

TERRY ADKINS

Our Sons and Daughters
Ever on the Altar



FRIST ART MUSEUM

Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery

February 20–September 7, 2020

October 2, 2020–January 10, 2021

FISK UNIVERSITY

Carl Van Vechten Art Gallery

February 20–January 10, 2021

Organized by Fisk University Galleries and the Frist Art Museum

Our Sons and Daughters Ever on the Altar is devoted to the work of Terry Adkins (1953–2014), a multimedia and multidisciplinary artist whose practice explored the intersection of music, art, and African American history. The exhibition comes forty-five years after Adkins's graduation from Fisk University, an esteemed historically black university founded in Nashville in 1866 for newly freed African Americans. The title is derived from an early school motto that reflects its commitment to spiritual and academic advancement and is still affectionately used by students and alumni. Through a selection of sculptures, prints, installations, and videos, the exhibition considers how this internationally acclaimed artist was influenced by his time in Nashville.

Adkins claimed that the foundation of his career began at Fisk, to which his family had strong ties. His father graduated from the university, and his uncle, Rutherford H. Adkins, served in several administrative roles, including that of president, for nearly fifteen years. His first memorable gallery experience took place in fifth grade, when he visited the Carl Van Vechten Gallery and saw Georgia O'Keeffe's *Radiator Building*, a painting of the New York cityscape at night. Adkins returned to Fisk in 1971 as a freshman, where he was mentored by Harlem Renaissance pioneer Aaron Douglas and studied with artist, art historian, and department chair Dr. David Driskell and numerous teaching artists, including printmaker Stephanie Pogue, sculptor Martin Puryear, and painter William T. Williams.

Trained as a musician, Adkins played in the jazz orchestra at Fisk and studied guitar, saxophone, and other instruments before turning to printmaking and sculpture. One of his primary aims as an artist was to forge a link between music and art, reversing each discipline "to make sculpture as ethereal and transient as music . . . and [music as] visceral and physical as if . . . it was matter." Adkins approached his art-making practice from the point of view of a composer. He arranged his works—many of which include modified musical instruments or other salvaged materials—into what he called "recitals."

Mining African and African American histories for marginalized narratives, Adkins's "recitals" bring visibility to underrecognized figures or highlight underrepresented aspects of well-known biographies. For example, it is not widely known that groundbreaking musician Jimi Hendrix served as a paratrooper in the 101st Airborne Division of the U.S. Army at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, in 1961 and then lived briefly in Nashville. Adkins greatly admired Hendrix, and his "recital" *The Principalities* explores this period of the guitarist's life. The video component *Flumen Orationis* pairs Hendrix's 1970 anti-war protest song "Machine Gun" with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 speech "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam." A centerpiece of the series, *Cloud* (fig. 1) is a commentary on the destructive history of war: a white parachute hangs above a spiraling rack of kimonos, which refers to the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This event caused, in Adkins's words, the "ghostly evisceration of human life and Japanese tradition."

Another "recital" on view at the Frist pays tribute to legendary blues singer Bessie Smith, who was born in Chattanooga. Adkins felt that, although Smith was successful during her lifetime, public acknowledgment of her accomplishments has been inadequate since her untimely death in 1937 at the age of 43. The installation *Belted Bronze* features multiple components that express essential elements of Smith's character, including her opulence, strength, and majesty (cover). *Buffet Flat* is an altar-like assemblage of taxidermy birds, bold red banners, a halo-evoking web, and silver serving pieces filled with glass beads and honey. The bulbous totem *Coahoma*, named after the Mississippi county in which Smith's fatal car accident occurred, takes on the character of an honorary monument or funeral stele, specifically a Congolese Songye power figure traditionally carved from wood. Another work, *Columbia*, is a large wall sculpture that suggests both the commercial label Smith was signed to in 1923 and the type of record (Columbia 78s) on which her music was played. The layers of thick black enamel paint match in number the platinum records released by the singer during her brief but influential career.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The presentation at the Carl Van Vechten Gallery relates to the significant impact that Fisk University had on Adkins. A highlight will be *Darkwater Record* (fig. 2), in which a porcelain bust of Chairman Mao Zedong sits on five cassette decks playing excerpts of Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois's "Socialism and the American Negro" speech. Du Bois was an 1888 graduate of Fisk and met Chairman Mao in China in 1959. Adkins also looked at Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro*, which was the first sociological case study of the African American community. The research was conducted in 1896–1897, and the book was published in 1899 by the University of Pennsylvania, where Adkins served on the faculty from 2000 to 2014. Adkins created a series of multilayer silkscreens from Du Bois's hand-drawn maps and color-coded tabs to produce the body of work titled *The Philadelphia Negro Reconsidered*.

