

THE SOUTH IS A PLACE OF TRANSFORMATION

MARION MANEKER, DECEMBER 21, 2021



Valerie Cassel Oliver, VMFA Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

Valerie Cassel Oliver’s recent groundbreaking show at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, “Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse,” appeared in the wake of a year of protest across the United States. The exhibition’s emphasis on the interaction between popular culture, in the form of music and folk arts, and contemporary art suggested a broad interpretation of American culture. Art in America took the opportunity to speak to Cassel Oliver about the implications of her show.

MARION MANEKER You once said “if you can understand the South, you can understand America.” Why is the South so central to American culture?

VALERIE CASSEL OLIVER To me, the South is a point of origin. It is where we begin as African Americans. The politics of subjugation, genocide, enslavement, disenfranchisement, and violence to perpetuate a social order and economic wealth all begins here. And this framing has persisted through multiple iterations to arrive where we are today. The South is also a space where, despite all these things, traditions have been preserved, cultures have persisted, serving as a counterpoint to and as a space of resistance against exploitation. Culture has also evolved, and the intermingling of traditions has given birth to new modes and expressions. So . . . it’s all in here! The South is inextricably linked to conversations around who we are as Americans, what we believe, and how African American identity was formed.

And this is important. For African Americans who were brought into this country through enslavement, the South is where fragments of who they were in Africa melded into an otherness dictated by European American social hierarchy. Identity was also shaped by the many other cultures encountered in this country,

First Nations people in particular. So, that amalgamation has informed who we are as African Americans, and the culture we have created—and continue to create—emerges from that amalgamation.



View of “Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse,” 2021, at VMFA, Richmond.

MANEKER What is key to understanding the South? What makes the South distinctive and essential for understanding the rest of American culture?

CASSEL OLIVER Its primary role in forming this country and its wealth. The fact that so much is rooted in the earth, tied to labor on the Southern soil. It’s the coalescing of cultures under this matrix—a highly pressurized socioeconomic and political environment. What then emerges from this pressurized setting changes and shifts everything around it (even things that want to stay fixed). Nothing is spared, in my opinion. The South is a place of transformation. It’s the original melting pot.

So it’s those realities of the South that change people—and change the trajectory of this country. They change how we see ourselves. Today we are contending with the residuals of this point of origin. There is a reckoning now taking place because of that past. We as a country have to confront this. We are confronting the issues born from this past, how it has spawned poverty, economic disenfranchisement, the mythology of white supremacy, violence against black and brown bodies, and so much more. There has to be an acknowledgment of this and a move to reconcile the inequities that exist because of this history and its vestiges in our society.

MANEKER We have all these American myths about the South. We think of it as being the oldest, most hidebound and backward part of America. But your show was largely about the dynamism of the South. In another context, you made the point that the South is filled with immigrants. Now it feels like the South is a place where culture is in overdrive, where the future of a multicultural America is actually taking shape.

CASSEL OLIVER When I moved to Richmond from Houston in 2017, there was an article that highlighted the 145 languages being spoken in Houston. The South has always been a melting pot, and in more recent times it has become a place where immigrants have resettled. We tend to think of New York as the ultimate melting pot, but we also had immigrants coming from all over the world and settling in the South. In the twentieth century, that went into overdrive because of the abundance of space. And because of America’s desire to be a beacon of democracy, many folks resettled in the wake of political turmoil and upheaval. The South opened its door wide to these displaced people and, along with them, their cultural traditions and languages.

We have a sizable Southeast Asian population in places like Mississippi, and Vietnamese communities in Texas and Louisiana. With each and every successive geopolitical issue, we’ve had lots of immigrants come into the region and root themselves in local environments. So this is what I mean about a new dynamism in the South.

But in truth, the dynamism has always been there. Texas was once claimed, wholly or in part, by Spain, Mexico, and even France. There were French and Caribbean communities in Louisiana. And we don’t talk much about First Nations people in this country—but they’ve been present here from the very beginning and are an essential part of this conversation. Despite this cultural complexity, the binary of black and white seems to permeate everything.

In the twenty-first century, the South has become a more contested space. People are moving back to the region. There’s a call even now for African Americans to come back and reclaim spaces in the South—a reverse

migration—which would enable a continuation of what was disrupted over a century and a half ago! What if Reconstruction had been allowed to succeed? Clearly, there is something to be considered, given the investment and contributions African Americans have made to the economy of the region. Why not reclaim the land of our ancestors? Many African Americans left the South because of terrorism and political disenfranchisement. The call to repatriate Black people to the South is in part an effort to make the political leadership of the South reflect the population of the South, which is about 20 percent African American.



View of “Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse,” 2021, at VMFA, Richmond.

MANEKER Your show ties together visual culture and music. Once it was commonplace to talk about jazz being a uniquely American art form. Now, I think, you make the case that rap is an American art form created by African Americans that has become a global art form. Rap, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, jazz—these are all musical forms that are deeply rooted in African American experience and culture. These musical forms also happen to be the soundtrack of American life—and global life now too.

