

Handmade:Geometry

McArthur Binion
in
Conversation
with
Torkwase Dyson

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You ready to jump in?

McArthur Binion

To be honest with you, I haven't talked about the work in so long. I finished graduate school in '73; I don't have to be smart anymore. I'll leave that to you, Miss Dyson—you're ablaze.

TD Well, why don't we start with these drawings here. I just had a chance to see them.

MB Those are called the *Under:Conscious Drawings*. I started that series five or six years ago when I first began to develop the idea of the under-conscious.

TD Working with the under-conscious started with those drawings?

MB Yeah. I was dealing with the idea of the under-conscious already, but the drawings came from a need to try to make language for it. I never had much language for it. But what was clear to me was that everything always started with the under-conscious. I explain it like this: I'm not discovering the under-conscious, I'm becoming it. It's the character just under the surface, close to the skin. It comes from a raw intellect, a raw instinct, not an educated intellect. It's the stuff you don't have to think about. It's the thread that nails the work. And I really never intended to work with the under-conscious this long but the idea resonated so much with me, I stayed close to it.

TD Looking at these *Under:Conscious Drawings*, I find it interesting that there are seven of them. They communicate, to me, a level of concentration, repetition, a sort of plateau—it's a very specific state of being.

MB Right, right.

TD You created all of these lines, these fissures, these marks, all over, over and over, one up against another, all by hand?

MB Yeah, I use my left and right hands. That's where the drawings come from, that's where the under-conscious comes from—the buildup of my marks.

TD Through your mark-making, you can see in each of the seven variations a very light underdrawing. The surface of the work ends up looking almost like velvet from the varying thicknesses of your marks on the paper—some of it in pen, some of it in charcoal. Some of it looks like paint stick.

MB No paint stick. It's charcoal, pencil, ballpoint pen, graphite.

TD So the lightest one—the gray one—that's just graphite (pp. 64–67)?

MB Yeah. That was actually the first one I felt was successful because it looked exactly as I imagined it in my mind. Drawing is my first love and I didn't know how far I could go with it—so I started with graphite. Graphite was as far as I thought I could go. Eventually, I started to push it further.

TD When I spend time looking at the infrastructure of these drawings, the graphite drawing stands out. I can trace your gestures more clearly.

MB The character of my hand is more obvious in that one, yes.

TD But in all the others, it's impossible to tell where one mark ends and another begins. The marks are both light and heavy, fast and slow. There's no tonal variation across the shape—it's completely even in every direction. To be so controlled over that amount of time and that amount of space is one thing, but to do it seven times is very intense. And while they immediately communicate flatness, they simultaneously lend themselves to a sort of object-ness. You oscillate between seeing a kind of terrestrial Anselm Kiefer landscape to something in the round. They're hitting that liminal space. When you shift your vantage point, it suddenly looks miles long.

MB Absolutely.

TD But that sameness, that kind of under-conscious order, the repetition—in my mind, it conveys a level of concentration that can only come from using everything your body is made of. And I say that looking at people like Julie Mehretu, Cy Twombly, Camille Norris, Eva Hesse, those new Jason Moran works, Agnes Martin—your drawings have an Agnes Martin level of concentration with a Cy Twombly kind of labor of mark-making (figs. 1, 2). I believe that you did that with your body. I looked at these things with a magnifying glass. I literally got on top of them.

MB Really? So you really got up close, you saw the real thing. Jesus Christ, that's scary.

TD I had to! I couldn't believe what I was looking at. I walked in and I was like, "Unh-uh. I need to get in these." I needed proof that a human being—that's not Agnes Martin, that's not working on a grid—has that amount of consistency for that amount of time and that amount of space.

MB It was some of the hardest work I've ever done. It permanently ruined my shoulder. Permanent. Permanent.

