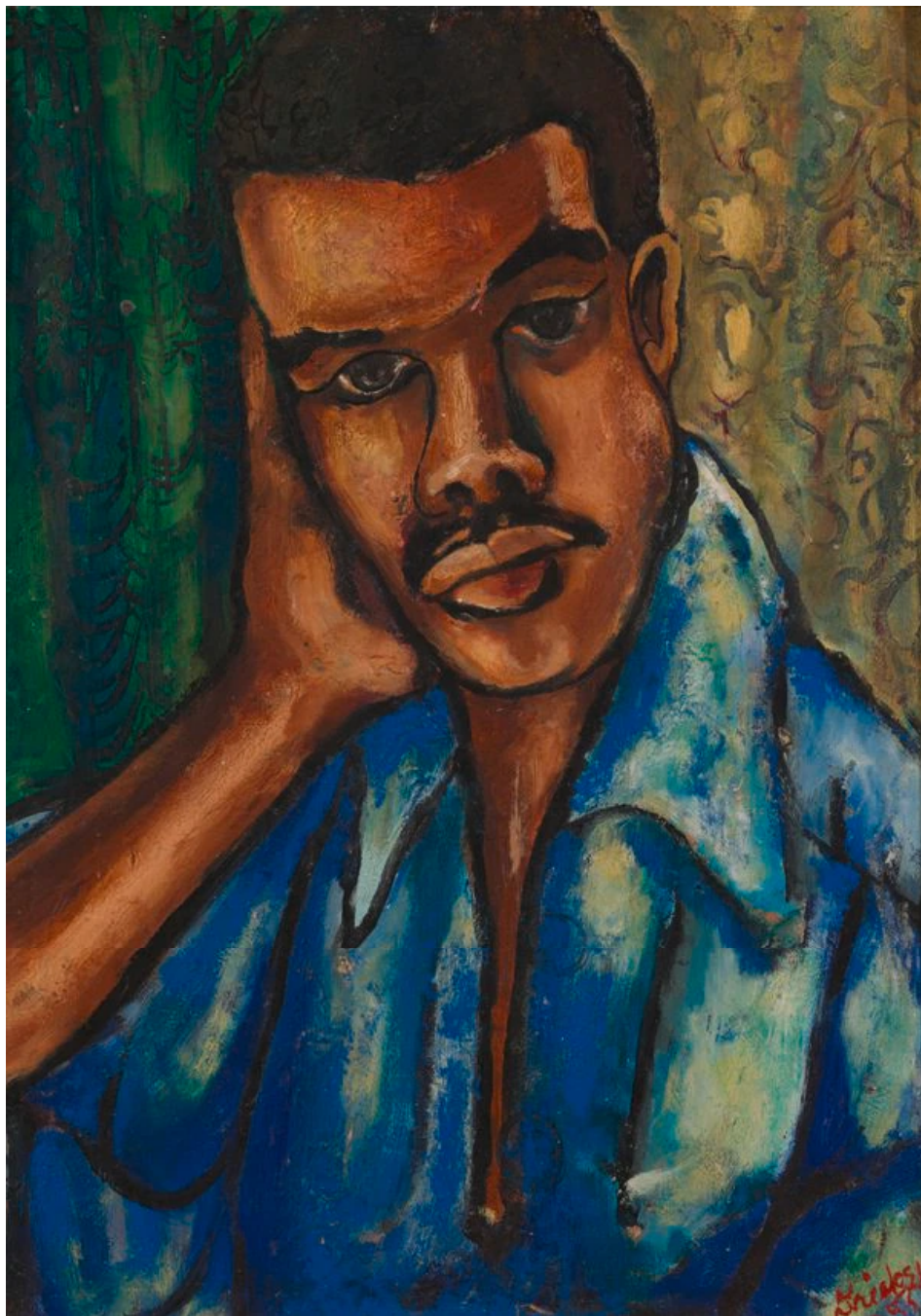


Another side of David Driskell, a towering figure in American art

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 17, 2021, 2:00 p.m.