I think what you’re saying is African American culture is more than just music. It represents a way of seeing and experiencing things, a call and response. The strong musical call prompts a cultural response, especially in the visual arts.

I wonder if we can regard the power of music in American culture as a counterbalance against the aggressive acts supporting white supremacy that we saw in Charlottesville in 2018 and in George Floyd’s murder in 2020.

larger culture experienced, not Big Mama Thornton, who popularized the song “Hound Dog.” Well, of course, that barrier eventually fell, and the door was opened to many other artists who transformed the sonic landscape—like Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and Fats Domino.

When rock and roll was introduced, it took the music of Black artists and packaged it with whiteness. The desire was to replicate the soul and the energy, but have it “look” different. So Elvis was what the

But my point is really that the South has always been a source of great American culture emerging from African American expression, visually and sonically. Just as music has been a unique contribution, so have visual modes of expression. A foundation for modernism emerged from African American expression. We are always looking toward Europe to understand modernism in America, when in fact we should look no further than our own backyard.

MANEKER Yes, exactly. There is a strain of modernism that comes to America from Europe. But there is also a homegrown strain of modernism. Jazz is the most famous example of it. You suggested in this show that quilts are another. I think you drew a parallel between the abstract patterns in quilts, using found objects and materials, and musical riffs and improvisations, where patterns are repeated but subtly changed. Thus, quilting is another distinctively American but also distinctly modern art form.

CASSEL OLIVER Absolutely. It’s a tributary toward our contemporary selves and our contemporary visual art forms. The conceptual framing of quilts is very broad. First of all, you have certain types of patterns that are

prominent in African American quilts. You have this notion of sacred geometry, a visual language and philosophy involving shapes and colors. For instance, it was once believed that evil traveled in straight lines, and the desire was to disrupt straight lines so that quilts would protect us by keeping both the body warm and the soul safe.

There were also specific characteristics and functions of color. There are loud colors, quiet colors. As these quilts get made, they're pieced together by individuals. But when you come together to quilt them, you quilt in a group. The stitching is done as a communal activity. When you are sewing these quilts, there are conversations and, oftentimes, prayer circles. Sometimes there's singing. The sense of community is almost palpable when you look at those quilts. The way they're composed, they have their own kind of rhythmic sensibility. Finally, when the quilters sew, they infuse that static object with expressiveness. They are "speaking" into the cloth as weavers have done for centuries in Ghana. I see this as an extension of a global Blackness, but it also bespeaks a profound understanding of conceptual practices. What's more, quilters often use old clothing, a material that retains the memory and energy of the wearer.



Sanford Biggers: Khemestry, 2017, antique quilt, birch plywood, gold leaf, 70 by 97 by 24 inches.

"folk." Numerous artists have drawn upon these traditions. Sam Gilliam's "Chasers" series, for instance, was framed upon the Flying Geese quilt pattern. More recent are the quilted works of Sanford Biggers and Bisa Butler, or the use of worn clothing in work by Kevin Beasley or Shinique Smith.

Perhaps a useful way to think of these quilts is as a kind of Arte Povera of the African American South—but they are also much more than that. They are a refusal to see the lack or nothingness of things. I love this idea, which was so beautifully framed by Fred Moten in a live exchange on "The Dirty South." This way of thinking has existed in the South for a long time and not just among African Americans. It really became part and parcel of how we see the world. You take something that's been thrown out and transform it or repurpose it through a "willful misuse"; you craft a completely new function, or simply elevate it and/or make it to your own liking.

MANEKER . . . working with the material that you have . . .

CASSEL OLIVER . . . and beautifying it—altering it to be what you want it to be. That also permeates the global African diaspora. We see it prominently in Africa itself and in the Caribbean. It's that same philosophical sensibility that gets embedded in everything.

MANEKER Does that become an art form that others use as an inspiration or a departure point for other art forms?

CASSEL OLIVER Most of the people who created those traditional quilts were not engaged with the art world and, quite frankly, were not invited. The work, however, was readily embraced, and the influence of the Gee's Bend quilters and others like Rosie Lee Tompkins has been deeply felt. The works are now more widely seen, thanks to organizations like the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, which is placing the quilts in museums.

These days, a lot of energy goes into trying to understand intellectual practices that were previously marginalized as "self-taught" and

MANEKER What do you think about the iconography surrounding George Floyd? Last year, his image proliferated globally as a symbol of racist abuse. You have pointed out that Floyd grew up in Houston. Although he was murdered in Minnesota, he was very much a Southerner.

CASSEL OLIVER Not only was he a Southerner and from Houston, he was also part of the Screwed Up Click community, a constellation of rappers connected by DJ Screw, a Southern hip-hop legend. George Floyd was a contributor to that culture. The image said “George Floyd is us,” because every country has its own marginalized population, whether immigrants or Indigenous people. A social hierarchy is imposed. Through economics or politics or culture, societies codify their own hierarchies and create their desired underclasses. It’s human nature and, sadly, universal.

