dartmouth).

The following are edited excerpts from a conversation with Ms. Williams-Adkins.

How did you and your husband put this collection together?

We didn't have a lot of money, but Terry would do trades with friends. It was organic. He loved his students [at the University of Pennsylvania] and collected their work. Jamal Cyrus was one of his students and Demetrius Oliver. Wilmer Wilson was in Terry's last class.

Would he do trades even for the African art?

Whatever it was he wanted, it was like a barter system. He knew a lot about African art, what was good and what wasn't good. He started collecting musical instruments in Zurich in 1987. He found this kora [lute] through an African art dealer. That was one of the things he loved the most. There's a photograph of him before I knew him playing it in the Alps. For two years after he passed away, we couldn't find it. I sent photographs out to all the people who had moved his things from Penn. Then somehow it showed up. It was him bringing it back to me so I could rest easily.

Have you continued to collect on your own?

I go to benefits and I will buy things. My eye is not like Terry's, but I think I'm pretty good at it.

These little thumb pianos seem to crop up on every shelf and mantel.

There are a million thumb pianos around the house. They are wood and metal and he would play them. They make really cool tonal sounds. You'll also see tons of bells, which he bought on eBay and at flea markets, like this heap on the floor that have rabbit's feet on them — he being superstitious. When people come in, inevitably somebody kicks them and it's like he's still here. When Terry was alive, there was always music blaring, whether it was Beethoven or Bessie Smith or Mahalia Jackson.

Who made these large X-ray photographs?

Those are Terry's, taken of memory jugs, which are African-American funerary objects. Sharecroppers in the South would collect small trinkets they found. When they died, the trinkets were put in plaster and this would be their tombstone. Terry collected over 120 of these. He was friends with the people at Penn in the radiology department at the hospital who helped make these photographs.

Do you have any favorites among Terry's sculptures here?

I'm never getting rid of this one named "Firmament RHA" that was shown at the Whitney at Philip Morris in 1995. It's all found metal and usually hangs up very high. It was an ode to his father who had passed away right before that show. It kind of looks like a plane and kind of looks like a box. Terry would probably have described it as a box filled with memories of his father.

And what's the significance of hanging it high?

Because it's closer to the angels.