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Terry Adkins Conceived His Exhibitions as a Conversational Interplay Among Objects, Installations, and Musical Performances

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on May 1, 2020 • 11:58 pm

No Comments



RIGOROUS, POETIC, AND HIGHLY ABSTRACT, the practice of **Terry Adkins** (1953-2014) is a nexus of art, music, and language. He repurposed found objects and reimagined instruments; brought visibility to the layered biographies of pivotal historical figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Matthew Henson, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Sojourner Truth, and John Brown; and founded the Lone Wolf Recital Corps, an evolving collective of musicians and artists that continues to perform in conjunction with his posthumous exhibitions.

Solo shows dedicated to Adkins are currently on view in Nashville, Tenn., and St. Louis, Mo. "Terry Adkins: Our Sons and Daughters Ever on the Altar" is co-presented by the [Frist Art Museum](#) (Feb. 20-May 31, 2020) and the [Carl Van Vechten Art Gallery](#) (Feb. 20-Sept. 12, 2020) at Fisk University in Nashville. In St. Louis, the Pulitzer Arts Foundation has organized "[Terry Adkins: Resounding](#)" (March 13–~~Aug. 2, 2020~~ Feb. 7, 2021).

All three venues are temporarily closed due to COVID-19. In the meantime, the exhibitions can be explored online. In addition, curators from the museums are coming together for a discussion about Adkins and his music [via Zoom on May 21](#).

ADKINS PLAYED GUITAR, saxophone and other woodwinds. His output spans sculpture, printmaking, performance, video, and sound. A conceptual artist and musician, Adkins approached his work as a composer, displaying his art by developing a conversational interplay among objects, installations, and musical performances.

He was not keen on image-based expression, by contrast, he was committed to abstraction in its many forms. "Infinity" (1971-2014), for example, consists of dozens of copies of John Coltrane's "Infinity" album installed side-by-side in two standing rows housed in a vintage Cherokee trunk. A meditation on Coltrane, the work was ongoing until the death of Adkins.

The origins of the work date back to when the artist was a 19-year old freshman at Fisk University and he stole a copy of Coltrane's "Infinity" album. The Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College organized "Terry Adkins: Recital," a retrospective featuring "Infinity," the earliest work on view, alongside more than 30 others produced between 1986 and 2012. Ian Berry, the museum's director, wrote about the incident with the Coltrane album and the work that resulted from it, in the introduction to the [exhibition catalog](#).

Coltrane's posthumous album was in many ways a collaborative effort. featuring remixes of the late saxophonist and composer's then unreleased recordings by his wife Alice Coltrane. Her creative efforts in offering her deceased husband's work in new forms with added strings and overdubs was regarded as equal parts sacrilege and honor.

Beyond the orchestrated version of free jazz contained in the vinyl's grooves, the album's provocative title, kaleidoscopic cover art, and complicated statement about ownership and reverence stuck with Adkins. Adkins's Catholic upbringing in Washington, D.C. was deeply ingrained in him and the church's liturgy and formal symbolism occurs in his work. Fueled by feelings of guilt, observance, and service and a later realization of his conceptual recital form, Adkins's self-assigned penance would be to purchase the record over and over whenever it revealed itself in his life in a record store or online. With each purchase a new act of communion would occur. The ritual would continue until Adkins's untimely death in 2014 and remain his most sustained work.

Infinity: "Fueled by feelings of guilt, observance, and service and a later realization of his conceptual recital form, Adkins's self-assigned penance would be to purchase the [Coltrane] record over and over whenever it revealed itself in his life in a record store or online." — Ian Berry



Pulitzer Arts Foundation: TERRY ADKINS, "Infinity," 1972-2014 (Cherokee trunk and John Coltrane "Infinity" albums, 20 x 26 1/2 x 13 1/2 inches / 50.8 x 67.3 x 34.3 cm). | © 2020 The Estate of Terry Adkins / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Alise O'Brien, © Pulitzer Arts Foundation and Alise O'Brien Photography



Fisk University: TERRY ADKINS (American, 1953–2014), "Darkwater Record," 2003–8 (porcelain and five Nakamichi 550 cassette recorders playing "Socialism and the American Negro" by W.E.B. Du Bois, 31 x 12 x 14 inches). | Artwork © 2020 The Estate of Terry Adkins / ArtistsRights Society (ARS), New York. Image © The Estate of Terry Adkins / Lévy Gorvy

ADKINS DEVELOPED "RECITALS," encompassing installations and performances," to memorialize figures such as Du Bois, Hurston, and Coltrane, figures he has described as having a worldview similar to his own.