David Driskell's "Self-Portrait," 1953. LUC DEMERS/ESTATE OF DAVID C. DRISKELL/DC MOORE GALLERY, NEW YORK

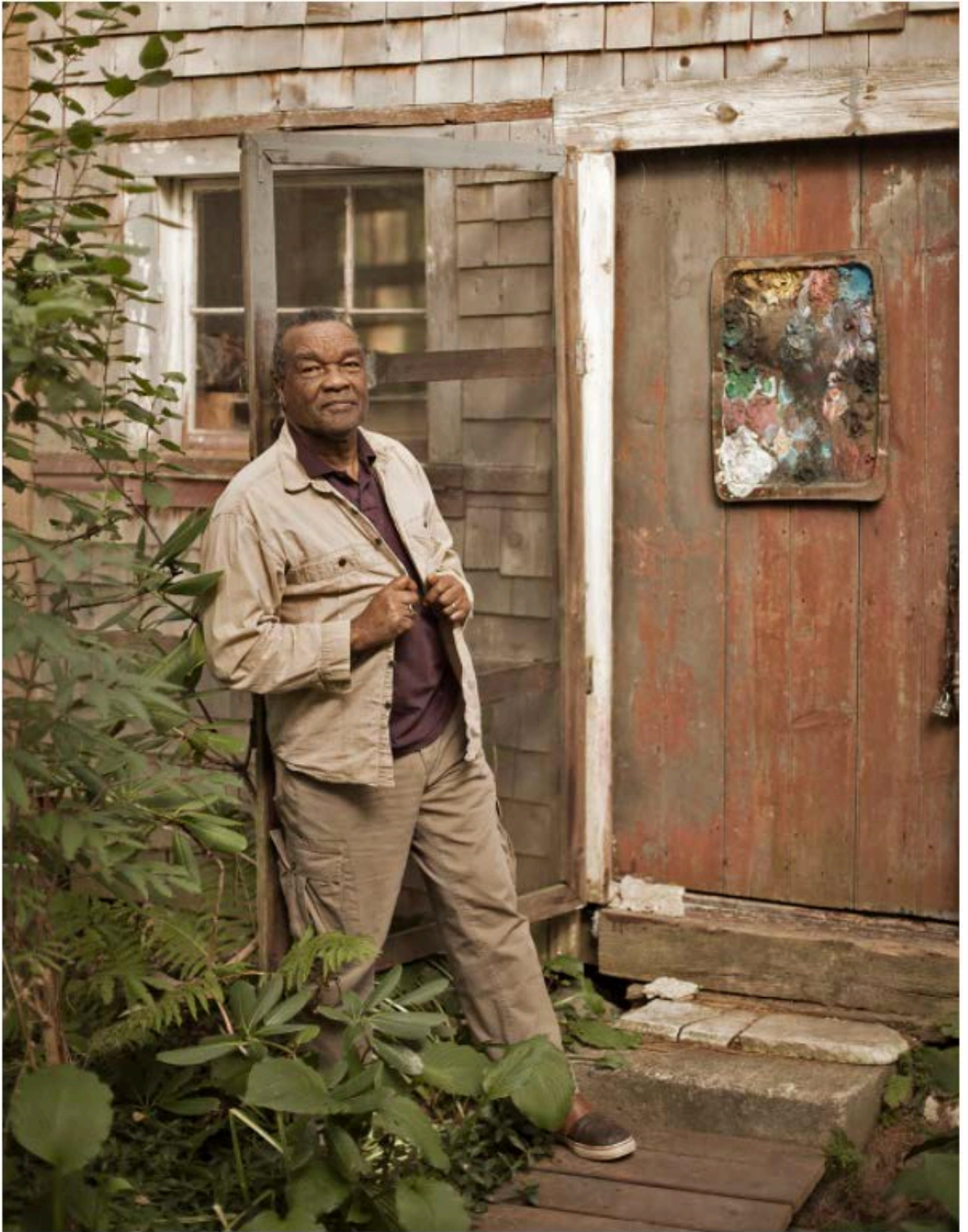
PORTLAND, Maine — Should it surprise that David Driskell, esteemed professor, curator, and inexhaustible advocate of centuries — yes, centuries — of Black American art had embraced, as a personal metaphor, the ragged form of the eastern white pine? A little, but consider his journey. He began painting the trees at one of his first residencies, at Maine's Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, in 1953, while still a student at Howard University, in Washington, D.C. Despite all he was and all he did — which was a lot, almost all of it foundational to crucif — he never really stopped painting them.

