CRITIC'S PICK

Art Meets Its Soundtrack Deep in 'The Dirty South'

A big, juicy exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts turns an embracing eye on Black artists in the American South.

By Holland Cotter

July 15, 2021

RICHMOND, Va. — Some of the country's most candidly truth-telling museums dedicated to the civil rights movement, and by extension to Black history, are in cities south of the Mason-Dixon line: Jackson, Memphis and Montgomery among them. Which suggests that old, sweeping views of the South as a bastion of stuck-in-past political denial are, and have always been, wrong.

Yet large-scale museum surveys of art from and about the South are scarce. It's as if the mainstream art world — specifically navel-gazing, Europhilic New York — didn't know, or believe, or care that whole, rich art cultures were unfolding in Atlanta, and Houston, and New Orleans.

One of the few recent broad-spectrum shows to tackle the subject was "Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art," organized by Miranda Lash and Trevor Schoonmaker at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, N.C. But that was in 2016. Now comes another one, a big, juicy, thought-through thematic sampler here at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

"Slab," 2021, a 1990 Cadillac Brougham d' Elegance customized by Richard FIEND Jones, a.k.a. International Jones. Brian Palmer for The New York Times

Called "The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse," it picks up names from the Nasher show, but with 120 artists, is twice the size. It sharpens the thematic focus from the American South to the African American South. And it makes explicit — tangible, audible — what the earlier show only alluded to: the intersection, in the Black South, of visual art and music.

Indeed, the phrase "Dirty South," which can take many social, political and personal readings (including as a form of regional endearment), has, in the show's context, a very concrete one. It was a branding label applied early on to Southern hip-hop, a distinctive strain of the genre that gained wider popularity in the mid-1990s when Southern artists like Goodie Mob, Ludacris, Outkast and Timbaland hit the national charts. They were, in fact, only the latest manifestations of musical innovations with Southern sources: blues, jazz, gospel, bluegrass, R&B, funk, soul.

Organized by Valerie Cassel Oliver, the V.M.F.A.'s curator of modern and contemporary art, the show starts in the museum's lobby with a classic, Southern hip-hop artifact: a type of a car known as a "slab," said to be an acronym for "slow, loud and bangin'." Such vehicles, elaborately painted and chromed and fitted out with volcanic stereo systems, function as both sound machines and art objects. (The one in the show was commissioned by the museum from the New Orleans artist Richard FIEND Jones, a.k.a. International Jones.) The total effect: celebratory look-at-me luxe.

"Summer Breeze" (2008) by Paul Stephen Benjamin features a bank of video monitors. One plays Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit," but incorporates an editing glitch. Brian Palmer for The New York Times

A second kickoff piece, "Summer Breeze," by the Atlanta artist Paul Stephen Benjamin, sets a very different tone. Installed just outside the main galleries, it's a pyramid of stacked video monitors. One plays a 1959 clip of Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit," the chilling dirge about racial lynching that she made famous. But the tape incorporates an editing glitch. When she sings the line "Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze" it comes out "Black bodies swinging in the sun," a description that corresponds to the single image playing on almost all the other screens: that of a young Black girl, bathed in sunlight and slowly swaying on a playground swing.

So from the outset, we're getting a sense of the take on the African American South that lies ahead: a picture of a relentless and continuing repression met with assertive creativity in which sight and sound play complementary roles.

From left, Beverly Buchanan's "Untitled (Frustula Series)," circa 1978 and Allison Janae Hamilton's subaqueous video. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; Travis Fullerton

The first thing we experience inside the galleries is the sound of rushing water. It emanates from Allison Janae Hamilton's subaqueous video — she dragged a camera behind a boat to film it — of the Wacissa River in rural Florida, where she grew up. Traveled today mainly by kayakers and bird watchers, the river's channels were originally dug by enslaved Black people for the transport of cotton. And its currents, luminously murky, carry us into the show's first thematic section, devoted to images of the Southern landscape.

