

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Weaver, A.M., 'Material Potentialities': Terry Adkins and His Influence,' *Art Critical Online*.  
31<sup>st</sup> January 2017

**artcritical**  
the online magazine of art and ideas

CRITICISM ■ EXHIBITIONS

---

Tuesday, January 31st, 2017

### “Material Potentialities”: Terry Adkins and His Influence

by A.M. Weaver

*Darkwater Revival: After Terry Adkins* at the Arthur Ross Gallery, University of Pennsylvania

August 27 to December 11, 2016

220 South 34th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104



Matt Neff, Untitled, 2014. Plexiglas, metal, tape, fluorescent lights, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Artist

Terry Adkins, a professor of Fine Arts in the School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania for 14 years, died in 2014 leaving a puissant legacy both in terms of his own works and peers and students influenced. “Darkwater

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Revival: After Terry Adkins,” at the Arthur Ross Gallery at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, required several viewings. Although a modest-sized gallery, the work of twelve artists, as well as Adkins himself, are on display. The show not only celebrates salient works by Adkins that were part of his 2002 multidisciplinary exhibit “Darkwater: A Recital in Four Dominions, Terry Adkins After W.E.B. Du Bois,” but presents the art created by students and colleagues who were close to him.

Adkins was a conceptual artist involved in creating work from discarded material and instruments, as well as a performance artist and musician well versed in jazz and experimental music. He tied his performances to his sculptures and installations, expounding on concepts transcendence, spirituality and blackness. Between 1999 and 2014, he chronicled in his “material potentialities,” the life and work of such historic figure as W.E.B. DuBois, Ludwig van Beethoven, Jimi Hendrix and the insurrectionary abolitionist John Brown,

At times difficult and obtuse, Adkins has inspired several generations. Having great faith in his vision, I was able to document a myriad of references and directives in his work while researching a 1998 essay for an exhibition of his work at the Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia. A deep thinker with a booming laugh, he created works that sparked the imagination and offered conundrums about politics, black narrative histories and man’s spiritual quests. “Darkwater Revival” includes six of his artworks. *Darkwater Record* (2002–08) is a moderate sized “combine,” in contrast to his signature monumental installations. A porcelain bust of Mao Tse-tung rests on top of a collection of



Terry Adkins, *Sermonesque* (from *Darkwater*), 2002. Metal with snare drum and buttons, 54 × 72 × 108 inches. Estate of Terry Adkins, Courtesy Salon 94

Nakamichi 550 cassette tape decks. The needles on the dial of the decks indicate that recordings are supposedly playing Du Bois’s speeches on socialism and the American Negro, but the work was designed to give evidence of sound with no actual audio. (In 2002, a previous version of the work included sealed FBI files on Du Bois.) In this partial presentation, actually hearing Du Bois’s speeches would be desirable, but the silence of the piece again highlights an integral part of Adkins’s intent. Adkins often played with sound and silence, which often represented forgotten or muffled histories.

*Sermonesque* (2002) is a suspended snare drum within the lattice of a nine-foot-tall wrought-iron cage. Here, the drum, an instrument related to African-American music traditions and African culture, and the wrought-iron frame, suggestive of a principle occupation, smithing, held by blacks during and after slavery, are inherently powerful insignia.

Additionally, select works by Adkins relate to musical ideas: two gelatin

silver prints of music disks that predate phonographs, possibly of folk music, and a video of wafting smoke that surrounds the crown of a

curly coif. To the uninitiated, the prints might appear to be cartographic renditions of the firmament. Du Bois’s concern with southern musical traditions is integral to his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1905). Along with its mystical visuals, the video *Harmonic Spheres*, 2012, features a score Adkins created with his protégé, Demetrius

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Oliver. Overall, “Darkwater Revival,” in both of its manifestations, takes a close look through signs and symbols at the life, philosophy and work by W. E. B. Du Bois.

