

PAULA COOPER GALLERY

"Terry Adkins by Calvin Reid," *BOMB*, March 25, 2015

# *BOMB*

## Terry Adkins by Calvin Reid

Part of the [The Oral History Project](#) series.



Terry Adkins. Photo by Paula Court. Courtesy of Performa.

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**The Oral History Project** is dedicated to collecting, developing, and preserving the stories of distinguished visual artists of the African Diaspora. The Oral History Project has organized interviews including: *Wangechi Mutu* by Deborah Willis, *Kara Walker & Larry Walker*, *Edward Clark* by Jack Whitten, *Adger Cowans* by Carrie Mae Weems, *Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe* by Kalia Brooks, *Melvin Edwards* by Michael Brenson, *Terry Adkins* by Calvin Reid, *Stanley Whitney* by Alteronce Gumbay, *Gerald Jackson* by Stanley Whitney, *Eldzier Cortor* by Terry Carbone, *Peter Bradley* by Steve Cannon, Quincy Troupe & Cannon Hersey, *James Little* by LeRonn P. Brooks, *William T. Williams* by Mona Hadler, *Maren Hassinger* by Lowery Stokes Sims, *Linda Goode Bryant* by Rujeko Hockley, *Janet Olivia Henry & Sana Musasama*, *Willie Cole* by Nancy Princenthal, *Dindga McCannon* by Phillip Glahn, and *Odili Donald Odita* by Ugochukwu C. Smooth Nzewi. Donate now to support our future oral histories.

## **Calvin Reid**

Where did I first meet you? It seems like I knew you and then I didn't know you and then I did know you. Were you at the Studio Museum in Harlem?

## **Terry Adkins**

I think we may have met at Howard University in printmaking somehow, or we vibed next to each other. I went to Fisk and I came to Howard to take a summer course with Winston Kennedy.

## **CR**

Yeah. That was my printmaking teacher.

## **TA**

So we had that in common. And when we both came to New York City around '82—

## **CR**

I got here '81. I remember the exact date. June 7, 1981.

## **TA**

That is how I knew you.

## **CR**

And you were originally from DC.

## **TA**

So we have that in common.

## **CR**

Well hey, you know, I have always liked your work. I wrote something when you had pieces at the Whitney's Phillip Morris annex. That must have been in the '90s sometime.

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**TA**

You wrote that and then you wrote another one called *Industrial Rhythms* [on Terry's one-man show at P.P.O.W. in 1998].

**CR**

Oh, I remember the show for sure. Okay, well let's start from the beginning then. Born in DC. Did you grow up in DC too?

**TA**

I grew up in Alexandria, Virginia. The oldest of five children.

**CR**

Where were you born in DC? Do you know which hospital?

**TA**

George Washington [University] Hospital.

**CR**

Because I was born in Freedmen's Hospital in Washington DC. [A historic hospital founded in 1862 to serve the freed slaves, later administered by Howard University until the new Howard University Hospital opened nearby on Georgia Avenue in 1975.]

**TA**

My mother was a nurse at Freedmen's. She might have been in the delivery room.

**CR**

Maybe! So now we have another connection, because I was born in '52.

**TA**

I was born in '53.

**CR**

There you go. We are linked there, too.

**TA**

That is what I mean. That is why I asked you to do this oral history.

**CR**

I went to Eastern High School.

**TA**

I was in the city.

**CR**

I was kind of on the outskirts because my immediate family moved across the Maryland/DC line a million times, crazy family life. But that is *my* oral history; I think we were on Addison Road. But never mind. If I try to call up all of these DC locations, we will be here all day. But you grew up in Alexandria. Musical family?

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**TA**

Not really. You know my parents were hobbyist musicians. My mother played clarinet and piano, and my father played the organ and sang. But I was one of five kids and went to an all-black Catholic school—you know this was during segregation.

**CR**

That is where it was.

**TA**

So I went to an all-black Catholic school in a poor parish called St. Joseph's that was taught by black nuns. And the parish was so poor you had third and fourth grade in the same room. I had already been listening to what was happening in second grade by the time I got to second grade. Consequently, on the spearhead of integration, this all-boy, all-white school called Ascension Academy in Alexandria, Virginia, was offering scholastic scholarships to students who could pass the entrance exam. So in the fifth grade I passed and I began to go to Ascension Academy and graduated as a senior. That was a strange world. All of a sudden I was going to school with these rich kids. Imprinted on our jackets was *Sapientiae Timor Domini Initium*.

**CR**

And in English that is...?

**TA**

*The Fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom*. Even at St. Joseph's, I had to wear a uniform. Ascension Academy was based on English boarding school life, except I went home everyday. The friends in my neighborhood were telling me, "You can't play no basketball. You can't do this. You are with those white boys." Anyway, I got teased. But I come from a family of educators. My father taught at Parker-Gray High School, which was a segregated high school, and my grandfather was a Baptist minister at the Alfred Street Baptist Church, but we were raised as Catholics because of my mother. So the Baptist minister on my father's side, he was the first principal at Alexandria High School, because at one time they did not educate blacks past eighth grade. He was qualified—he was a theologian and he started [in education] to help see to it that blacks could be taught through senior year of high school.

**CR**

Interesting. More connections. My grandfather was a Methodist minister and so I grew up in a religious house big time. And I ended up going, unusual situation, to Jefferson High in southwestern DC which was this kind of preppy school carved out the public school system because I had an uncle who was teaching chemistry and science there. My mom was determined to get me into a good school in the public system. You know everyone was gaming the system, using whatever pull they had to get their kids in better schools. That's just to connect us again on some interesting points. But go on.

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**TA**

We might as well be twins.

**CR**

We really got similar touch points in our past, let me tell you.

**TA**

In the connection to art, in the early days I could draw really well. It was pretty unusual being in first and second grade and advancing from stick figures to being able to draw, like a camera, from memory almost. My older friends thought that I was tracing and stuff. You know every kid is gifted with something. And when you are gifted with something you don't consider it to be anything special. People who can do it—do. So I was assigned to write peoples' names in the streets in a kind of 3-D graffiti.

**CR**

Did other kids in the class want you to draw for them? Did that happen at a young age?

**TA**

Yeah. In fact this year is the 50th anniversary of the day President Kennedy was assassinated. I was called upon by my fifth-grade teacher to teach an art class because we did not have art classes. So they had the choice either to draw a still life, an American eagle emblem, or Batman—

**CR**

That is an interesting combination.

**TA**

They chose a still life, so I had to draw a big still life on the chalkboard in front of class. And then we went on a long—it was kind of like a vacation day—we went on this long hike and when we came back we learned President Kennedy had been assassinated. I was shocked and saddened like everyone in the nation. To this day I think that it was a conspiracy and have watched *JFK* by Oliver Stone too many times. (*laughter*) I went on through school there until I graduated as a senior and then I went to Fisk University. I went there to study history and to be a lawyer but luckily for me, when I got to Fisk, there was an emerging art department with David Driskell and Martin Puryear who would be teaching there for two years.

**CR**

I didn't realize that.

**TA**

And Earl Hooks, one of the world's greatest ceramicists, previously was there—Stephanie Pogue, one of the foremost printmakers, and Fred Bond and Robert Blackburn taught a seminar course—

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**CR**

So how did you get lured into the art department? If that's what it was?

**TA**

I got lured in because there was a lot of activity. The hipper upper-class students were over there, and in those days there was something mysterious and mystical about being an artist—

**CR**

What year are we talking about?

**TA**

We are talking about 1971. And so the second year, sophomore year, I saw an exhibition of John T. Scott's, rest in peace, of his calligraphy, and I brought the book back with me, and I said, "This is something I would like to do." Because this was the first time I was confronted by imagery that was other than just a sketchbook or fine art as an idea. But before that even, I have to say, when I was in the sixth grade my father went to Fisk to get his master's degree in physics in the summer program. There I was with a woman who ran this art program for kids. So I went there and the first two works of art I really remember engaging in on a deep level—because the Stieglitz Collection was at Fisk; and half of it still is—so the first real works of art I engaged with were Georgia O'Keeffe's and, interestingly enough, a sculpture that was kind of creepy because it was so real of George Washington Carver looking at peanuts in his hand.

And my show at Salon 94 right now [November 2013] is about comparing the legacy of George Washington Carver with the legacy of Yves Klein.