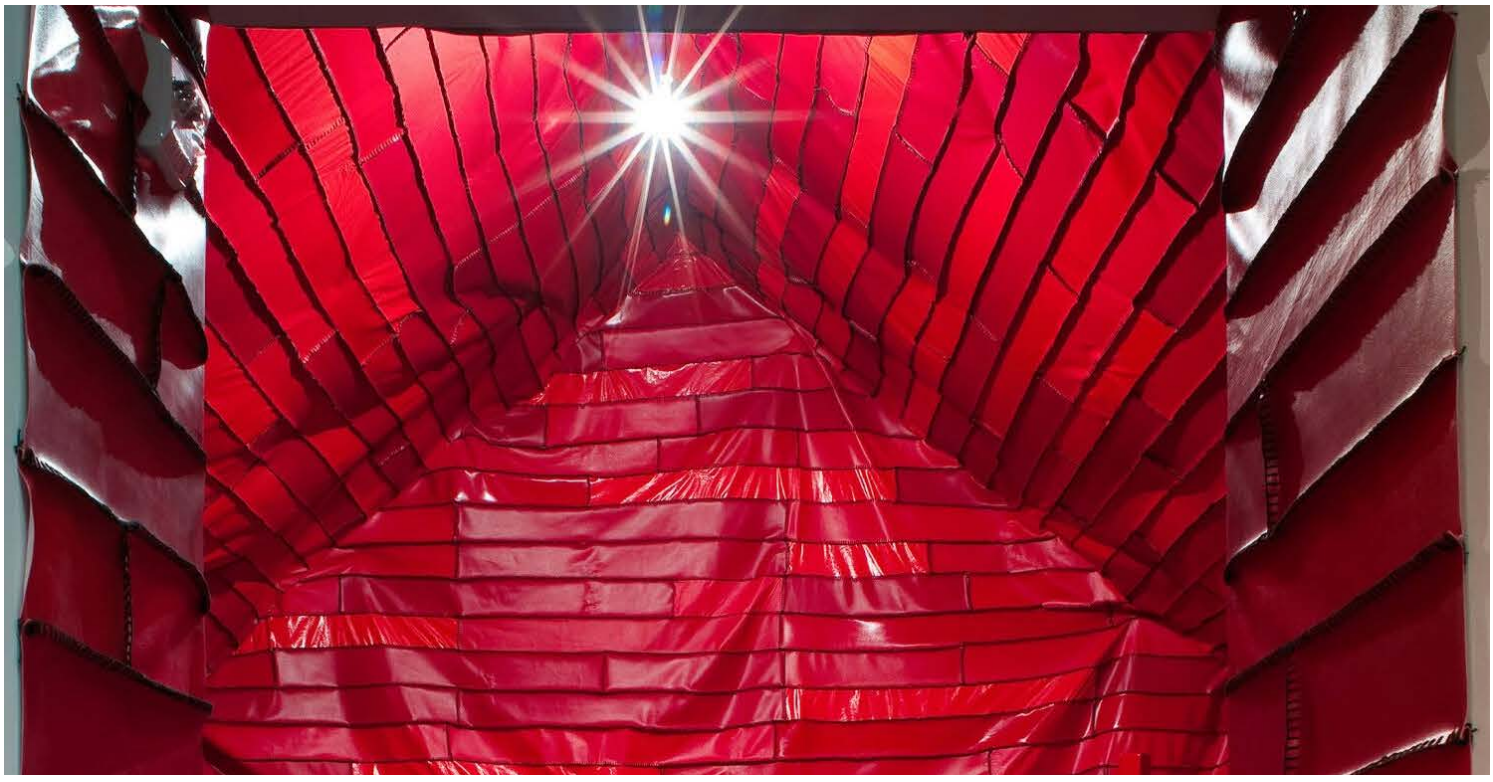
The impression is of all but unmappable terrain. In a painting by Alma Thomas and a photographic projection by the wonderful Demetrius Oliver we get a lush garden and a star-stippled sky. Kevin Sipp connects nature and culture in the 2009 assemblage called "Take it to the Bridge/Trance-Atlantic," in which a bare, gnarled tree branch stretches, like a reconciling arm, between a drum, possibly African, and what could be a hip-hop D.J.'s turntable.