"Recitals are the biographical investigations into the legacies of individuals who I feel have either been *underknown* or, in the case of better-known individuals, have less-known aspects of their lives. This could be the question of Beethoven's ancestry, it could be the fact that Jimi Hendrix was once a paratrooper in the United States Army, or it could be bringing to light more facts about a charismatic figure like John Brown," Adkins explained in an interview with Okwui Enwezor published in the "Recital" catalog.

"I think of recitals as a certain kind of portraiture really, a completely and entirely abstract portraiture. What I try to do begins first of all with selecting the figure that I am interested in, followed by a period of immersive research into their life, and from that I distill the aspects of their lives I would like to make become the subject, and I try to draw from that the quality or characteristics of their personalities and their historical impact. In doing so, there is also usually a literary, musical, or historical legacy that one can draw from to help resuscitate, to reenact to a certain degree these figures in a live performance format. That is where the *recital* aspect comes in."

Charles Gaines, the Los Angeles-based artist, member of the Lone Wolfe Recital Corps, and friend of Atkins, curated "Terry Adkins: The Smooth, The Cut, and The Assembled" (2018), the artist's first solo exhibition at Lévy Gorvy gallery in New York. Gaines has said, Adkins was trying to "poeticize" his subjects rather than "literalize" them.

"Particularly in the performance work, he uses that affective language in order to poeticize the subjects of his interest. What he is doing is instrumentalizing the space of affectivity in a certain kind of way in order to create this critical observation of his subject," Gaines said.

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Associate Curator Stephanie Weissberg introduces "Terry Adkins: Resounding" at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis, Mo. | Video by Pulitzer Arts Foundation

ADKINS LIVED IN BROOKLYN, N.Y., and was a professor of fine arts in the School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Gone too soon, he died suddenly in 2014, at age 60. The cause was heart failure.

Born in Washington, D.C., Adkins grew up in Alexandria, Va., where his grandfather was a minister at Alfred Street Baptist Church. The oldest of five children, Adkins said he was raised Catholic "because of my mother." He attended an all-black Catholic school until fifth grade. Considered "gifted," at the dawn of integration he passed an entrance exam to attend an all-white, boys-only Catholic academy. "That was a strange world. All of a sudden I was going to school with these rich kids," Adkins said in a BOMB magazine oral history interview with Calvin Reid.

He had deep familial connections to education and music. "I grew up in a musical household. We listened to everything from Coltrane to Dinah Washington—all of the soulful stuff," Adkins said. He described his parents as "hobby musicians." A teacher and track coach at Parker-Gray High School (an Alexandria school named for two African American educators), his father played the organ and sang. His mother was a nurse at Freedmen's Hospital in Washington. She played piano and clarinet.

Adkins received his undergraduate education at Fisk University. After attending a white school for so many years, he said he wanted to go to a black college. Fisk was familiar. His father earned a master's degree in science at Fisk and brought the whole family there for a summer. This was about seven years before Adkins enrolled.

(Another connection, his uncle Rutherford H. Adkins, a Tuskegee Airmen, later led Fisk, serving as interim president in 1996, and president from 1997 until his death in 1998.)

Adkins went to Fisk to study history, intending to become a lawyer, he said in the BOMB interview. Drawn to the art department, that plan changed. "I got lured in because there was a lot of activity. The hipper upper-class students were over there, and in those days there was something mysterious and mystical about being an artist—," Adkins told Reid.

Aaron Douglas established the art department at Fisk in 1937 and served as its first chair. By the time Adkins arrived in 1971, Douglas was chairman emeritus, but remained a regular presence on campus. Adkins would see him in the library. Douglas became his mentor.

"I pestered him because I knew who he was. We had many conversations. His influence was this connection to historical reference and I guess I hadn't thought about this until now, but what he did was always geared toward a larger audience, an audience outside of this art audience," Adkins said, citing his murals and illustrations for books in a conversation with Berry published in "Recital."

Adkins continued: "I guess this whole idea of recitals is kind of rooted in the early experiences of his impressions upon me and looking at him from a historical perspective as one who wanted to reach and educate and uplift the visual sophistication of a large audience."

Studying under Martin Puryear (who taught him photography and drawing) and David Driskell, who was handpicked by Douglas to succeed him as chair of the art department, Adkins received a BS in printmaking from Fisk in 1975. He also earned an MA in printmaking from Illinois State University in Normal (1977) and an MFA in sculpture from the University of Kentucky, Lexington (1979).