View of *Nenuphar*, 2013, Salon 94, New York. Left to right: *Norfolk*, 2012, drum, rope, music stand, 67 x 29 x 15 inches; *After Bonterre*, 2013, series of gouaches on botanical engravings, 11 x 8 inches each; *Vasculum*, 2013, tin, 28½ x 6½ x 6½ inches. Edition 1 of 5. Courtesy the Estate of Terry Adkins and Salon 94, New York.

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**CR**

Well yeah, I guess this stuff never really leaves you. But go ahead.

**TA**

So those were the two works that I saw in the sixth grade.

**CR**

Where did music fit in during this time or was it just not there?

**TA**

I grew up in a musical household. We listened to everything from Coltrane to Dinah Washington—all of the soulful stuff. When I got to Fisk, I had started out on guitar but I didn't get very far. So in my sophomore year, I started playing saxophone. I played with the orchestrated crowd, the jazz orchestra there.

**CR**

Do you read music?

**TA**

I can read it a little bit. You give me a part; give me a day I'll—

**CR**

You'll have it.

**TA**

But I can't sight read too well. But that's the way that I worked with the orchestra. George Bennett, he would teach me, but to this day I can't read that well. But this is how the music started. Both were parallel activities always. And so the second year at Fisk, I had to get a camera because I was taking a photography course with Martin Puryear. He taught me photography and drawing, and we are friends until this day. I remember going to the Ritz Camera shop, and I never burdened my parents with money requests. I always made my own money whether by cutting grass or hustling groceries. I always wanted my own money. I always wanted to be independent that way. I knew that I had four kids behind me that were going to be going to college soon. I didn't want to burden my father with anything. So I went into the Ritz Camera shop and said I needed a single-lens reflex camera; the cheapest one in the store was this Russian Zenit E camera.

**CR**

I never even heard of that. You know it is eerie. I have some similar interest landmarks along the way because I went into photography when I got to Howard. I dropped out for a while and then really became very serious about photography.

**TA**

Well, you know photography is kind of a quick entry into seeing—

**CR**

Absolutely!

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**TA**

And making an image.

**CR**

Seeing—that is a keyword there.

**TA**

I have one or two of the photographs I took when I was there [at Fisk]. So this thirty-nine-dollar Russian Zenit E; I was kind of happy with that because I liked the way that Sputnik threw America into a frenzy—the space race and everything. I said, "Hey, this is Russian, they got Sputnik; this can't be that bad."

**CR**

Right, how bad can it be? Well, what was it like?

**TA**

It was pretty good. It had a manual light meter; you had to match this ring up with an arrow. I took some really good photographs with it over the years.

**CR**

Were you processing film too?

**TA**

Yeah. Processing film. All that.

**CR**

People with digital cameras nowadays don't know what it is like to start out taking pictures if you really wanted to learn photography, back in the day.

**TA**

That is right. That is right.

**CR**

It was sitting in the dark room, processing black-and-white film in trays.

**TA**

You have skills of feeling in the dark, of seeing in the dark, doing things with your hands without seeing—

**CR**

And working with some pretty deadly chemicals. That's the other thing, sitting in the dark room sucking in those chemicals.

**TA**

I like the way they smell.

**CR**

You know, it is funny; I did a lot of film processing. I never much liked it but I was very hooked into it in my college years. I even did some color photo processing. But go on.



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**TA**

So, yeah, I went to Fisk. Went through four years of that.

**CR**

So did you change your major or did you go on with the Fine Arts major?

**TA**

I went on with the Fine Arts major. I got a Bachelor of Science degree. It was in printmaking and printing uses chemicals. And while I was there, there were two big exhibitions. One was *Two Centuries of Black American Art* [1976] and the other was called *Olmstead*. [Gilbert Dwoyid Olmstead (1914–1985) was a self-taught African American photographer who worked in the Hill District ghetto of Pittsburgh and was influenced by Gordon Parks.]

**CR**

Sure, I remember that. Did Driscoll work on that? That show and the catalogue was a huge deal at the time.

**TA**

I worked on those. I got to see all the work unpacked and everything. Seeing a whole pantheon of history, of image upon image upon image of black artists doing images of black people from early in the colonial period to social realism in the '30s to even contemporary work. I was always more mystified by the abstract dimensions of it, even though Aaron Douglas was a professor emeritus at Fisk. I knew him and I got to talk to him about his murals at Fisk. To me, he is the only one that heard Alain Locke's call to make a black art through these silhouettes.

**CR**

Well, you know at the faculty at Howard at that time was Lois [Mailou] Jones Pierre-Noel [the great African American painter whose influence reaches from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement]. When did she start out—in the 1930s, if I am not mistaken, and later on—we had a number of key artists from the Black Arts movement. I mean AfriCOBRA people: Jeff Donaldson, Frank Smith, Wadsworth Jarrell. [They were also very involved in the Chicago wing of the Black Arts Movement.] That was the professorial atmosphere that I was in at Howard.

**TA**

Well, yeah Howard was known because of that, and AfriCOBRA as a more nationalistic school of thought.

**CR**

That is a whole other story.

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**TA**

I think that Howard, facility wise, was a little better than what we had at Fisk; that is why I went to check it out in the summertime. I was thinking about changing over.



Terry Adkins, *Aftermath*, 2012, unique silkscreen print and heat treated toner. Courtesy the Estate of Terry Adkins and Studio Museum, New York. Photo by Marc Bernier.

**CR**

Was it?

**TA**

Well the facilities were better, but Martin Puryear talked me out of it because he said they only do art one way.

**CR**

Well, believe me there was a whole discussion around that as well. The faculty definitely was focused on black cultural nationalism and its expression through art. I was very much interested in these ideas, the role of the black artist in addressing the reality of black life and I was in nirvana to be around those professors at that time. But the department actually had some problems with accreditation because—as I heard it explained once by a faculty member—everybody at the school was doing the same thing. So that is a whole other story about the Howard art department of the time. The faculty was on a mission [defining black art and black artists in a time of political and social crisis], but it was a very distinguished faculty, and it had an incredible legacy.

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**TA**

I obtusely landed in the best place possible. So after a thorough indoctrination of studying African American art, we both complained that our respective schools were a bit out of touch with the larger art world—I somehow felt that it was too limiting. That the education there was not abreast with what was going on in the art world at large. And so I knew I had to go to graduate school.



Terry Adkins, *Sharon*, mixed media drawing, 1990, 39 x 27½ inches. Private collection, New York.

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**CR**

So what kind of things were you doing? Were you making sculpture then or doing a variety of things?

**TA**

I was making sculpture. Mostly printmaking. And so I got into graduate school—

**CR**

I am forgetting some of these connections, here. Yeah printmaking—so what were you doing?

**TA**

Collagraphs, silk screens, etchings—the whole deal. And when I went to Illinois State University. I got in as a printmaking graduate student.

**CR**

Now were you playing sports, too?

**TA**

No. I mean the first two years at Fisk, I was on the basketball team but you know I never got in a game. In the DC area I was pretty good. I had the highest point average in the game in the whole—

**CR**

These issues are always really interesting to me. I mean that is the whole fabric of your experience. I think they all feed into things later on.

**TA**

That bubble was burst very quickly when I got to Fisk, tried out for the basketball team and this guy named Dick Gold—I will never forget, with a gold tooth—he was about 5'6" and could dunk one-handed behind his head. I saw that and said, "Okay, let me go and try out for the JV." So anyway, that was an experience.

**CR**

That happened to me in high school. I said, "Oh, I guess I am not going to be a star."

**TA**

And I ran track there for a minute. So another interesting tidbit from childhood, because it ends up coming back full circle; my dad was a track coach at Parker-Gray High School, and every year he would take a team to the Penn Relays at the University of Pennsylvania. [Terry did a show called *Relay Hymn* in memory of his father, Robert Hamilton Adkins.]

**CR**

I used to go to the Penn Relays when I was at Howard. We'd drive to Philly, get drunk and sleep in my car. I even saw some of the Penn Relays!

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Terry Adkins, *Burner Spill*, 1999, steel, aluminum, enamel paint, 19 x 9¼ x 13 inches.  
Courtesy the Estate of Terry Adkins and Salon 94, New York.

**TA**

Anyway, he taught himself by babysitting us while doing this. So anyway, now I am teaching at Penn and my son is a freshman there and is going to tryout for the track team.

**CR**

The Adkins family—there is a cosmic loop going on here.

**TA**

So where was I, before I started digging around?

**CR**

We are talking about graduate school. This is an interesting point. I hit a wall at Howard too, where I thought: Is this all there is? I was in a situation that had really made me serious about making art, so I cherish that, but I started to feel like everybody kept making art the same way, and that maybe there were some other things in art to think about.

