

# PAULA COOPER GALLERY

Heidenry, Rachel. "An Exquisite Tribute to Terry Adkins, Maker of Monumental Sonic Sculptures,"  
*Hyperallergic*, January 12, 2021

## HYPERALLERGIC

Art **Reviews**

### An Exquisite Tribute to Terry Adkins, Maker of Monumental Sonic Sculptures

Reverberating through the Pulitzer's iconic building, Adkins's works carry the potential of sound, and remain alluring even in silence.



by Rachel Heidenry  
January 21, 2021



Installation view of *Terry Adkins: Resounding*, Pulitzer Arts Foundation (© 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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ST. LOUIS, MO — Terry Adkins was an artist who improvised. Whether in sculpture, performance, video, or printmaking, he rooted his projects in history, and then imbued them with a sense of experimentation. "I am engaged in an ongoing quest to reinsert the legacies of unheralded immortal figures to their rightful place within the panorama of history," he once said. That quest is on display in the momentous and exquisite exhibition, *Terry Adkins: Resounding*, at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis.



Installation view of *Terry Adkins: Resounding*, Pulitzer Arts Foundation (© 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)

Featuring over forty artworks spanning Adkins's career, as well as books and instruments from his personal collection, the exhibition foregrounds the artist's lifelong engagement with music, language, history, and African American culture. Working between New York and Philadelphia until his death in 2014, the artist became known for staged multimedia performances with the Lone Wolf Recital Corps, a performance collective he founded in 1986 that included artists such as Sanford Biggers, Kamau Amu Patton, and Charles Gaines. Termed recitals, these performances explored the untold stories of underrepresented figures in African American history, while incorporating Adkins's latest artistic creations. The exhibition

features many of his most monumental sculptures, including "Last Trumpet" (1995), composed of four 18-foot-long brass horns — "arkaphones" — and "Muffled Drums" (2003), a soaring stack of eight bass drums.

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But it is the inclusion of some of his lesser-known works that makes the exhibition particularly impactful. In *Mute* (2007–2011), Adkins clipped three shots from the 1929 film *St. Louis Blues* — which features the only known footage of iconic blues singer, Bessie Smith. Removing the sound, he created a single-channel video, featuring three panes of moving images composed as a triptych: close-ups of Smith's polka-dotted dress, her face, and hands. Where normally we would listen, Adkins makes us look.



Terry Adkins, "Mute" (2007–11), single-channel digital video, silent TRT: 00:22:07 (© 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)

"Mute" grew out of Adkins's disappointment in the lack of public monuments to Smith in Philadelphia, where the prolific artist lived for the last two decades of her life. The work both honors her legacy and urges reverence — the video itself a

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monument to the singer. Indeed, the emotional intensity of Smith's body language is captivating. Ma Rainey, a friend and influence of Smith's, famously claimed to have first heard the blues somewhere in Missouri, and as we watch Smith silently sing *St. Louis Blues*, we are reminded of the power and history of this musical form.

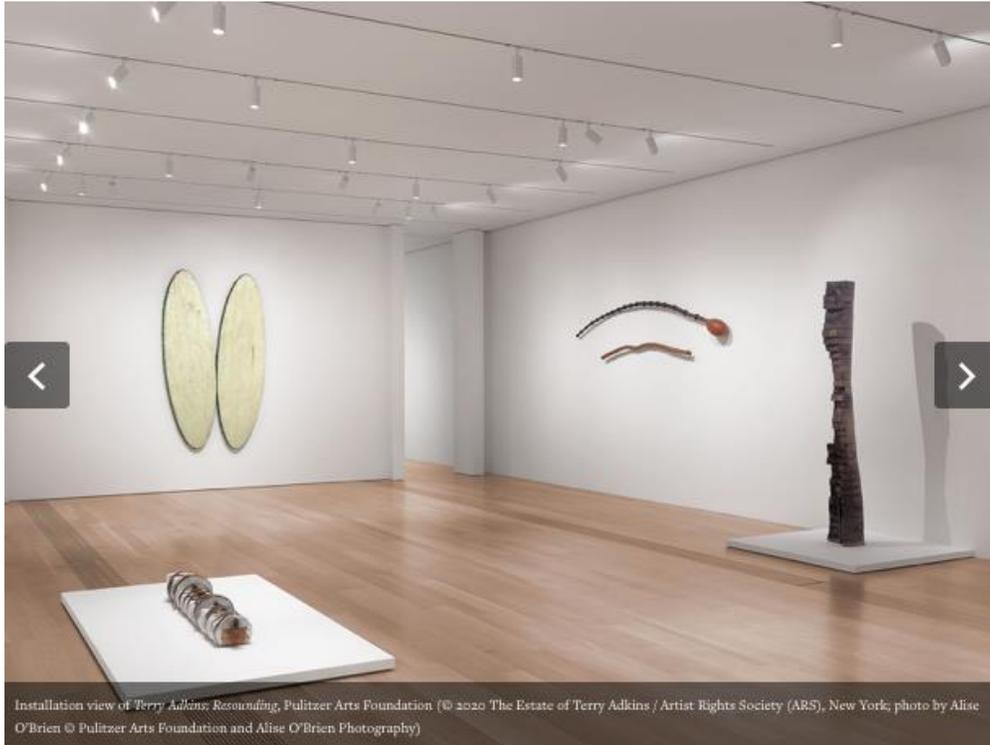
Within each gallery, one encounters anecdotes to historical figures or events: W.E.B. Dubois, abolitionist John Brown, George Washington Carver, John Coltrane, the 1917 East St. Louis Riots. It's as if you're walking through a visual textbook of American history, though Adkins tells these histories in abstract ways, balancing the cerebral with the emotional. While many of his sculptural pieces have instant aesthetic impact, each requires deep engagement to tease out the underlying narrative. The pathway to do so, is often through the material. For Adkins, who enjoyed both fabrication and working with materials "made by other hands for other purposes," transforming instruments, metal hangers, or even pant leg stencils into new forms was a way to draw connections between specific communities, places, or historical events.



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*Resounding* illuminates the literary, musical, and visual influences of a groundbreaking artist. Reverberating through the Pulitzer's iconic building, Adkins's works carry the potential of sound, alluring even in silence, beckoning you to listen as much as to look.