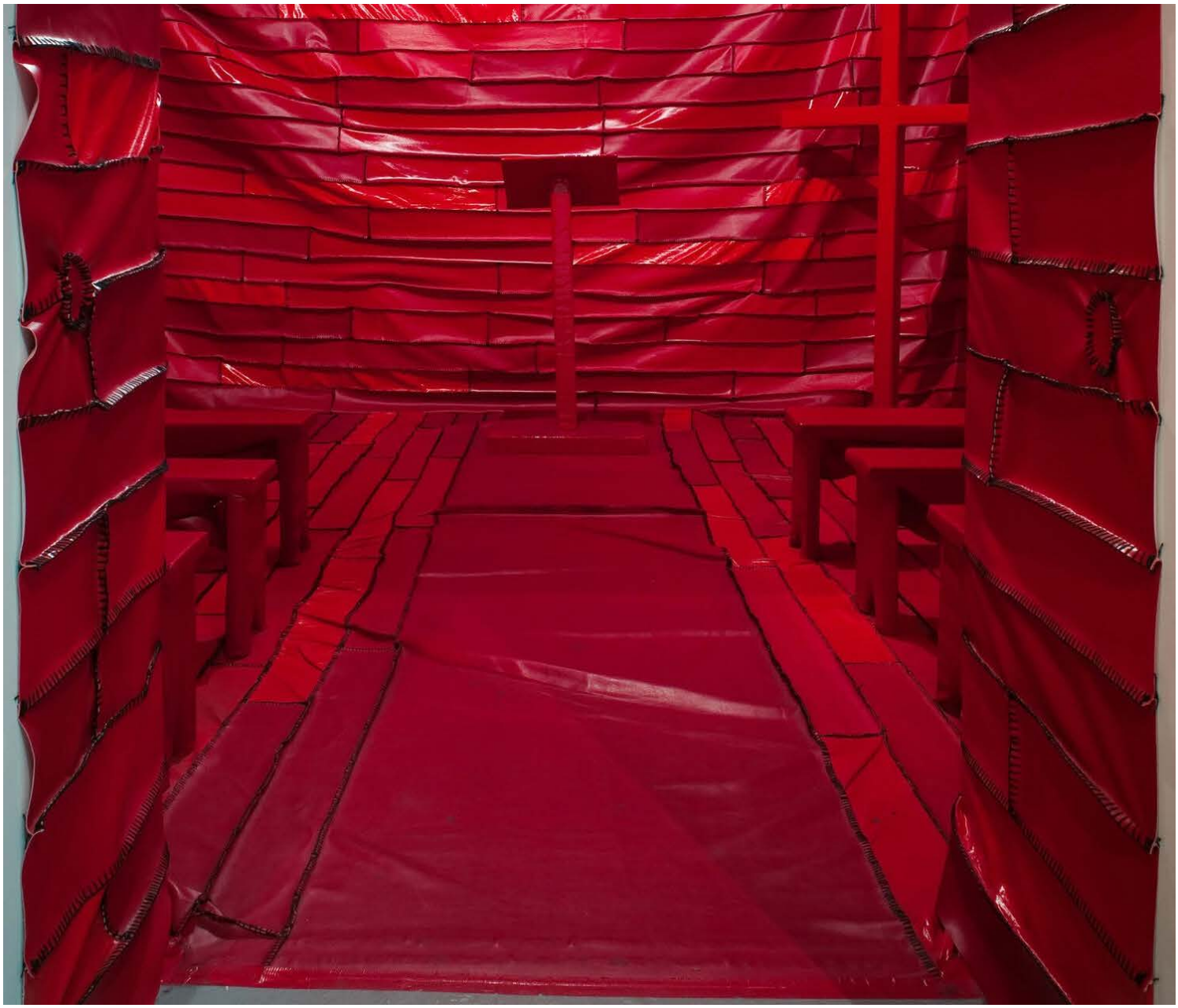
Four sharecropper cabins sketched in the 1940s by Samella Lewis have a mean, shutdown and abandoned look. Nathaniel Donnett's 2017 re-creation of a section of a wall of such a house seems no more promising, until you read the title — "I looked over Jordan and what did I see; a band of angels coming after me" — and notice the faint, blue, unearthly light shining through the wallboards.

Nadine Robinson's 2008 "Coronation Theme: Organon," a sonic sculpture inspired by the 1963 civil rights protests in Birmingham, Ala. Brian Palmer for The New York Times

Transcendence, as often as not firmly anchored to earth, is the substance of the show's second, larger section, "Religion." It announces itself in Nadine Robinson's "Coronation Theme: Organon," a sonic sculpture inspired by the 1963 civil rights protests in Birmingham, Ala. Visually, the piece comprises 30 audio speakers massed in a shape resembling a church organ. From them emerges an aural collage mixing the sounds of dogs barking and people praying with a coronation anthem by George Frideric Handel, the crown in this case going, by implication, to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was arrested during the protests.

The show also has a couple of architecturally scaled pieces that qualify as secular sanctums. One is Rodney McMillian's hand-stitched red vinyl walk-in version of a chapel that once existed on the Dockery Farm in Mississippi where, in the early 20th century, musicians like Charley Patton, Robert Johnson and Howlin' Wolf cooked up Delta blues. And there's Jason Moran's "Staged: Slug's Saloon," a usable performance space that doubles as a shrine to a fabled Manhattan music club where, in the 1960s, free-jazz deities like Sun Ra and Ornette Coleman played. (One of Coleman's saxophones and a scrap of Sun Ra sheet music turn up later in the show.)