**TA**

That is why I went to grad school. This other world opened up to me. Like you, I thought my experiences at Fisk were good but rather insular. They too were on a mission of taking a stand about the continuum and the legacy and the foundations of black creative thinking in America that had happened here before and had not been widely known, had not been catalogued—



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**CR**

What I found interesting when I got to New York in the early '80s, in addition to the questions that were going on in the New York art scene about the center and the margins of the art-making culture, is that there were multiple art worlds. We were having these discussions at Howard many years before and when I got to New York, I remember seeing that the mainstream art world was starting to address these issues: the power of identity on the creation of art; the nature of the art world and the art market, and who decides what is important; the dispersal of the so-called center of the art world from New York to a variety of other defining art locales and art markets.



Terry Adkins, *Nenuphar*, 2013, glass and plexiglass, 52 x 65 x 5 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Terry Adkins and Salon 94, New York.

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## Part Two: Two Weeks Later

**CR**

Last time, I was asking whether you see yourself as imbuing objects with these charged meanings or whether you are extracting some metaphysical sense from the play of materials. And you went into it how you see this whole subject/object relationship—because you connect with these things so intimately. And you talked about *potential disclosure*.

**TA**

Weren't we still talking about Howard and Fisk Universities?

**CR**

We may have been because when you hit on certain points, I connect them again. Tell me how you see and respond and work with things, and then we will move on from that point.

**TA**

My first job [after] leaving Illinois State University was as a printmaker. At University of Kentucky you could get an MFA with just another year of study. I pursued that. I was also playing music the whole time with local musicians. This is where this whole sculpture thing came in. First, I started using materials I was familiar with from printmaking, like an installation would be made of paper, wood, and metal. I became fascinated with found materials.

First of all, from a financial standpoint I had no money. Second, you could go to the junkyard and buy materials by the pound. The functions of these materials fascinated me. They were made by other hands for other purposes and at other times, and then they were discarded as being useless. So the idea that they could be rejuvenated and repurposed was exciting, because it taught me how to identify those things that had potential for something. Certain things had to identify themselves. This process of identification, the period of gestation in the studio, and lastly, the period of transformation is the way I started working sculpturally. I stumbled into it rather obtusely and never from a traditional standpoint of technical skill but more from a standpoint of being able to assemble things and bring things together as vehicles of subtle force as much as something to look at and experience. So I tried to make these material things as immediate and ethereal as music. And the music I pursued, I tried to make it as visceral and physical—almost approaching matter. Trying to make both of the things do what they naturally are not inclined to do was a challenge.

**CR**

How resistant are you to purely formal interpretations? I mean you are moving forms and surfaces around but you don't really talk about them in that way. These materials have histories; they have emotive material in them. They have a legacy. I'm trying to figure out how you work in the mix because it would be easy to say that these sculptures are abstractions, interesting and inventive recombinations of things. So where does the historiography come from?

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Terry Adkins, Blanche Bruce, and the Lone Wolf Recital Corps perform *The Last Trumpet* as part of the Performa Biennial 2013. Courtesy Salon 94.



*The Last Trumpet*, Performa Biennial, 2013. Photo Chani Bockwinkel. Courtesy of Performa.



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**TA**

Well, I find to just work abstractly, without a subject, boring.


**CR**

No problem there.

**TA**

I have to, *have* to have a topic and often times the topic has to do with my very early educational experience in the United States—before I went to Ascension Academy—the entire experience of segregated schools is not included in the history books. In a segregated community, entrepreneurship was practiced at a very high level. We were not missing for anything. Had to go to a theater, we had a black theater. Had to catch a cab, we had a black cab company. So this absence of the proper, truthful documentation of the black achievements in the United States, or the misinterpretation of that, or anyone else's history, became an interesting platform for me to work within. Because, like you said, the materials had a history. So it was a parallel shift to deal with history as my subject. In doing so, I found that it gave me something to go for with all these formal things, how to bring them together to abstractly tell a story about an individual. So I call this abstract portraiture. The *Recitals* include a component from the legacy of the individuals that I chose to illuminate. They are often enigmatic figures like John Brown, John Coltrane, Sojourner Truth, you know, Zora Neale Hurston. Those whose histories and legacies, honestly, needed a boost, even in the locales where they were most active. Who really thinks about these figures? Even to take someone as well-known as Jimi Hendrix and to deal with lesser known aspects of his life, like him being a paratrooper in the 101st Airborne. In many ways, these are all culture heroes who brought me through a period, ushered me into manhood, and so I am compelled to do honor to them by these things called *Recitals*.

*...Adkins transforms and repurposes a range of found materials, archival imagery, and reclaimed actions in a process that he calls potential disclosure. The artist aims to reveal the dormant life in inanimate objects, historical facts, and figures of thought, with the ultimate goal of rendering the material immaterial.*

*"Under the auspices of the Lone Wolf Recital Corps—a sound-based performance collaborative founded in Zurich in 1986—Adkins and fellow corps members stage multimedia happenings that interact with and employ architecture, sculpture, video, music, spoken word, costumes, and recorded sound. For Adkins, these 'recitals' provide an ideal platform for recovering and reenacting the dynamic tenor of the subjects concerned."* 

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**TA**

It is exciting for me too because I get to reinvent myself each time. I treat this material as I would material from a junkyard. And I try to form it, but the ultimate goal is to render all of that immaterial. So that if you came into an installation-based experience or structure, you wouldn't have to know all that. The work has to speak strongly enough to stand on its own. So this all started at the University of Kentucky.

**CR**

So what year are we talking about?

**TA**

1977. And I stayed at University of Kentucky until '79 when I got the MFA and was fired from teaching at Kentucky State; that's where I was teaching at the time.

**CR**

Fired? Tell us about that.

**TA**

In those days, 95 percent of the postgraduate degrees given to blacks were either in education or business administration. So this particular college president, who shall remain unnamed, said at the commemoration, and I am quoting word for word, "A person who graduates from Kentucky State University should eat a hamburger with more dignity than the average person eats a steak." Now this is a college president. So I said, "I can see I am not going to be here for too long." Word got back to my father, may he rest in peace, that I was dressed then in the same way that I dress now; that I was at Kentucky State trying to be a beatnik. Mind you, this is in the midst of professors wearing three-piece suits. And my father said, "My son? *Trying* to be a beatnik? He is a beatnik." I got fired from there, which was a good thing because I got the MFA from the University of Kentucky and then I came back to Washington DC and joined a band led by Yahya Abdul-Majid. I was playing on the streets of Washington and going to a workshop that Brier Lancaster, may he rest in peace, he died this year, was running.

**CR**

Where was this?

**TA**

This was at d.c. space. Brier Lancaster was running a workshop every Wednesday. So we would go there, a bunch of musicians—

**CR**

I must have been coming there at the same time because the d.c. space was the spot! That was THE spot.

**TA**

It was a hotbed for a lot of African Americans.

**CR**

Absolutely!

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Terry Adkins, detail of *Banner*, 2003, iris print on watercolor paper, 40½ x 80½ inches. Edition of five. Courtesy P.P.O.W., New York.

**TA**

And it preceded the 9:30 Club and all that. I don't think Bad Brains was out just yet. [They formed in 1977.] But moving back to Washington, music took over for a while. I didn't have a studio. I moved back to my parents' house—they were fully supportive and opened up the garage to me—but somehow it was not the same as a studio space. So music took over for an extended period there. We played music based on Ornette Coleman's harmolodics theory. I was playing on the streets of Georgetown and then I got a small studio and had exhibitions at Hard Art Gallery. You remember that spot?

**CR**

I'm trying to but I can't remember.

**TA**

There were two black women—I forget their names. But I had a show there; a piece was bought by *The Washington Post*. They were just watercolors that I was doing on very thin paper.

**CR**

So this is '78, around when I left.

**TA**

Yeah, '78.

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**CR**

Well, I left because I was in Richmond those years.

**TA**

And you were in grad school at VCU [Virginia Commonwealth University], right?

**CR**

Yeah.

**TA**

Sherman Fleming was in grad school there.

**CR**

I don't remember the name.

**TA**

Yeah, he's a performance artist from Washington, DC—I worked with him a lot when I was there. And there was a show curated by Keith Morrison called *Alternatives by Black Artists* that was at—what was that space with the pegboard? WPA [Washington Project for the Arts]?

**CR**

Oh, yeah yeah.

**TA**

Yeah, the old WPA, that's how I met Sherman Fleming [aka Rod Force]; he was doing crazy performances, and he had this group called the Anti Formalist Reclamation Organization [AFRO].