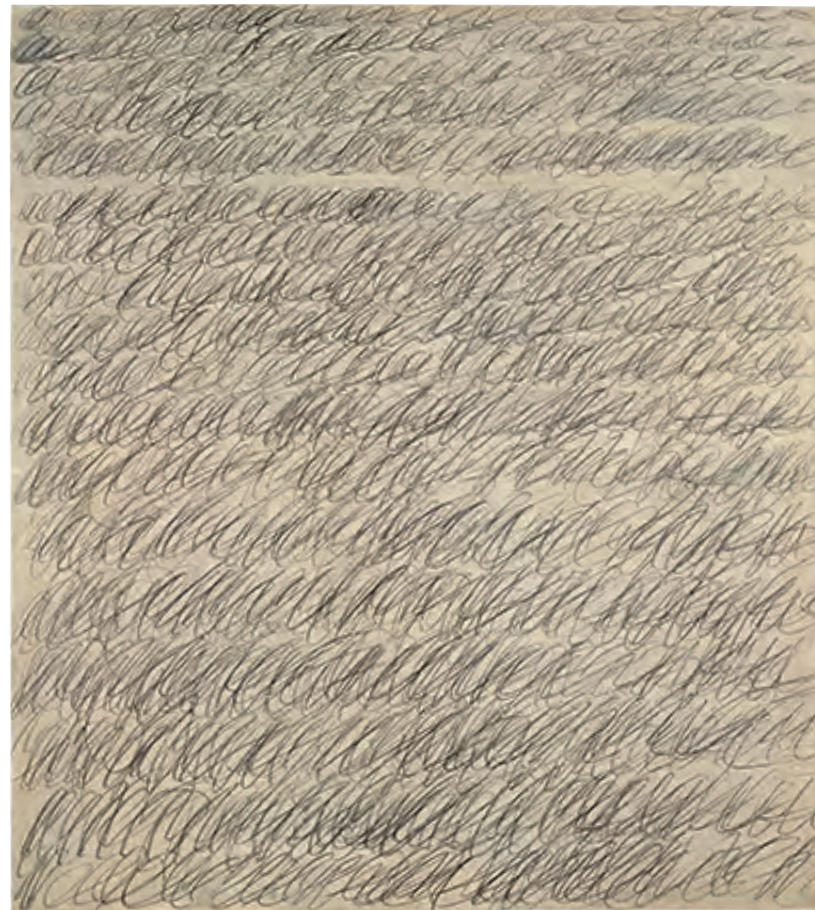
Fig. 1

Agnes Martin, *Drift of Summer*, 1965
 Acrylic paint and graphite on linen
 72 × 72 in. (182.88 × 182.88 cm)
 The Doris and Donald Fisher
 Collection at the San Francisco
 Museum of Modern Art



Fig. 2

Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1969
 Oil paint, pencil, wax crayon
 33 ¼ × 30 in. (84.5 × 76.2 cm)



- TD It looks like it took everything in you. From your toes to the top of your head.
- MB Everything. It fucked me up, man.
- TD I am obsessed with the shapes in these drawings. Can we look at some of your paintings?
- MB Let me pull one out to show you . . . bingo.
- TD Oh, whoa. I need a light. Turn on the light.
- MB This painting here is 7 by 7 feet. When you look carefully, you can see an outline of a circle within the grid (pp. 30–33). The circumference of that circle defines the scale of the canvas. It's my true circumference, the circumference of my body. There are also five 6-by-4-foot *DNA* paintings that will hang in the show. These are all my height, and the width of two of me. So it's all based on the body, on my body. It took me a while to recognize it, but, it's me. It's all self-portraits.
- TD When you create this "true circumference," do you hand-draw the circle?
- MB Yes. I hand-draw the old-school way. I take a piece of string and I go all the way around with my body.
- TD In a way, that's self-preservation.
- MB Yeah. Sometimes I say making circles is the hardest thing I've done in my life. Once you break the line, you lose it, it doesn't work. You have to be so tense—it's the hardest thing to do.
- TD When I think about the labor of your hand, the touch, the drawings, the paintings, everything, it's clear that you're making this language with your hands. You put into my mind this idea of hand geometries, these natural geometries—
- MB Handmade geometries.
- TD Exactly. *Handmade Geometries*. And it's a continuation on the kind of intuition that's built off of the under-conscious. Like you said, it's guided by a kind of raw instinct. It's really irreducible, letting the embodied experience lead the work. Qualitative drawing.
- MB Right. I'm going to find my way to someplace that's new, innovative, someplace I haven't been, and I can't know anything about it. Because if you know something about it, you won't truly

get there. That's how I think about the under-conscious, and trying to develop it.

TD This idea—I'm obsessed with it now.

MB I'm afraid of it now.

TD I'm afraid of it too but I'm afraid of it in a good way, because the under-conscious is the real fire. You know what I mean? It's the fire that comes from intuition, from rubbing up against yourself, because—

MB Because when you rub against yourself, you make fire.