Adkins sought to place into the canon of art history figures outside of the field, such as Dr. George Washington Carver. Dr. Carver was a botanist, scientist, and inventor who developed numerous pigments and dyes, including "Dr. Carver's Egyptian Blue 9th Oxidation" in 1935. Adkins asked Tuskegee University to reproduce the pigment, and he used it in a series of botanical prints titled *After Bonnaterra*. In this body of work, Adkins sought to compare and contrast the histories of Carver, who unbeknownst to many was an award-winning painter, and Yves Klein, a French artist widely known for developing a similar hue called International Klein Blue.¹

Throughout Adkins's career, he was inspired by people and artwork he had encountered at Fisk, including a portrait of Matthew Henson that still hangs in the John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library. Its creator, Winold Reiss, taught Aaron Douglas in New York during the 1920s and gave works to Fisk in 1952 in honor of his former student. Henson was an African American polar explorer who, while traveling with Robert Peary in 1909, became the first man to stand at the North Pole. Adkins was fascinated by Henson's story, and *Nutjuitok (Polar Star), after Matthew Henson 1866* (fig. 4) was one of his last bodies of work. Also on view at the Van Vechten Gallery

1. These works were included in an exhibition entitled *Nenuphar*, on view at Salon 94 in New York from October 30, 2013, through January 11, 2014.

will be prints of x-rayed memory jugs (fig. 3). Memory jugs are African American funerary objects often created by Southern sharecroppers as headstones. They were made of clay and included objects from the person's life. Adkins collected more than 120 of these and worked with medical school colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania to make these photographs.

Terry Adkins's art is in the collections of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, Pérez Art Museum Miami, and Tate Modern, among others, and has been exhibited around the world. Conversations between the artist and both Fisk University Galleries and the Frist Art Museum about mounting an exhibition in Nashville were cut short when Adkins died in 2014. This collaboration therefore marks the long-awaited return of Adkins—a native son of sorts—to Middle Tennessee.

Katie Delmez

Curator

Frist Art Museum

Jamaal B. Sheats

Director and Curator of Galleries

and Assistant Professor of Art

Fisk University



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Illustrations

Cover

Audience (from *Belted Bronze*; detail), 2007–8. Twenty-eight framed drawings and peacock, drawings: 77 x 176 in. overall; peacock: 85 x 16 x 30 in. Artwork © 2019 The Estate of Terry Adkins / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image © The Estate of Terry Adkins / Lévy Gorvy

Fig. 1

Cloud, 2011. Kimonos, hanging rail, hangers, and parachute; overall dimensions variable. Artwork © 2019 The Estate of Terry Adkins / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image © The Estate of Terry Adkins / Lévy Gorvy

Fig. 2

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 in. Artwork © 2019 The Estate of Terry Adkins / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image © The Estate of Terry Adkins / Lévy Gorvy

Fig. 3

Ars Uperville, 2012. Pigmented inkjet print, 72 x 48 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Terry Adkins. Artwork © 2019 The Estate of Terry Adkins / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image © The Estate of Terry Adkins / Lévy Gorvy

Fig. 4

Irkait, from *Nutjuitok* (*Polar Star*), after Matthew Henson 1866, 2011. Digital fine art pigment print on paper, 25 x 32 in. Artwork © 2019 The Estate of Terry Adkins / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image © The Estate of Terry Adkins / Lévy Gorvy



@FristArtMuseum @Fisk1866 @FiskUniversityGalleries
#NashAdkins #FiskForever

This exhibition is supported in part by



The Frist Art Museum is supported in part by



Fisk University Galleries is supported in part by



Frist Art Museum

919 Broadway
Nashville, TN 37203
FristArtMuseum.org



FISK UNIVERSITY GALLERIES
CARL VAN VECHTEN ART GALLERY

1000 17th Avenue North
Nashville, TN 37208
Fisk.edu/galleries