**CR**

I like the name.

**TA**

And I collaborated with him musically on his performances around DC and then I got another job teaching at Norfolk State University; that lasted one year before they fired me. And then I came back to the Washington area; this was in 1981–82. And then I applied for the Studio Museum in Harlem's residency program, which I was awarded that year. So I came to New York in '82 as an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum, and that changed everything.

**CR**

Was this the old Studio Museum?

**TA**

No, this is in the same location as now on 125th Street. James Andrew Brown and Leon Waller were the other two artists there at that time. Same format as they have now—three people per year. The only difference was they closed at five o'clock and everybody had to be out of the building then. We were nine-to-five artists-in-residence.  
(laughter)

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**CR**

It's a different time.

**TA**

We made the most of it.

**CR**

Did I come into contact with you then? I was in New York kind of feeling my way around. I was going up to the Studio Museum but I can't remember.

**TA**

I had seen your work in print that you did in grad school and I felt you as a kindred spirit—being from DC, having attended Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, and having been in printmaking. I looked to you and Rick Powell.

**CR**

Well, Rick. I looked to Rick Powell myself! [He is currently John Spencer Bassett Professor, Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies at Duke University.] He was an inspirational graduate student at Howard University when I was finishing there.

**TA**

Printmaking was not championed but people became fascinated when they got into it. I looked to you guys, as *the* guys, as my peers, always trying to keep tabs on what you were doing. I don't think we ever officially met until a while later. We heard of each other. I always admired your work. So I got here and Studio Museum was an earth shattering experience for me. I felt like—

**CR**

Where were you living?

**TA**

I was living on 122nd Street then with my aunt Teri, my father's older sister, whom I was named after. Her husband had just died and I was right around the corner from the Studio Museum. But I felt in many ways like the character in Stevie Wonder's "Living for the City."

**CR**

Just like I pictured it. That is pretty much how I felt, too. Overwhelmed by the city of my dreams. I knew it was big and overwhelming but you don't get it until you live in New York.

**TA**

It was really real for me. And honestly my mind was geared toward abstract artists like William T. [Williams], Al Loving—and these guys were active—Gerald Jackson, James Little. So it was really an eye-opener in many ways.

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**CR**

Did you ever go to the [Robert Blackburn] Printmaking Workshop? That's where I went. I almost lived there. I mean, I moved all of my stuff there. When I first came to the city, Bob [Blackburn] set me up as one of the monitors so I could work there without paying. People could volunteer to be monitors of some kind, clean up, teach classes (which I also did) and get to use the workshop presses for free. After I first arrived in New York, I started monitoring the workshop in the evening after I got off from my day job. I used to close the place down every night. So I had to sweep up, but then I could come in and work on my prints anytime I wanted. He did that for many artists who had just got to New York and needed a place to begin working.

**TA**

I drifted in there much later. I might have made one print there but I can't even remember if that is the case. So, immersed in the New York art world, everything is new and a big scene. Julian Schnabel and those guys were on the rise. New German painting was all over PS1.

**CR**

There you go. You are setting the scene nicely here.

**TA**

And that was the scene. Now in going to the Studio Museum, I felt the same as I did at Fisk, that somehow even though it was a great opportunity, somehow its parameters—the ceiling of possibility was limited. I mean, this sphere of artists that I have always known through the exhibitions at Fisk like Romare Bearden, God Romare Bearden; God Jacob Lawrence; and the whole New York royalty of Harlem. I felt, as we were saying earlier, that there was a larger world out there and I intended to partake of the larger world. [As those artists would want him to do, because he came along later. —Merele Adkins]

**CR**

Did you have any contact with Linda Goode Bryant and her alternative space, Just Above Midtown [JAM]? She was still in Midtown at those times; she moved downtown later on. [Bryant is a pioneering curator and arts organizer. She founded JAM, an interdisciplinary alternative space focused on contemporary African American artists in a variety of media and—in a first for radical black art—it was based in the prized Midtown art gallery district on Fifty-seventh Street. JAM showed a dazzling array of artists that included Lorraine O'Grady, David Hammons, Fred Wilson, Fred Holland, Senga Nengudi, and more. The list could go on for while. In the early 1980s the space moved downtown to Franklin Street in TriBeCa. —Merele Adkins]

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**TA**

She had moved downtown and of course I had met David Hammons, Tyrone Mitchell, Charles Abramson... all the guys who you know. There is this phenomenon: those of us born in '53, a group of us I call "other bloods," then there is a ten-year gap, and then people like David Hammons, William T. Williams who are ten years ahead of us.

**CR**

Oh, yeah I was studying them in school. David had already made his mark in LA.

**TA**

But there are no artists in between. I got a theory that it has to do with the genocide in Vietnam and the experience of the black artist. That's why there is nothing in between us and them. There is that ten-year gap. So when I came here, of course I was seeking out all these people, going to all these openings, experiencing the New York art world as it was. Somehow I thought the Studio Museum, in its mission to honor the past, was a little too Beardenesque in its adoration, a little too much of that. At that time, it was as if they were satisfied with this position, that their foremost mission was to preserve, protect, and defend this historical—

**CR**

This heritage. But you know that contemporary art is about something else.

**TA**

Right! And the artist-in-residence, even though the program was really the brain child of William T. Williams—just the fact that it was only open from nine to five and at five o'clock we had to leave. What distinguished the museum from everything else was the resident program, yet little things like that showed that the program was not high on the totem pole of priorities. Their priority was to honor [the past versus more modern, abstract work] more or less. But it was a good experience. But like you say, I had already been familiar with the frustrations and limitation of being at Fisk and you at Howard too. There is a larger world out there.

**CR**

It wasn't so much [just] Howard but in the air, an academic question and a practical question: the role of the black artist. It's almost a cliché because it was drummed into my college experience. And at some point you have got to escape that. The expectation is not that you will do great work but that your role is to validate the path that got you here. There is a role, but it's a role defined by each individual artist. I would be curious to hear how you deal with that. Yes, you have historical antecedents in your work. It's not blatant in your work but at the same time the role of the contemporary artist is to confound our



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notion of what art is. That can put your work on a collision course with demands to validate some historical legacy and with the people, your audience, who may want easy representational connections between the past and the present.

**TA**

Well, I felt that I was at least trying to do something a little different. The only models that I had for what I was doing were John Dowell [John E. Dowell, legendary printmaker and professor at Temple University] and Emilio Cruz. These artists were also, simultaneously, musicians and had made a place for performing. Trying to figure out what I wanted to do, I had them as beacons. It could be possible that I didn't have to separate out those two pursuits; that I could somehow bring in the art arena... I don't really consider what I do to be performance art. I consider it to be installation-based experiences that often have live music or live sound as a component.



Terry Adkins, detail and installation view of *One Rainy Wish (for Jimi Hendrix and the tears on the Mohawk Trail)*, 1989, mixed media. Site specific installation. Collection of the Adkins Estate. Installation view from *Selections: Six Contemporary African American Artists*, May 13–October 29, 1989, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA. Photos courtesy the Williams College Museum of Art.



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**CR**

Is there some early example—when your ideas were starting to show, and where you wanted to go with it.

**TA**

Yeah, the first sideline I did was called *Rainmaker for Jimi Hendrix* at—what's the name of that school in Massachusetts? A lot of curators come out of there.

**CR**

Williams?

**TA**

Yeah, Williams. I was going this way all along but that was the first one I did as an individual piece. I was trying to fuse these two interests where each would be able to stand on its own within the same structure. So coming to the New York music scene in regards to that: I played at Shuttle Theater, EightSeven—the whole underground scene—because my buddy Yahya Abdul-Majid had come here prior to me, and was already plugged into people such as James Blood Ulmer, the whole scene here, and so I was active on that too. In fact, I played with Butch Morris and a lot of other people. I felt that that scene, very much like the art scene, was not giving the black artists their proper due. Musicians such as John Zorn and Lee Horowitz would descend upon these very same places and come away being the ones championed; whereas the originators ended up not getting anything out of it. It is like David Murray says: "That's the way they see it, and that is how it is going to be treated, and you have got to come to terms with that." So on the one hand I saw that, and on the other hand, I saw how black visual artists were either made invisible or were being pigeonholed. And then this whole multi-culture thing came along, and the infusion of the reappearance of black imagery—of black artists doing images of black people—postmodernism and black face or whatever you want to call it, which to me was retrogressive.