TD You become present with thought, with memory, with the unknown, with whatever depth of the under-conscious you're coming from.

MB Right. But when you get deep into the under-conscious, you're making trouble, let me tell you. That's some wild shit. That's why I'm going to Lisbon. So I can cultivate it, put more words to it.

TD You're going to Lisbon? Why Lisbon?

MB I took my first sabbatical there in 2000. At that time, I hadn't focused on my practice in so long—I had moved from New York to Chicago, got married, had two children, got a job—my work was always on the bottom. When I went to Lisbon, I became an artist again. It was kind of like becoming an artist from the very beginning. So I decided I was going back this summer and I went and got a studio there. And I'm bringing with me this stack of really good 400-pound Arches paper with all the images that I've worked with over the years. It's all laid out. And I'm only going to work with ink and a brush. I love graphite, but this is about ink and brush. Every day, I'll ink until lunch, and then I'll go to a café and write in the same café every day. I'm looking for at least one sentence a day. And if I can get that clear, I might move to a paragraph eventually. I want to find more language for the work, write my story, and discover how I became who I am.

TD You better watch that memory, that geographical memory. Lisbon is . . . oof. That's some dark and heavy African environmental disruption.

MB When the revolution happened in '74, all the black people from the colonies moved to Lisbon. So if I can go back, maybe I can figure out the language for the work, for the kids that come after me. I think it's important to leave language for them so there can be, not a healing space, but a recognition space that the

history is real, and that you can have it, and grow it on your own. I'm always conscious of brown people. I'm working for the race.

TD When you say race, you mean race as in the construction of race, R-A-C-E?

MB Race as in black and white. Race in terms of Modernism. I think about this a lot. When Western Europe understood the power of African sculpture, it changed the world, but it was all based on our backs. So, I'm in it for the race. This is something we talked about in Detroit.

TD That's right. We talked about this in Detroit.

MB Like, how did the New York School painters get their inspiration so fast? The bebop musicians. They introduced improvisation to the visual artists, which onset Abstract Expressionism. Prior to this introduction, the art world had not accepted the African American influence on American visual culture. As the abstraction and improvisation of bebop became standard practice across the arts, and as the New York painters absorbed the influence, it set up the art world for a major cultural shift. The difficulty is, once the art historical world accepts the bebop influence, the art world must realign its narrative.

TD Ooh, that gives me chills.

MB It's always about the black people first. That's why I said no to my acceptance within the art world back in the 1970s, because that wouldn't have proven shit. I responded to abstraction a generation later because I'm interested in the *music* and the history it came from, not because the art that resulted from it spoke to me. I draw inspiration from jazz musicians like Henry Threadgill, Cecil Taylor, and Lawrence Douglas Butch Morris, and my work operates at the intersection of the introduction of that abstraction.

TD Now you've got me thinking about the history of abstraction, and its becoming or turning points. The way we currently understand abstraction, and Modernist abstraction, comes from—a lack of more dynamic ontologies—it's still a Matisse/Picasso-centered, shaped language that questioned perceptions that continues to lead the way. As if the rest of humanity had not been grappling with visual perception . . . Twisting and turning space, time, color, and truth through objects. But, when you say you want to leave a language of abstraction for us to inherit, it also has to do with cultivating the under-conscious and that it can, as you said, be controlled, and used for revolution, change, reorganization.

- MB Straight up. I want my instinct, my raw instinct, to establish the language that adjuncts the work.
- TD It sounds like you're being very intentional about what kind of ideas you want to leave behind, what you want them to know about the ontological condition of black abstraction, where you decidedly come in and where you break from it.
- MB Yeah. That's true.
- TD And you are very intentional about your register of politics around abstraction, the history of abstraction, and the way you use that language in terms of your own work, your own identity. Working with your history, your memories, the way in which you lived geographically, and all the choices that you make in your life.
- MB The under-conscious is all about who you really are, it's in your DNA. I wouldn't change a day of what happened in my life because—boom—that's the under-conscious! The under-conscious is all about that instinct. It's as raw as you can go. I want to see how I was at four on the train in a suit coming up from Mississippi to Detroit in 1951. I even hired a genealogist who traced our ancestry back to the 1830s to a black man named Robert Binion.
- TD That's an intense energy right there, to see one's self and one's work through that personal history, that language.
- MB And another thing—sorry, what was your original question?
- TD That's okay. I'm riding on that Mississippi train. That Mississippi train was so intense.
- MB Want to talk about Mississippi?
- TD I know how you love talking about Mississippi.
- MB "Sip Sip" is what I call it. Actually, I think it's really symbolic—which is a word I never use because it's the squarest word—that you and I met in Mississippi. As soon as we met, it was like—bam!
- TD Ha ha. Well, Mississippi is significant for more reasons than one, and you include a lot of images of Mississippi in your work, especially in your *DNA* paintings. The work has a foundational layer of reproductions of personal ephemera: photographs of your home where you were born in Macon, images of your address book, your birth certificate, etc. You reproduce such personal images.

