

Terry Adkins, Composer of Art, Sculptor of Music, Dies at 60

By Margalit Fox

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Terry Adkins in the Arctic preparing a piece on Matthew Henson, a black explorer who accompanied Peary there in 1909.
Tom Snelgrove

Terry Adkins, a conceptual artist whose work married the quicksilver evanescence of music to the solid permanence of sculpture, died on Feb. 8 at his home in Brooklyn. He was 60.

The cause was heart failure, his dealer Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn said.

A sculptor and saxophonist, Mr. Adkins was at his death a professor of fine arts at the University of Pennsylvania School of Design. His genre-blurring pieces, which might combine visual art, spoken-word performance, video and live music in a single installation, had lately made him “a newly minted breakaway star” on the international art scene, as The New York Times described him in December.

Mr. Adkins’s work — cerebral yet viscerally evocative, unabashedly Modernist yet demonstrably rooted in African traditions — has been exhibited at museums and galleries worldwide, including the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

His art is in the collections of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, part of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington; the Studio Museum in Harlem; the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York; and the Tate Modern in London.

His work will be shown this year as part of the Whitney Biennial, which runs from March 7 to May 25 at the museum.

“Terry always saw object and sound and movement and words and images all as the material for his art,” Thelma Golden, the director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, said in an interview on Friday. “He was so deeply inspired by aesthetics, philosophy, spirituality, music, history and culture, and he had such a fertile and generative mind, that he was always able to move between many different ideas and create a lot of space and meaning in a work.”

To his sculpture, Mr. Adkins sought to bring the fleeting impermanence of music, creating haunting assemblages of found objects — wood, cloth, coat hangers, spare parts from junkyards — that evoked vanished histories.

To his improvisational, jazz-inflected music, he brought the muscular physicality of sculpture, forging immense, curious instruments from assorted materials. Many were playable, including a set of 18-foot-long horns he called arkaphones.

The sculpture and the music were meant to be experienced in tandem, and with his band, the Lone Wolf Recital Corps, Mr. Adkins staged multimedia performance pieces that fused the visual and the aural. Many were homages to pathbreaking figures in African-American history, among them the abolitionist John Brown, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the musicians Bessie Smith, John Coltrane and Jimi Hendrix.

“Meteor Stream: Recital in Four Dominions,” for instance, was one of a cycle of works in which Mr. Adkins honored Brown. In that piece, performed in 2009 at the American Academy in Rome, he explored Brown’s storied past through an amalgam of music, sculpture, video, drawing and readings from Brown’s own writings.

In an installation devoted to Hendrix, Mr. Adkins homed in on lesser-known aspects of his subject’s personal history, including his service in the early 1960s as a paratrooper in the Army’s 101st Airborne Division.



Mr. Adkins performing in New York in November; with him are giant arkaphones he invented. Salon 94

To research a piece on the life of the African-American explorer Matthew Henson, who accompanied Robert Peary on several expeditions, including the one Peary said reached the North Pole in 1909, Mr. Adkins traveled to the Arctic to experience Henson's milieu firsthand.

At its core, all of Mr. Adkins's work was about how the past suffuses the present and vice versa.

Terry Roger Adkins was born in Washington on May 9, 1953, into a musical household. His father, Robert, a teacher, sang and played the organ; his mother, Doris Jackson, a nurse, was an amateur clarinetist and pianist.

As a young man, Mr. Adkins planned to be a musician, but in college he found himself drawn increasingly to visual art. He earned a B.S. in printmaking from Fisk University in Nashville, followed by an M.S. in the field from Illinois State University and an M.F.A. in sculpture from the University of Kentucky.

Mr. Adkins, who also maintained a home in Philadelphia, is survived by his wife, Merele Williams-Adkins, whom he married in 1992; a son, Titus Hamilton Adkins; a daughter, Turiya Hamlet Adkins; his mother; two brothers, Bruce and Jon; and two sisters, Karen Randolph and Debbie Vereen.

His work was the subject of a major retrospective in 2012 at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. It has also been featured at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center (now MoMA PS1) in Queens, the LedisFlam Gallery in Brooklyn and elsewhere. In an interview with the website danaroc.com, Mr. Adkins spoke of his desire to reconcile the temporal imperatives of music with the spatial ones of art.

"My quest has been to find a way to make music as physical as sculpture might be, and sculpture as ethereal as music is," he said. "It's kind of challenging to make both of those pursuits do what they are normally not able to do."