Included in the exhibit are sculptures, videos, mixed media works, prints and photo-based work by Ernel Martinez and Keir Johnston of Amber Arts and Design, and Wilmer Wilson, among others. Of note was a performance *Push/Pull The Weight* held on Martyrs Day by Martinez and Johnston at the gallery. Their piece paid homage to the abolitionist John Brown another personage that Adkins heralded. Full of symbolism, with flags of gold and black and a central totem Martinez laboriously builds using steel disc brakes that jostled the nerves when they were dropped onto a giant wooden spindle, the performance exemplified struggle and resilience and was accompanied by an improv musical score by June Lopez.

Matt Neff’s sculptures dominate the main floor of the gallery and are a tour de force; having worked closely with Adkins in the past as a student and assistant, he has taken to another level Adkins’s approach to making art using found materials. The works transcend the sum of their parts. In *Untitled*, 2014, Neff uses found aluminum railings and panels of Plexiglas lit by fluorescent lights, flanked by rims from a small truck. This sculpture reads as an elegant structure and belies the materials used. However, Neff states that he is concerned with historical and current negotiations of power and privilege. These issues are not overtly apparent in the work on display as part of “Darkwater Revival” here; rather, his sculptures here are appreciable for their formal qualities and Modernist sensibilities.

Sarah Tortora also embraces lessons from Modernism. Her geometric suspended painted reliefs made of wood have appendages that appear to hover in space. Sean Riley deconstructs pieces of denim to create quasi-geometric shards. Jamal Cyrus’s *Raisin*, 2016, resonates with innumerable references to blackness, including the Lorraine Hansberry play, *A Raisin in the Sun* and even the comical commercial using animated raisins circa 1990. In this work, Cyrus uses hand dyed burgundy fabrics and collages them in a tight intimate composition.



Jamal Cyrus, *Eroding Witness 7\_b*, 2014. Laser-cut papyrus, 27 × 16 3/4 inches. Courtesy of the Artist

Of note are two video installations by black women, Tameka Norris and Nsenga Knight, which are as different in context and intent as night and day. Norris creates an absurd, laughable work that addresses stereotypes; titled *Purple Painting* (2011), Norris, her face painted purple, wantonly eats a banana with abandon while emitting animal like noises. Embedded in the background is another video screen, playing footage of Norris in a coiffed blonde wig, eating a banana with great care and poise. She plays with several tropes related to gender, sexuality, race and humor. At first take, the work is hilarious, while deeper scrutiny of the juxtaposition of the figures and their gestures reveals a layer of commentary that is biting and uncomfortable for some viewers.

Knight, in *X Speaks* (2014), takes a didactic approach to disseminating the late speeches of Malcolm X. She takes the language of the American political and cultural icon and encourages an assessment of his ideas for blacks in the

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

21<sup>st</sup> century, by having his speeches read by community participants, recording these events. The sessions, broadcast live across the Internet, are made accessible via technological dissemination. Is Knight, a Muslim, proselytizing or merely creating an open forum on race and oppression by using X's seminal speeches as a point of departure? This project surfaces in the milieu of the Black Lives Matter Movement, Malcolm X's 50th anniversary, hostility towards assimilation by African-American Muslims and the fight for social justice.

Knight crosses the line drawn between art and education in relationship to socio-political concerns. While many African-American artists obscure or conceptually abstract content, Knight tackles head on subjects related to Black oppression, Islam and the construct of race in America.

Across the board, more than sharing aesthetic commonality, the works by Adkins's students are very diverse in format, materiality and content. "Darkwater Revival" highlights the questioning minds of the artists presented. The ultimate influence of Adkins is that those who follow in his wake are engaged in intuitive processes, immersive research and collaboration. These artists, in pursuit of multivalent journeys, credit Adkins as their radix.



Terry Adkins, Darkwater Record, 2002. Estate of Terry Adkins, Courtesy Salon 94

<http://www.artcritical.com/2017/01/31/a-m-weaver-on-terry-adkins/>