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Fisk University: Installation view of "Terry Adkins: Our Sons and Daughters Ever on the Altar," Carl Van Vechten Gallery, Nashville, Feb. 20-Sept. 12, 2020. | Courtesy Fisk University Galleries

"OUR SONS AND DAUGHTERS Ever on the Altar" is on view concurrently at Fisk in North Nashville and the Frist Art Museum, which is downtown. The institutions are about two miles apart. The museum and the HBCU decided to partner to organize a more wide-ranging presentation, showcase more of Adkins's work, and provide more visibility for the artist in the city where his artistic roots were established. At Fisk, the exhibition was scheduled to coincide with the 45th anniversary of the artist's graduation.

"This is the first exhibition of its kind of Terry Adkins's work in Middle Tennessee, and we are excited to partner with the Frist Art Museum to co-present it," said Jamaal Sheats, director and curator of Fisk University Galleries, in a conversation with Frist Curator Katie Delmez published by the National Endowment for the Arts, a supporter of the exhibition.

Sheats continued: "A Fisk University alum, Adkins was a member of the jazz orchestra and a disc jockey for WFSK Jazzy 88 radio station. However, the Fisk Art Department was his home. He studied under the then chairman of the art department and director of galleries, historian, and artist David Driskell. Adkins has credited Aaron Douglas, who founded the art department 75 years ago, as igniting his interest in art. Today, I see Adkins's work and career as a beacon for the arts tradition at Fisk."

The works on view at Fisk explore the lives of Du Bois, a Fisk graduate; Henson, the Arctic explorer whose portrait by Winold Reiss hangs in the university's John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library; and George Washington Carver, the inventor and agricultural scientist who taught at Tuskegee Institute, another HBCU.

"Progressive Nature Studies" (2013), a series of color prints inspired by Carver's work is featured in the exhibition. "[E]verybody knows who George Washington Carver is but how many people really know he was an award-winning painter? This piece really brings that out," Sheats said in the NEA conversation.

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Frist Art Museum: TERRY ADKINS (American, 1953–2014), "Buffet Flat, from Belted Bronze," 2007–8 (silver bowls and utensils (some modified), glass marbles, leather case, honey, nylon single-sided flags, taxidermied birds, sewing machine, instrument stand, and inkjet print, approximately 240 x 216 x 144 inches). | The Estate of Terry Adkins. © 2020 The Estate of Terry Adkins / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The Frist exhibition focuses on musical aspects of Adkins's practice. "Terry himself had reached out to the Frist before he passed away about having an installation piece devoted to Bessie Smith shown at the Frist Art Museum," Delmez said in the NEA conversation. "Bessie Smith was born in Chattanooga, about two hours away from Nashville, and Terry liked to have his work shown in an environment that had a connection with the subject.



We were interested, but he did pass away unfortunately, and things were at a standstill.”

Recitals exploring the life and work of blues singer Bessie Smith, jazz saxophonist Charlie “Bird” Parker, and rock legend Jimi Hendrix are displayed at the museum. The body of work devoted to Hendrix exemplifies Adkins’s desire to foreground little-known aspects of the lives of important figures.

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Delmez said: “In 1960, Jimi Hendrix came from the Northwest to Fort Campbell, where he trained to be part of the 101st Airborne. During that time, he did dozens of practice parachute jumps and he wrote about that experience in letters to his father. For Terry Adkins, who was very much inspired by Jimi Hendrix, he feels that was something that really shaped the later course of [Hendrix’s] music career, that it was something that stayed with him. Again, there’s the tie to the local—after he was honorably discharged, [Hendrix] came to Nashville and live here for a spell before his career really took off.”

Public programming for the exhibition included a conversation about the life and legacy of Adkins with Merele Williams Adkins, the artist’s widow, and Driskell. Scheduled for April 3 at the Frist, the event was cancelled in March, when the museum closed temporarily in the wake of COVID-19. A couple weeks later, Driskell died on April 1, due to complications from the novel coronavirus.