At the Portland Museum of Art, things become clear. “David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History” unfurls the whole of Driskell's art career, less known alongside his towering advocacy. The trees are there at the beginning, middle, and end. One, “Two Pines #2,” from 1964, is a mound of form and color in a jagged heap. Another, “Winter Tree,” 1962, is rough and heavy, almost sculptural in its thick accretion of encaustic. “Young Pines Growing,” 1959, is angular, fractured, cubist-like. “Pine and Moon,” from 1971, is loose and gestural, a vision of liberation. They're almost like checkpoints over the arc of his career, tracking peace and tumult over the years. What they have in common is how Driskell saw their subject: as stoic, enduring, whatever the shifts in light and climate, still and storm. It's how Driskell saw himself.



Despite his status as a scholar, Driskell's artmaking is less known. The Portland exhibition, jointly produced by Atlanta's High Museum of Art (which had it first) and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. (which gets it next), is the very first comprehensive survey of Driskell's own nearly 70 years of artistic output. It is, sadly, a posthumous tribute. After working with curators on the exhibition for nearly two years, Driskell died of COVID-19 early last year at age 88. It's a heartbreaking end for an iconic figure who gave so many important Black artists, curators, and scholars their start.

Driskell may never have been more visible than at the end of his life. Positioned as a central figure in "Black Art: In the Absence of Light," an HBO documentary from earlier this year on both the historic exclusion of Black artists and their unquashable determination to be seen and heard, Driskell holds court in his Falmouth studio a few short miles from the museum in which his work now hangs. (He was a regular summer resident, buying a house there in 1961.) As he expounds on his lifelong struggle to bring Black art into the light, his own work surrounds him. It makes clear he is both of those things — artist and advocate — and always had been, at once.



David Driskell at his studio, 2010. JACK MONTGOMERY/COURTESY PORTLAND MUSEUM OF ART

Driskell curated dozens of exhibitions over his life, and taught generations of artists, whether at Talladega College, in Alabama; Howard University Fisk University, in Nashville; and finally the University of Maryland. But his indelible mark is surely his 1976 exhibition “Two Centuries of Black American Art: 1750 to 1950,” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It’s the center of gravity around which “In the Absence of Light” orbits. The landmark show presented a view of Black American visual culture that was comprehensive, with lineage, and unassailably high caliber. The show, [Driskell said in a 2009 interview with the Smithsonian](#), was about “engaging the establishment in the rules of the canon, so as to say ‘No, you haven’t seen everything. You don’t know everything. And here is a part of it that you should be seeing.’”

It had profound influence, both in its day and well beyond. When the show later traveled to Dallas, Atlanta, and Brooklyn, it drew crowds. Among the hordes was a 21-year old Kerry James Marshall, the great Chicago painter who, like so many others, saw a universe of bright possibility where there had been only darkness. Today, the show echoes loudly in the work of leaders of the Black art world. Thelma Golden, the director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, credits it as allowing her to see that “activist curating” — a field, she wrote in the Portland exhibition’s catalogue, Driskell pioneered — had the power “to transform the history of art as it was written.”

It’s not hard to see why Driskell’s work as a scholar tended to overshadow his art career. Could anyone produce a body of work to rival a transformative agenda that changed the course of racial politics in American culture? Probably not. But can we see Driskell’s own art through those priorities, and understand that he walked as well as he talked? Yes, we can.