I do not admire artists whose work is posited in image and arrested at the surface of race. Now, I believe that there is room for everyone and I appreciate these artists' work but I don't find myself admiring it. I realized that the machinery that keeps it in place, supports it, and regurgitates it—how that too runs up against the same ceiling of possibility because it is racialized. So the same ceiling of possibility we felt at Howard and Fisk, at the Studio Museum, same ceiling of possibility in work posited in image and arrested in race... It will proliferate, be supported, and viewed but it is never really part of the national conversation. It is always marginalized and it does not really advance things forward. Contrarily, I think it keeps things where they are. And that is the *ceiling* of possibility. So—

**CR**

In particular, is it the pure representational aspect?

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**TA**

The representational aspect of it. Not to say that it is any better for abstract artists because it's not! There is a whole other thing operating there. But what I mean is that it keeps it at the level of the social realism of the 1930s and, in that sense, it is really conservative. I don't care how many clues are left there for writers to write about it and critics to critique it, and all of the doors you can open through it. Fundamentally it is still social realism of the '30s. Basically, it does not go any further. And that is like, 'Hey man, come on, Ben Shahn is great!' You know what I mean. Ben Shahn is great.

**CR**

Yeah. No, I like Ben Shahn, too.

**TA**

But at the same time, I don't see anything advancing further than what they did in the '30s, even though it might have contemporary subject matter, like this romantic image of the ghetto. But you know it is also about trying to set the stage. I still consider it to be a big impediment, and that is why I have always chosen to work abstractly, to deal with the principles of what I feel is the rich wellspring of the culture I come from but also making sure it's placed—that it takes a stand of asking the larger question of what it means to be human rather than what it means just to be black. Earl Hooks [noted sculptor and retired chairman of the art department at Fisk University] told me this a long time ago, when at Fisk I asked how much should I let blackness influence my work. He looked at me inquisitively and said, "Do you really think that we are the only people to ever be fucked over?" BOOM! Free! Leaving the Studio Museum, I was thrust into New York City. Looking for opportunities, I applied to PS1 and I was accepted. This was the only one in the days of grit that had a national and international studio program. I was there for two years. People like Andres Serrano and a lot international artists

—

**CR**

My wife was actually up there. And multiple years, I was a juror for the studio program. I was among the people brought in to look over the applications.

**TA**

It was a vibing place and it was in the midst of this '80s New York painting frenzy—the German show [*Expressions: New Art from Germany*, September 25–November 20, 1983] was there; the Arte Povera show [*The Knot: Arte Povera at PS1*, October 6–December 15, 1985] was there.

**CR**

The downtown New York art world, both romantically and in other ways, was trying to engage with street life and what was going on in the Bronx at the time with hip-hop. The East Village scene was starting as well. I was kind of wandering around there trying to figure out who I

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was at the same time. There was an emerging affirmative, alternative New York art scene that allowed for a variety of new ideas and new artists to make a mark. Particularly the East Village gallery scene became a way to bypass the SoHo and 57th Street lock out of everything but artists with access to rarified taste and money and connection.

**TA**

That's true.

**CR**

It was an interesting time in New York.

**TA**

I had a relationship then with Kenkeleba House. I was in their *Jus'* Jazz show. They were a clip-on-lights bastion out there on Second Street in Alphabet City. It was quite something. And it was also a time of rampant drug use, openly in the street down there [in Alphabet City]. It was crazy.

**CR**

Yeah it was crazy, and the alternative spaces. I mean crazy spaces, freelance shows. One of the things that really captured my imagination in New York was the ability of artists to take the presentation platforms into their own hands. To find ways to show their art and not wait around like a starlet or something, waiting for some dealer or gallery to pick you out of the crowd. For me, the 1980s and some of the 1990s were how artists could force the issue; independently organize shows or pop-up galleries in the biggest art scene in the world and be part of the critical discussion. That you or any artist, if you've got enough talent and energy, can be proactive and grab critical attention on the premier urban stage for contemporary art.



Terry Adkins, *Omohundra*, 2002, brass and copper, 60 x 29 x 8 inches. Courtesy of the Terry Adkins Estate and Salon 94, New York.

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**TA**

Well, I tried to do that in particular by keeping my feet in the music scene and in the art scene. I met a young Kellie Jones at the Studio Museum. And you know in those days David Hammons's studio was up in Harlem and Tyler Mitchell [the bass player who worked with Don Rafael Garrett as well as the Sun Ra Arkestra in New York] had a studio in Harlem. It was cool. I took my Volvo station wagon and for a whole year I worked for a delivery service here in New York City. The name of my car was LUO Ltd. I was studying music too—traditional music from Uganda and in particular their tradition of polyphonic music. I later went to Uganda and Ethiopia as part of the United States Information Service [known overseas as the US Information Agency, it was a government diplomacy program that ended in 1999]. So very few opportunities when I applied to PS1. Got that and was there for two years. It was a very good experience and then PS1 had this competitive residency opportunity in Zurich, Switzerland. I had never gone to Europe—had always wanted to.

**CR**

So what year are we talking about?

**TA**

We are in 1986 now. And I was fortunate enough to be the first artist to win this thing out of PS1 to go to Zurich. Learned German before I went. And just another eye-opener, it was beautiful. In a situation where all I had to do was work. I stayed there a year beyond the residency.

I was active musically and artistically, participated in my first Basel Art Fair in Galerie Emmerich Baumann in Zurich in '87-'88. [Terry first traveled to Zurich for the Project Binz 39 in 1986. This project was supported by Henry Levy.] I flirted with the idea of becoming an expatriate but somehow when I walked down the street and people knew me and I didn't know them, I thought, No, this is too small. I yearned for the anonymity of New York again. And so I returned to New York, got a studio in Dumbo in Brooklyn. It's in the early days of Dumbo. I was working with wood and making mostly wood pieces.

The following is from notes taken by Salon 94 during a walk-through of Adkins's 2013 show, where *Oxidation Blue*, one of the wooden pieces mentioned above, was shown:

*The vessels are made from wine barrels and are stained red inside. The blue is a water-based wood dye.*

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They are portraits, in a way, of Adkins's subjects, George Washington Carver and Yves Klein. Both men created their own blue: Klein created International Klein Blue (IKB) and Carver created Dr. Carver's Egyptian Blue 9th Oxidation in 1935. The vessels are meant to loosely evoke bird sarcophagi, re-empathizing both men's fascination with Egypt and mysticism, and are meant to be vigilant over the space.



Terry Adkins, *The Still*, 1989, wood and pigment, 75 x 9 ½ x 11 inches. Collection of Susan Bilar, Zug, Switzerland. Photo by Peter Schaelchli.

**CR**

When did you start moving your work into abandoned buildings? I know you were doing that. Now were those wood pieces very specific projects or was this something that came later?

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**TA**

That came as I moved into Dumbo because I had gotten with this gallery called LedisFlam. It was a young gallery, very enthusiastic but with no money. And like a lot of galleries with no money they were running it on interest-free loans from their artists by not paying them in a timely fashion. But it was cool. I had my own studio out in Dumbo. I was working. I had never been the type of artist that goes into the studio everyday to work, work, work. I am not a sweat meter kind of artist. If I have something coming up, I will come and work. Otherwise, I take time taking a life and I have music.

**CR**

And you were working, making money?

**TA**

In Switzerland I was pretty successful. I had exhibitions at Galerie Emmerich Baumann [and Galerie Andy Jllien] in Zurich. They were selling my work. So I came back to New York with enough money to establish myself and a studio and start. I didn't have to teach or anything.



Terry Adkins, *Oxidation Blue*, 2013, polychrome wood, 36 x 24 x 7 inches. Courtesy Salon 94, New York.

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**CR**

That is generally part of the friction in New York: How do you work and support yourself even if you are in a gallery.

**TA**

It was a little dicey there but I managed; '88-'92, I was here surviving. In fact I moved into an apartment on the Lower East Side across the street from Kenkeleba House, owned by Joe Overstreet and Corrine Jennings. And was working having shows in other places, but it's as you say, always a little on the edge here because the survival thing looms so large that it can consume you. I was on the edge of that. And then in '92, I met my wife-to-be [Teri Merele Williams] and nine months later we were married. So that changed things. She was perfect. Merele was perfectly supportive. Was willing to be the breadwinner. But somehow, reluctantly, after a ten-year hiatus, I returned to entertaining the possibility of teaching.

**CR**

So you got married in '93?

**TA**

'92. So still had my studio in Dumbo and then I took a job at SUNY in New Paltz.

**CR**

What were you teaching?