Rodney McMillian's "From Asterisks in Dockery" (2012), a walk-in version of a chapel that once existed on the Dockery Farm in Mississippi where, in the early 20th century, musicians like Charley Patton and Robert Johnson cooked up Delta blues. Rodney McMillian and Vielmetter

You'll find altars; Renee Stout's "She Kept Her Conjuring Table Very Neat" is one. And sculptural icons, like Thornton Dial's fantastically improvisational "Foundation of the World (A Dream of My Mother)." And a choir of angels as imagined by artists as different as the self-taught Tennessee tombstone carver William Edmondson and the jazz-dazzled modernist painter Bob Thompson, a Slug's habitué.

Finally, you'll meet an earth-angel in the New Orleans street evangelist Sister Gertrude Morgan. On view is one of the safety-pinned, ballpoint-pen-inscribed ("Jesus is my air plane") paper megaphones through which she preached and sang, and, thanks to recordings, her stalwart voice is in the gallery air.

Sister Gertrude Morgan's "Jesus Is My Air Plane," circa 1970. Estate of Sister Gertrude Morgan

The theme of the show's third section, "The Black Body," feels especially present-minded. How could it not, given the constant message delivered by the news that if you're Black in America, you are always, everywhere — South, North, red state or blue — in physical danger.

True, certain body images here radiate bold, untrammeled joy, as in the case of Rashaad Newsome's elating, fast-cut video potpourri of New Orleans Mardi Gras parades and vogueing. Others, like a figure-packed painting by El Franco Lee II depicting the short life and early death of the Houston hip-hop star and slab-culture guru Robert Earl Davis, known as DJ Screw, have a redemptive lift. We see Davis laid out in his coffin, but we also see him manipulating turntables, center-stage, in heaven.

From left, Radcliffe Bailey's "If Bells Could Talk," from 2015; Whitfield Lovell's "Rise of the Delta," from 2013; and Rashaad Newsome's "King of Arms" (2015), single-channel video installation with sound. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; Travis Fullerton

In a major installation by Paul Rucker, "Storm in the Time of Shelter," bodies become both instruments and victims of violence. For the piece, Rucker assembled 48 mannequins dressed in bespoke Ku Klux Klan-style hoods and robes tailored, not from white sheets, but from a globalist array of patterned fabrics: Asian silks, African kente cloth, military camouflage. The figures, arranged in a cross formation, make for a bright, eye-catching sight. But who are they? Foot soldiers in a newly tolerant right-wing rainbow army? Archival photographs of lynched Black bodies displayed in surrounding vitrines say no. Packaging changes; evil remains.

Although the Rucker installation (on view through Aug. 8) is part of the larger show, it's in a space of its own on the museum's second floor. And one other work, "The AfroDixieRemixes," by the multimedia artist John Sims, is similarly set apart.

Paul Rucker's "Storm in Time of Shelter," in which he assembled 48 mannequins dressed in bespoke Ku Klux Klan-style hoods and robes. "Packaging changes; evil remains," our critic says. Brian Palmer for The New York Times

Entirely sonic, the Sims piece is based on a single familiar song, “Dixie,” composed for pre-Civil War minstrel shows and meant to mock clichés of “happy” Black slave life. (It’s possible that its lyricists were Black.) Later, with altered verses, it became the national anthem of the Confederacy, and then the canonical expression of Lost Cause nostalgia in the Jim Crow era. Sims doesn’t rewrite the song; he simply records it being performed by Black musicians in a range of Black music styles — gospel, blues, soul, hip-hop — undercutting, through genius appropriation, its white supremacist punch.

His piece is particularly effective installed where it is: in an 1897 Confederate Memorial Chapel that still stands on the museum’s grounds. Indeed, the immediate neighborhood is saturated in Confederate culture. The headquarters of the United Daughters of the Confederacy sits, a squat block of white Georgia marble, directly beside the museum. Monument Avenue, a residential thoroughfare once dotted with statues of Confederate heroes, is close by. (Since 2020, all the heroes but one, Robert E. Lee, have been trucked away.)

The term “Dirty South” can refer to many things, including a morally sullied history. All the art in the V.M.F.A. show, though largely of recent date, has roots in such a history. And although the show will be traveling to other venues in other cities, it has particular resonance seen here.