Pulitzer Arts Foundation: TERRY ADKINS, "Single Bound," 2000 (metal and rooster feathers, 84 x 72 x 11 1/2 inches / 213.4 x 182.9 x 29.2 cm). | Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Purchase through the Archer M. Huntington Museum Fund and with support from the Blanton Contemporary Circle, 2001, © 2019 Estate of Terry Adkins and Lévy Gorvy, New York



Pulitzer Arts Foundation: Installation view of "Terry Adkins: Resounding" (2020-21), Lower West Gallery, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis, Mo. | © 2020 The Estate of Terry Adkins / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Alise O'Brien, © Pulitzer Arts Foundation and Alise O'Brien Photography

AT THE PULITZER ARTS FOUNDATION in St. Louis, some of Adkins's most ambitious and innovative works are on view. The exhibition features more than 40 works, many rarely seen, some shown for the first time since they originally debuted, and key selections from the artist's personal collection including musical instruments, objects, and books.

Titles such as "'Divine Comedy" by Dante Alighieri, "Music and the Power of Sound: The Influence of Tuning and Interval on Consciousness" by Alain Daniélou, "Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil" by W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Land Where the Blues Began" by Alan Lomax, "George Washington Carver: In His Own Words" by Gary R. Kremer, "The Story of Jazz" by Marshall W. Stearns, "Yves Klein" by Sidra Stich, "Cane" by Jean Toomer, "The Palm-Wine Drinkard by Amos Tutuola, and "Native Son" by Richard Wright, give insight into Adkins's literary interests and influences.

"Infinity," the Coltrane work, is on view at the Pulitzer. The works on display also include "Muffled Drums" (2003), a towering sculpture composed of eight drums. (The tallest sculpture Adkins produced, the original presentation featured 11 drums.) Many of the drums include identifying graphics, including "The Royal Knights Drum & Bugle Corps. of Danville, Va.," a painted landscape scene, and "Lone Wolfe Recital Corps."

Included in a recital to Du Bois, the museum provides the following backstory about the work: "Its title likely references the Silent Protest Parade of July 1917 that Du Bois helped organize. Newspapers described over eight thousand people marching silently to the 'beat of muffled drums' in the streets of New York City, protesting segregation, discrimination, and lynching in the United States. The event was developed partly in response to the 1917 East St. Louis riots in which numerous black residents were killed; the official death toll is not known to this day."

A detail of "Muffled Drums" (focusing on the drum with the landscape scene) appeared on the cover of the March 2014 edition of Artforum. The magazine was going to press when Adkins died. The issue coincided with the appearance of his work in the Whitney Biennial and included a [conversation between the artist and musician George Lewis](#).

Also in the exhibition, "Last Trumpet" (1995) was first presented in a show dedicated to the artist's late father. The iconic work is composed of four trumpet-like horns, 18-feet in length, that Adkins invented and called "Akrhaphones" (shown at top of page). In the Artforum exchange with Lewis, Adkins said, "I made them on the scale at which I thought angels would play them.... the Akrhaphones actually represented the horns of the first four angels of the Last Judgment."

Last Trumpet: The iconic work is composed of four trumpet-like horns, 18-feet in length... "I made them on the scale at which I thought angels would play them.... the Akrhaphones actually represented the horns of the first four angels of the Last Judgment." — Terry Adkins

Adkins made the horns by attaching sousaphone and trombone bells to tubes of cast brass, with no expectations that they would be playable instruments. He was surprised when they produced sound. The horns have been played on occasions by the Lone Wolf Recital Corps. The group was scheduled to "activate" the Akrhaphones at the Pulitzer on June 5-6. The [performance has been postponed](#).

In a 2006 interview with [Dana Roc](#), when Adkins was asked what he wanted to be known about his life, he said in part: "My quest has been to find a way to make music as physical as sculpture might be, and sculpture as ethereal as music is. It's kind of challenging to make both of those pursuits do what they are normally not able to do. That has been my challenge." CT

TOP IMAGE: Pulitzer Arts Foundation: Installation view of "Terry Adkins: Resounding," (2020-21) Main Gallery, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis, Mo. Shown, "Last Trumpet," 1995. | © 2020 The Estate of Terry Adkins Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Alise O'Brien, © Pulitzer Arts Foundation and Alise O'Brien Photography

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LIVE DISCUSSION On May 21 @ 5:30 p.m. CT via Zoom, curators Katie Delmez of the Frist Art Museum, Jamaal Sheats of Fisk University Galleries, and Stephanie Weissberg of the Pulitzer Arts Foundation are hosting a free virtual happy hour conversation about artist Terry Adkins. [Register here](#)



Pulitzer Arts Foundation: TERRY ADKINS, "Last Trumpet," 1995 (brass and sousaphone and trombone bells, four parts; Each, 216 x 24 x 24 inches / 548.6 x 61 x 61 cm). I The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of David Booth; and gift of Mr. and Mrs. Murray Thompson (by exchange), 2017, © 2019 Estate of Terry Adkins and Lévy Gorvy, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/ Art Resource, NY