**TA**

I was teaching sculpture. It was okay. In '95 we had a son, Titus, who is now eighteen. Wow. So my priority changed a great deal from trying to advance in the New York art scene to trying to support my family and maintain some kind of semblance of creative activity. And the gallery, LedisFlam, went out of business and so I was out of that. It was not selling that much, so it didn't make a New York difference. But SUNY, because of the insurance and all that, became very important for maintaining the family's stability and it was okay to return to teaching again. I mean ten years prior, I was a young fire-breather who was not to be understood. They probably did the right thing by firing me because it was not a good match.

**CR**

What was the atmosphere up there in New Paltz like?

**TA**

The geography is very beautiful and just the commute was worthwhile.

**CR**

Did you go up there for a couple of days each week, stay overnight?



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**TA**

Yeah, I did. And it was demanding, but I stuck it out for eight years and it proved to be a very beneficial way to support my family. I had determined that I would be a professor emeritus there; that they'd write my name on the tombstone, but something else came along. I also took a semester to teach at Cal State University, Chico, and that was interesting too, to experience the California state system, to see the kind of students that they had. This was prior to taking a job at New Paltz and being married.

**CR**

So you did Cal State first?

**TA**

Yeah, Cal State, Chico, was first. I was in a group show at the New Museum at that time, when it was on Broadway. Gary Sangster, the curator, placed my work in the context of other artists working abstractly. I liked it because it was not a racially based show; a lot of them out there were into identity. It was called *Cadences: Icon and Abstraction in Context* [1991] or something like that. I came back from California, this was '92, and then I met Merele. So that leads into marriage and family life. My focus changed from trying to get my claws into the art world, which I was still trying to do but very peripherally. I had other people to think about besides myself, but I was still maintaining work and teaching classes to hang in there.



View of *Cadences: Icons and Abstraction in Context*, curated by Gary Sangster, February 16–April 7, 1991, New Museum, New York. Foreground: Terry Adkins, *Parker Gray*, 1990, wood and tempera, 133 x 95 x 7 ½ inches. Courtesy of Ledisflam Gallery, New York. Photo courtesy of New Museum. Photo by New Museum.



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**CR**

What were you making? Let's talk about '92-'93. You are teaching, you have got a family. How did that effect what was coming out of the studio? Did you even have time to make art?

**TA**

My dear wife was very considerate in that regard. She first and foremost wanted me to maintain contact by staying active artistically because she knew that was my reason for living. She understood that and when you have support from the home base, then yes, it was cool. But also Calvin, what it did was make me way more sensitive about the value of time—I had to have time for my family, for my son growing up. That is when I started doing these things in the abandoned buildings. I would just set them up. [Terry would set up installations of found materials in abandoned buildings and photograph them.] Leave them, take a picture, and boom. I didn't care whether it got into the gallery system. I was frustrated by the gallery system. And so that is when the *Visionary Recital* project started and it meant going to locations, limiting myself to materials at the site and making these quick immediate gestures, moving through the space without taking the time to judge or reflect. Taking the pictures. I didn't care whether the pieces were going to be destroyed or not because they ended up being destroyed. Oftentime, I had to employ strategies that involved dressing up like one of the workers in the daytime to go see what was in the building, leaving just the right door cracked open enough to get back in at night. Do these things overnight, take the pictures, and then leave. This one particular building [in Dumbo], I was working from the top floor down. They were working from the bottom floor up, renovating it. It was not until they got to the middle of it that they saw what was going on and then they went upstairs and the cover was blown, but by that time—

**CR**

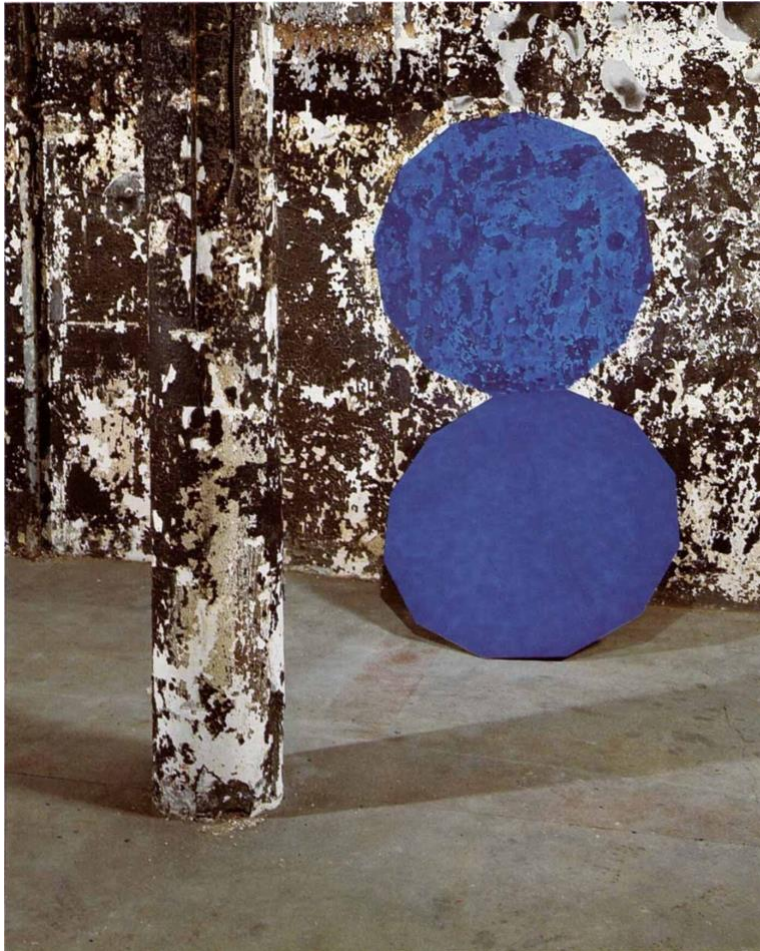
So where were these buildings? How were you identifying them? Were they all around Dumbo?

**TA**

Yeah, they were in Dumbo because of the big upheaval about the renovation down there. All you had to do was have a superlong extension cord to power up lamps to take pictures of this stuff in the wee hours of the morning. That started with the idea of working swiftly, not worrying about archiving or making products for the gallery system, which I was disillusioned with anyway. The idea was to work in this immediate way more like music, to just leave events and not possess them. I did take some things from that experience back to my studio and would catalogue them like an archaeologist and set them up for a period of gestation, and then I would reuse them.

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Terry Adkins, *Fire's Either*, 1994, carbon wood and paint, 240 x 120 x 120 inches. Installation view, 68 Jay Street, Brooklyn, New York. Courtesy the Terry Adkins Estate.

**CR**

Was that the show you had at P.P.O.W. at their old space when it was in SoHo on Broome Street?

**TA**

I am pretty sure it was after—the first thing that happened that really gave me an opportunity to see what I could do in a larger expanse of space was when Thelma Golden gave me a chance at Whitney at Phillip Morris around that time. [Currently director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, in '92-'93, Golden was a noted curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where she created a site-specific commissioning program for the Whitney's branch museum at Altria, formerly Philip Morris.] I was working in this abandoned building mode and it gave me an opportunity to present these things on a grand scale. Also my father had died in '95 and I wanted to do a *Recital* in his honor because he had always been really supportive of me being an artist—my parents were really supportive of that. It takes a special kind of vision to—

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**CR**

My dad wasn't really around and my mother didn't quite get it. I was the oldest son and once I left, there was this sense of "what is this artist business." But in the end, my mom and my family have been very supportive and have come to New York to be at the opening of some of my shows.

**TA**

Same here.

**CR**

But no one in my family discouraged me from doing anything. I was like the king kid. They would never discourage me. They were perplexed, but to their credit, they supported me. They would say, "Well, yeah go for it."

**TA**

I could draw well early on, so my support ended up being spelled out by the kind of Christmas presents handed out. My brother, two years younger than me, would get a Tonka truck. I would get Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* paint by numbers. And my mother would tell me, "Look, don't mess this up. This cost me a lot of money." That was the kind of encouragement that I got.

**CR**

My mother wanted me go to dental school, to go into science or be a lawyer. She was a dental hygienist. They were like every other parent. But they were cool.

**TA**

So the time management thing is where these [building] projects started and also I started hiring myself out as the New York outlaw that could come into an environment and within one week do an exhibition reflecting the local discard. I did these in North Carolina and I also did this in Akron, Ohio, which is where the first *John Brown Recital* was done. That was in '98.