MANEKER There is a great vibrancy in art by African Americans right now. It may be because that, as a group, they have so much to say that is relevant to everyone. Very few of the issues are restricted to Black people. They are universal issues that happen to be well expressed by a group that is in a complex conversation with our dominant culture. Maybe that’s because there’s a much longer lineage of that in the history of the South—a history of being marginalized but also having a strong life force that tries to create connections and build a community.

CASSEL OLIVER The exhibition dealt with that. So yes, you had the sonic and the visual arts, but also variations within those disciplines. There were visual artists who were trained in the academy and those who were not, musicians who were trained and others who simply “picked up” an instrument. The idea behind having this very rich dialogue within the larger circle of makers was to seek that ethos through the various languages of the community. And I love melding academic concerns with those of artists working in a vernacular vein. I try to use language that embraces the vernacular but goes beyond “folk” or “folk art,” since I feel those terms deny the intellectualism that is clearly present in the work. So a locution like “intuitive intellectuals” feels right to me, because it suggests blending and has a resonance that is best for the moment.

We talked about African American quilts, but there are also sculptures and SLABs [customized cars featuring powerful sound systems]. Assemblage can also be performative. So the idea that you have this formal range across generations is key. And over time, the particular way that Black people live and express themselves, visually and sonically, evolves. Their modes of resistance and celebration drive the larger cultural expression. For instance, the SLAB stands as a refusal to be ignored. It’s an expression of self and a means of being seen. The cars have elaborate stereo systems and extended [wheel] rims. People play their music loud on those urban streets because they refuse to be made invisible. Period. You will see them. You will know they are there.

MANEKER They’re using amplification to reclaim, quite literally, a public space.

CASSEL OLIVER Yes, it’s a kind of reclamation—a refusal to be relegated to whatever other people feel you should be or do. You can see that refusal in the work, particularly in the work by artists who are close to the ground, who are not academically trained. Their art is not always about that one thing, of course, but it’s a kind of North Star to their practice. And then you have people who came up from the South. When you look at certain places, you begin to see the deep repositories of creative expression. People know that Jack Whitten and Thornton Dial grew up in Bessemer, Alabama. But guess who else is from Bessemer? Sun Ra.

So, you know, you have this kind of triangulation that happens both sonically and visually, that happens within the quote-unquote fine art sensibility. And you have it within vernacular art, where a form of intellect permeates the work. It manifests in everything.

MANEKER You mentioned three figures, all from the South, who are not known as Southerners. They don't carry an identity freighted with Southernness. But is there something distinctively Southern that is also American in the broadest way?

CASSEL OLIVER I do think there's something uniquely Southern that becomes larger. In art, there are philosophical ways of seeing, being, and doing. You are able to see something different from what is on the surface; you see the potential of what a thing can be. It's a different sensibility—like being able to read the rings of a tree stump—that helps you understand the political, social, and economic factors giving rise to the cultural expressions of a particular time. You can see the journey.

It's the same kind of aesthetic sensibility, whether it manifests in a visual framing or a sonic framing. This idea of how you bend a note, how you use language. You can bend meaning just as you can bend sound and time. Through the willful misuse of language, I can say one thing and mean a number of different things. It's the inflection that you put on things. Phat! That's a willful misuse of language. There's also a willful misuse of materials. These actions create something, transport it, transform it—and transfigure how we see it.

MANEKER America has changed. One doesn't need to get on a train and move to New York or Chicago to be an artist any longer. People are now more comfortable and feel more cosmopolitan in Southern cities.

CASSEL OLIVER You have to realize that during the migration, people just simply transplanted the South to other places. One often refers to these migratory spaces as "Up South." You could be in Chicago and still be in the Mississippi Delta.

MANEKER You talked earlier about some sort of movement of people back to the South. Is there also a cultural migration?



Bisa Butler: Basin Street Blues, 2014, cotton denim, 68 by 42 inches

CASSEL OLIVER There is a sophistication to the South. It has always been here. In the twentieth century, images got affixed to the region that showed only the ugliness of Jim Crow, massive Black resistance, and the fraught nature of the Civil Rights movement. But the South is so much more than that, and a far richer place because of its history.

Southern hip-hop is interesting because it allows the South to speak to and of its contemporary self. Artists here embrace history as a holistic means of understanding the current condition. And they directly address what it means to be Southern. They say, in effect, "we might be Southern, but we're not country. There is sophistication here." That is why the opening text for "The Dirty South" quotes rapper Andre 3000 telling the audience at the Source Awards that "the South's got something to say." It was a chance for this generation to replace the old perception of the South with something

completely different. Here at the museum, I try to create narratives in which people can see themselves reflected. "The Dirty South" was about art that emerges from the Black experience, an experience that tells a national story. The exhibition aimed to trace the arc of American history that begins in the South. Its tale was told through the hands and voices of African American artists, working over the course of a century. It represented the persistence of creative imagination, innovation, and joy. And, yes, it contained trauma, but that was not the overarching narrative. It never has been.