Pulitzer Arts Foundation: TERRY ADKINS, "Divine Mute (from Deeper Still)," 1998 (aluminum, brass, nickel, and wood, 77 x 77 x 21 1/2 inches / 195.6 x 195.6 x 54.6 cm). The George Economou Collection. © 2019 Estate of Terry Adkins and Lévy Gorvy, New York



Frist Art Museum: TERRY ADKINS (American, 1953–2014), Installation view of "Aviarium," 2014 (steel, aluminum, silver-plated brass cymbals, and trumpet mute). | Artwork © 2020 The Estate of Terry Adkins / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image © The Estate of Terry Adkins / Lévy Gorvy. Photo by Bill Orcu



Frist Art Museum: Installation view of "Terry Adkins: Our Sons and Daughters Ever on the Altar," Carl Van Vechten Gallery, Nashville, Feb. 20-May 31, 2020. | Courtesy Frist Art Museum

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Fisk University: Installation view of "Terry Adkins: Our Sons and Daughters Ever on the Altar," Carl Van Vechten Gallery, Nashville, Feb. 20-Sept. 12, 2020. | Courtesy Fisk University Galleries

Fisk University: Installation view of "Terry Adkins: Our Sons and Daughters Ever on the Altar," Carl Van Vechten Gallery, Nashville, Feb. 20-Sept. 12, 2020. | Courtesy Fisk University Galleries



Fisk University: Installation view of TERRY ADKINS (American, 1953–2014), "Progressive Nature Studies (Portfolio)," 2013 (inkjet on pulled press paper, Object: 24 pages: 14 x 11 inches / 35.6 x 27.9 cm each frame). | Courtesy Fisk University Galleries





Pulitzer Arts Foundation: TERRY ADKINS, "Methane Sea," 2013 (wood, steel, rope, and tape, 78 x 40 x 55 inches / 198.1 x 101.6 x 139.7 cm). | The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Agnes Gund, 2014. © 2019 Estate of Terry Adkins and Lévy Gorvy, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY



Pulitzer Arts Foundation: TERRY ADKINS, "Last Trumpet," 1995 (brass and sousaphone and trombone bells, four parts; Each, 216 x 24 x 24 inches / 548.6 x 61 x 61 cm). | The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of David Booth; and gift of Mr. and Mrs. Murray Thompson (by exchange), 2017, © 2019 Estate of Terry Adkins and Lévy Gorvy, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/ Art Resource, NY



Pulitzer Arts Foundation: TERRY ADKINS, "After Bonnaterra (unidentified number)," 2013 (gouache on botanical engraving, 11 1/4 x 8 inches / 28.6 x 20.3 cm). | Estate of Terry Adkins and Lévy Gorvy, New York

Pulitzer Arts Foundation: These works on paper (#s 13–15) allude to George Washington Carver and Yves Klein's lifelong investment in the natural world, color, and history. Starting with images from a series of eighteenth-century botanical illustrations, Adkins applied a vibrant layer of ultramarine gouache to evoke the iconic blues developed by the two men. The works are named for French natural scientist Pierre Joseph Bonnaterra (1752–1804), who authored several texts in the encyclopedia series from which these illustrations are drawn. Klein and Carver's mutual intellectual pursuits resonate with several of the plants depicted here including the water cabbage (as seen in #15), a species native to the Nile River that appears in ancient Egyptian writings.

Pulitzer Arts Foundation: TERRY ADKINS, "Nenuphar," 1998 (brass and copper, 30 x 69 x 9 inches / 76.2 x 175.3 x 22.9 cm). | Collection of Catherine Gund, © 2020 Estate of Terry Adkins and Lévy Gorvy, New York

BOOKSHELF

The Pulitzer Arts Foundation published an [exhibition guide](#) to accompany its exhibition. In addition, an exhibition catalog, "[Terry Adkins: Resounding](#)," is forthcoming in summer 2020 from the museum and more widely in the fall. The first career-spanning volume of Adkins, "[Terry Adkins: Recital](#)" documents his retrospective organized by the Tang Teaching Museum and Gallery at Skidmore College. Also consider "[Terry Adkins: The Smooth, the Cut, and the Assembled](#)" and "[Terry Adkins: Infinity Is Always Less Than One](#)."



Tags: Fisk University, Frist Art Museum, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, Terry Adkins