David Driskell's "Ghetto Wall #2," 1970. LUC DEMERS/PORTLAND MUSEUM OF ART, MAINE

Born in Georgia in 1931, Driskell came from a family of makers. His mother was a quiltmaker and his father, a reverend, was a blacksmith and builder. When he was 5, the

family moved to North Carolina, where we went to a segregated school. He did well enough to earn a scholarship at Shaw University in Raleigh, but his sights were set on Howard, the celebrated Black university. He started there in 1951, studying history, when he took a drawing class as an extra.

The professor singled him out and changed the course of his life. That professor was the celebrated Black American art historian James Porter. By 1953, Driskell was at Skowhegan, where he became infatuated with the stalwart symbol of the pines. In 1955, immediately after graduation, he took a job teaching art at Talladega, the same year the Montgomery bus boycott began.

Is it any wonder that “Within the City,” from that same year, is an oppressive swarm of jagged black shards, the city beyond all but consumed? Driskell worked at the nexus of formalism and allegory, as driven by how a painting was made as by what it carried. Some of the early works here are virtuosic technical noodling (I’m thinking of “Blue of the Night,” 1959, an inky-dark nocturne of thick palette-knife smears). Others meet the moment: “Black Crucifixion,” made in 1964, the year the Civil Rights Act was signed, is a bleak and dubious symbol, since proven right. The figure is all but flayed, his ribcage and hip bones glowering under dark skin. Its connection to an earlier work, “Behold Thy Son,” from 1956, seems clear; it allegorized the horror of Emmett Till, the Black teen abducted and murdered in 1955 Mississippi by white men who accused him of grabbing a white woman. “Behold Thy Son” drew a line from Till to the death of Christ.



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In the late 1960s and early '70s, Driskell traveled to Africa to embrace in person the aesthetics Porter introduced him to at Howard. He came back with new motifs to employ, the mask chief among them. Those journeys were confluent with growing upheaval at home; the civil rights movement, racial conflict, and growing protests against the Vietnam War had thrust the country into a fractious moment.

Driskell's work reflected it: the rough, plaintive frame of "Soul X," 1969, another skinned-seeming figure splayed in the dark, or the chilling bricolage of "Ghetto Wall #1," 1971, with its fragments of photographs and wood block prints festooned with chaotic brushwork, all under a menacing mask-like visage split in two. "Black Ghetto," a mixed media piece from 1968, says much about the moment and Driskell's view of his place in it. A slim Black figure is framed by rough filigree carved in white paint, a scrap of wood, a yellowing book pinned to the surface. Driskell called it an "autobiographical reflection on my own childhood" and "the issue of having to confront life in America along lines of color and race."

This is stern stuff, and no way to leave Driskell, for whom the pervading sense one gets is joy. He exults in color — rapturous, sometimes overwhelming color, as in the mixed media riot of "The Herbalist," 1999, an exuberant riot of strip-quilt collage, an African convention (and a tribute to his mother, who was also an herbalist). A slim passageway in the exhibition contains the small wonder of "Seascape with Rocks," 2004, a diminutive but electric-charged scene with hues like no seascape or rock I've ever seen. He could be funny, as in "Shaker Chair and Quilt," from 1988, a maximal collage of canvas strips and retina-burning color, named for New England's original minimalists. He could also pull back, deftly, in capturing his beloved Maine coast: "Frost and Ice, Maine," 1977, is spare formalism at its best, restrained in palette and technique, evocative, opaque, mysterious, almost abstract.



David Driskell's "Shaker Chair and Quilt," 1988. BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART, BRUNSWICK, MAINE/ESTATE OF DAVID C. DRISKELL

The show concludes with Driskell in his Falmouth studio, at his easel and surrounded by ebullient works. He looks resolved, though there's so much left to be done. But he's left a how-to. In bright yellow text, his words on the wall ring true: "When the indomitable human spirit rises above the chaos of violence, hunger and pain and soars to a heightened relief through the making of art, we are classless and raceless so long as we create the spiritual vision." Words to live by.

DAVID DRISKELL: ICONS OF NATURE AND HISTORY

At the Portland Museum of Art, 7 Congress Square, Portland, Maine, through Sept. 12.
207-775-6148, portlandmuseum.org

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