**CR**

I knew what you were doing. You didn't have a gallery and I didn't see too many of your performances, but I saw the sculptures and I was really anxious to write about the show that you had at Phillip Morris in '95 because of the qualities that I saw in that work, the notion of charged icons. To me your work was connecting, in unusual, nonlinguistic or non-obvious ways, to African American legacy and tradition. Your work has always seemed to provide metaphorical connections to the texture of black music, the blues, jazz, and even the regional identifiers we attach to place, and southern black culture and attitude. If I can describe the effect without sounding completely romantic or precious, it's a vibe: An enveloping and viscous ether of meaning and cultural like-it-ness that either settles on or is exuded from the rough textures, materials, and objects that you work with.

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Your works capture elemental textures we associate with the tough realities of African American legacy. Obviously, I had been very invested in other works of this kind—wasn't it the early 1990s when David Hammons—another master of drawing out or projecting cultural meanings on all kinds of objects—had his mainstream explosion? For those of us in the know, David had been an old master for a long time already. But he blew out somewhere in the '90s—and got a lot of much-deserved critical attention after producing years of radical and often beautiful works.

**TA**

He had a show at PS1 called *Rousing the Rubble*.

**CR**

That was a big moment.

**TA**

We knew him as this rather mystical underground figure who would appear and disappear at will.

**CR**

Our trickster—

**TA**

And so, like you said, the atmosphere in New York at that time was charged. And the show at Phillip Morris was a good chance to see how I could do what I do at large.

**CR**

That place was about scale.

**TA**

I am going to be conducting people playing at Performa 13 tomorrow night. [November 1, 2013]

**CR**

Where is this going to be?

**TA**

It's at 13 Crosby Street, tomorrow night at 6:30. So, yeah, that happened in '95; then I started a relationship with P.P.O.W. through Carrie Mae Weems. Had two shows.

**CR**

Those were big years for Carrie too.

**TA**

And Carrie defined that gallery, single-handedly, to show abstraction in an iconic context. I met Carrie Mae Weems when she was in an exhibition at the New Museum for the first time. We met there.

**CR**

Lorraine O'Grady was starting to claw her way into public attention. Adrian Piper was having a rediscovery.

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**TA**

Yeah, but there is a strange phenomenon among light-skinned black artists. I call it the Tragic Mulatto Syndrome.

**CR**

Like a compensation?

**TA**

Like a compensation for their non-blackness.

**CR**

I mean obviously the community has always been a range of hues. But it does seem that there is an exaggerated response to not being obviously recognizable. Whatever.

**TA**

I think it is quite fascinating myself. A lot of interesting work has been done out of it. But there has never been anyone to step back and say, "Hey, this is a thread here." It is an interesting phenomenon to talk about.

**CR**

Because so much is invested into skin color in the American racial cauldron and yet we have this component of the community that doesn't look apparently black. And in many cases they are the most vociferously black. It's a complicated issue to navigate but it's an aspect of the culture. So, a really interesting period during the '90s, moving through many changes in your life and in your work. Your stuff is getting big. You're getting—

**TA**

I'm getting periodic play, enough to sustain me from feeling like I am totally invisible. But mainly a period of teaching, being able to use—I had a show and performance at the SculptureCenter about Jean Toomer's *Cane*. So periodic opportunities in the United States, mainly college campuses when they want someone to come in and shake things up a little bit. This happened even early on. Oh yeah, and then I went to Africa with an exhibition proposal—in fact my first museum show at Virginia Commonwealth University at the Anderson Gallery.

**CR**

So what year is this?

**TA**

This is '91, I guess. So through the curator I met there we put forth a proposal to the United States Information Services. I was supposed to do an exhibition in eight sub-Saharan countries starting with Ethiopia moving through Uganda and Mozambique, where the exhibition would travel. I would change it depending on local stuff I would find in these

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places. But by the time I got back from Uganda and Ethiopia, Jesse Helms had shut the whole program down. But I did get to see Ethiopia and Uganda, which I had always wanted to. So that was an eye-opener because materials they used were on the level of survival. A yellow plastic container was worth a fortune because it could hold water. That undermined my whole vision of working with found materials. Theirs seemed to be so much more meaningful; it related to survival instead of some aesthetic experience. That had a profound impact on me.



Left: Terry Adkins, *Strung Refuge*, 2000, aluminum and wood, 36 x 48 x 24 inches. Right: Terry Adkins, *Methane Sea*, 2013, mixed media, 78 x 40 x 55 inches. Images courtesy the Terry Adkins Estate and Salon 94, New York.

**CR**

So you have had a firsthand African connection to add to the rest of your components?

**TA**

Yeah.

**CR**

In the late '70s I made my main and only trip Africa—I went to FESTAC. I spent a month in Lagos, Nigeria, and that was an eye-opener for me. [The Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, also more generally called FESTAC '77, an Olympic style international festival of African Diaspora culture on a monumental scale. The first such festival took place in Dakar in 1966. The 1977 FESTAC drew thousands of artists, musicians, scholars, and creative people of African descent from every place on the planet to perform and discuss the state of global African

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Diaspora culture.] It was truly an amazing event, with celebrated black artists, jazz musicians, many Howard University faculty members, and more, all traveling to and performing for a month in Lagos, Nigeria. At the time I was the photo editor of *The Hilltop*, the Howard University [then] weekly school newspaper, and a cultural reporter, and I was sent to Lagos along with a *Hilltop* reporter, a nice guy whose name escapes me. We actually stayed with another Howard graduate who had moved to Lagos to become an architect. He was a big help with our coverage and took us all over the city. We covered the monthlong arts festival and we both wrote a long report, complete with photographs in a special FESTAC issue of the *Hilltop*.

**TA**

You know it helps with this superficial harkening to the great wondrous days of Africa.

**CR**

To see it up close.

**TA**

Yeah, and to see how in many cases it is dysfunctional, corrupt, and just like every other place in the world. It is not the glorious thing that we make it out to be.

**CR**

Yeah, it's fucking survival; it is really tough.

**TA**

That's right, survival of the fittest. And the fittest happen to be either the most oppressive or the most corrupt and in positions of power to abuse it. So anyway, that is why I preferred eastern Africa to western Africa. Because I was more interested in their music tradition. So going to Ethiopia and Uganda were real eye-openers for me partly because of my own work. I came back and I was like, I can't work with this stuff anymore. I mean, I am doing it for this aesthetic jive where they are doing it on a level of survival. So I had questions about that for awhile. Also, in the same way that I feel that arrested surface of racism limitation in image-based work, I also feel that the lack of access to production methods for black artists has created this economic ghetto of found materials and the acts of resuscitating them.

**CR**

It's a heavy niche in the contemporary art world. But go on.

**TA**

This assemblage of this semi-hoodoo stuff. To me that is just as limiting as image-based work. It's just a different type of image. This is in large part due to economics. I am for the first time in a position now



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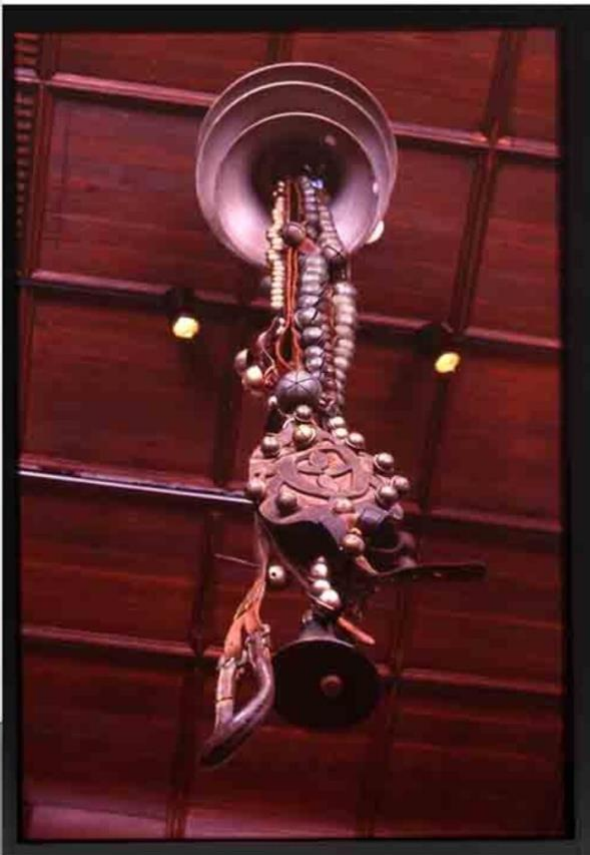
to have things fabricated. So it's not that much different; I just limit it to components being fabricated. But I do have a tendency to use items from the outside or from around the yard, and other tools from other occupations—references to labor and stuff.

**CR**

Now wasn't some of this stuff going on in your first P.P.O.W. show I referenced a little earlier?

**TA**

Yeah, that piece in the middle of the wall, that yellow thing was in the first P.P.O.W. show. [*Forst Mosaic*, 1997, wood, strung labels, 58 inches in diameter x 3 inches. Courtesy P.P.O.W.] In 2000, things changed again because I got a job at the University of Pennsylvania.



Left: Terry Adkins, *Behearer*, 2004, steel and brass, 60 x 32 x 22 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Terry Adkins and Salon 94, New York. Right: Terry Adkins, *Upperville*, 2002–03, bells and leather, approx. 216 x 40 inches. Courtesy P.P.O.W.



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**CR**

Now were you making the musical instruments? Was that going on all along or is this something you gleaned after Africa?

**TA**

'95 was these long horns and before that bamboo flute. But thank God for Thelma Golden; that was the first time I was placed in a position to have something fabricated. The first thing I fabricated in my artistic life was those horns. To sit there, design something, and have it made. I kind of dug it. And so '95 up to 2000—I played a lead role in a Spike Lee Jaguar commercial called *The Harlem to Martha's Vineyard Special*.

**CR**

I did not see this.

**TA**

It was an infomercial for Jaguar cars.

**CR**

I did see those car commercials. It was on the Internet or something?

**TA**

He's changed the face of not just what you see on the movie screen—nobody talks about how he has changed the complexion of what happens behind the scenes. All the people he has brought along and fostered in their careers, cameramen—every aspect of the structure of the film industry. Without fanfare, his influence is far more than people see. You see the faces on the screen of the actors who have worked with him, what they have gone on to do. But there are also people who were thoroughly entranced into this industry because of the training and sponsorship they received from him. So I got the job. My sculptures were in the film. I played a sculptor and Spike Lee's real wife, Tonya Lewis Lee, played my wife and a doctor. The whole thing was that she would not let me drive the Jaguar. That was quite an experience. And at the same time, I got hired at the University of Pennsylvania. That made me like teaching again because it's an open environment around like-minded colleagues in a research institution that values your creative abilities as bringing honor to the school.

**CR**

Cool.

**TA**

Very supportive. I don't even think of it as a job. That changed my relationship to teaching, making it more of an enfolding experience. Since it wasn't like a job, I could treat it creatively. I don't know how to describe it. It's not because of the facilities. They were actually better at SUNY New Paltz. But I became more productive as an artist. I had an

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exhibition about the blues at this place called Finesilver Gallery in San Antonio. [The exhibition, titled *Wild Ashes Mute*, took place from October 20 to November 25, 2000, and featured a sculpture series by the same name. The body of work was inspired by early Texas blues recordings—the historicizing and mythologizing of black musicians's experience.] Once again with this idea that Terry Adkins can show up and in two weeks or a month, you have the whole shebang. I was good at doing that.

**CR**

It is interesting to hear how the reception at U Penn energized you creatively. That is often not the case with artists; it wasn't the case in your earlier teaching career.

**TA**

The good thing about SUNY New Paltz was that I got to become familiar with students. A lot of them were the first ones in the histories of their families to go to college. So that aspect about it I loved. At the same time, you had the state system that demands so much of you and gives you back very little in return. At U Penn the situation was different because number one, I was in a design school of architects, landscape architects, and city planners and the faculty were pretty high achievers in their respective fields. So it was expected of you first and foremost to excel at your field—

**CR**

And to bring that to the classroom.

**TA**

Exactly.

**CR**

So you are expected to be an artist.

**TA**

Yes. So it's the first time I experienced that support. In most schools, the art world is a dangling modifier, an unwanted child, and treated as such. So 2000—by then my daughter Turiya had been born; she was two. That was the beginning of the *John Brown Recital* series. I had gone to Akron, Ohio, for two weeks [at the University of Akron, Mary Schiller Myers School of Art]. Within two weeks I did an exhibition based on the abolitionist John Brown who had a sheep farm in Akron and resided there. After the recital I ended up traveling all over the place.

**CR**

Tell us about the *Recital* series. I have seen your object work but I have never seen these recitals and how all of this works together.

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TA

Well, it usually happens as a result of location. It is really site inspired. This one was about John Brown because he was active in Akron. Langston Hughes had been active in Akron, it could have been about him. Toni Morrison active—could have been about her. Had it been Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Frost, Dante Alighieri active in Akron, it could have been about anyone of them. But it so happens that John Brown was active there and so I went with the idea that I would do something about him. *Recitals* are involved with immersive research. I become the person, somehow. Find out everything that I can and then spit it out in an abstract, live recital form based on this immersion and absorption of biographical particulars that I dealt with in researching them.



*Recital* videos in the Terry Adkins Archive. Courtesy the Terry Adkins Estate.

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**CR**

On the musical side, what compositions are you doing? Is it pure improvisation?

**TA**

Most of the time it's pure improvisation around the literary legacy of a person. In the case of John Brown, there is a lot of literature, a lot of speeches, a lot of oratory. Frederick Douglass's being the more prominent one, Ralph Waldo Emerson being another, poems by Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and others about John Brown. He captured the American conscious for a long time and was a spark that started the Civil War.

**CR**

Terrorist?

**TA**

Terrorist or saint. Depends which way you look at it. So, that started there; and that idea could have been applied to any given number of places where John Brown was active. Something connected with him and history in Toronto, in Detroit, in Iowa, in Kansas, in Boston, in Harper's Ferry. In the series, I even imagine that he was successful in Harper's Ferry. The exhibition and I traveled southward in the same way as he envisioned a mass of fugitive slaves as he moved southward through the mountains. So that's how that happened.

**CR**

Did that show come to New York and did it travel to other places?

**TA**

It came to upstate New York and it traveled to Richmond, Winston-Salem, Gainesville [Florida]—that was the most southern place it went to. And then it came to the American Academy in Rome. I found that out through research because I was looking for a reason to have it in Rome. I found that McKim of McKim, Mead & White, the architects who built the American Academy, had parents who were staunch abolitionists. They were at John Brown's hanging. His father was the one who said prayers over John Brown's body at Lake Placid.

**CR**

I did not know that.

**TA**

And was responsible for collecting the body for Mrs. Brown. His mother was a Quaker. Knowing this changed the whole thing about being in the Academy for me. Of course William Styron, who had written *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, had been in residency at the

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Academy. John Brown was a big fan of Nat Turner as a visionary. Robert Penn Warren who wrote a book about John Brown had been in residency at the Academy—

**CR**

So were you there for the Rome Prize?

**TA**

Yeah. So I got the Rome Prize. That was in 2009. We are getting way ahead now. That was in 2009 and 2010. And it also marked the 150th year anniversary of the raid on Harper's Ferry. The show ran from the night of the Harper's Ferry raid on October 16 to the actual date of John Brown's hanging on December 2, 1859.

The following is a description of the last John Brown Recital at the American Academy in Rome:

*Meteor Stream is the latest incarnation of Terry Adkins' ongoing cycle of site-inspired recitals on the abolitionist John Brown that began in 1999 at the John Brown House and sheep farm in Akron, Ohio. Commemorating the 150th anniversary of his Harper's Ferry, Virginia campaign Meteor Stream coincides with the inception of Brown's October 16th 1859 raid on a U.S. armory to his execution by hanging on that December 2nd at Charlestown. Adkins dutifully explores biblical aspects of John Brown as a shepherd, soldier, martyr, and prophet through a communion of sound, text, video, sculpture, drawing, and ritual actions. He has also responded to new research for Meteor Stream that reveals incredibly far-reaching ties, binding the legend of this enigmatic American figure to parallel histories of Rome, the Janiculum Hill and the American Academy in Rome.*

*On Friday November 27, 2009, Terry Adkins' Lone Wolf Recital Corps unveiled the world premiere of Hiving Bee Song Cycle at the American Academy in Rome in conjunction with Meteor Stream.* ②

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Terry and Merele Adkins, December 2009, the American Academy, Rome, Italy. Photo by Annie Schlechter.

*Terry Adkins passed away on February 8, 2014 before he had a chance to work on the end or the edit of this manuscript. His widow, Merele Williams Adkins worked with me to answer the many questions embedded in the transcript for him. I would like to thank Merele, Calvin Reid, Salon 94, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and all who helped to shape this oral history after Terry's untimely death.*

*—Betsy Sussler, Editor in Chief, BOMB.*