- MB It's all about the under-conscious as a rubric for art-making, but I don't know. I come from farmers and I was picking cotton at three years old. And I was thinking about, if I never left Sip Sip, I'd probably have a different accent, but I'd still be a working motherfucker wherever I ended up. I'm not sure I'd have been an artist, but I'd be some kind of artist. You know what I'm saying? I was the first artist in my family.
- TD **When did you eventually make your way to Detroit and then New York?**
- MB My family moved from Mississippi to Detroit when I was young. I grew up in Detroit and came to New York after grad school. But when you're twenty-eight or twenty-nine years old, how much do you know about who you are? How much do you know? You don't know enough. Maybe one person knew—Picasso. You know what I'm saying? He started to create his work at the age of fifteen. But the artists of my generation—like Henry Threadgill and Dave Hammons—we all came to New York in the mid-'70s. That was really the last generation that was able to connect with the black painters and art of the day. The people that really began New York black art consciousness. Brice Marden was one of my first friends when I moved to New York. So I had begun hanging out with Brice and Dan Flavin, and I didn't realize it at the time, but those were *the guys*, the cats, the highest in the art world. And I was this young black kid from Detroit coming in. And long before it was in, I was considered slick because I was from Detroit and shit. I was ready for it, but I had to work at it. So there you have it, baby.
- But I'm kind of angry about how much New York has changed. You can't go to New York with \$95 like I did anymore. You can't. And it's good and bad. It's good because now the world is learning there's really good art everywhere. Everywhere. But still, New York is where it's at. Which is kind of crazy, but true.
- TD **Well, I still think Tougaloo is where it's at.**
- MB I'm sure it is.
- TD **When you moved from New York to Chicago in 1992, how did that influence your progress?**
- MB I came here for one thing and that was to work. I'd already loved enough, I'd seen enough art, I didn't need any more friends—I needed to work. I had been living in New York for eighteen years, and I had gone through a breakup with Ntozake [Shange]. That breakup was synonymous with my leaving the art world because

- the relationship couldn't live inside that world, and 'cause, you know, she was on top of the world then.
- TD Absolutely. And so you came to Chicago to create work.
- MB I came here to solve work. I needed to establish a good work situation. And eventually, I became kind of well known in Chicago for knowing everyone and everyone knowing my work. Chicago really allowed me to have a lot of space and to work by myself, and it still allows me that. But the thing about Chicago is that you can be invisible in plain sight. Chicago artists can be soft.
- TD Hold on now. You know I'm from the Chi—
- MB You just grew up here, baby. You didn't play up here.
- TD You're right, you're right; I didn't play as an artist up here. But there are some great artists in Chicago. Mike Cloud is hitting it off, too. That brother is making some hardcore music, some hardcore paintings. Asking serious questions from painting and visual perception is a visceral politic in the work.
- MB That's true. There are some great artists in Chicago. We actually just moved to Hyde Park, you know. A great apartment. It's got a great window for reading, and looking out at the lake and just chilling.
- TD Where'd you move—is that near Dawoud [Bey]?
- MB Like four blocks south of him—I'm at Stony Island and 59th.
- TD Oh, I know where you are. The house I grew up in was in South Shore, 77th and Bennett.
- MB Right on. What was your father doing in South Shore?
- TD Back in the day, my grandfather James Samuel Madison lived on 77th and Euclid and gave my father a house for me and my brother Mejai on 77th and Bennett. Yeah, we real South Shore—it's where all the love was/is. My mother moved around for school, and used to be at 50th and Cornell. But now, after a trip around the world, she's in Skokie.
- MB And she's a professor at Northwestern, you said?
- TD Yeah. Yeah. Performance Ethnography. Her name is D. Soyini Madison—artist, writer, all-around thinker.

- MB No shit. So she's bad, huh?
- TD She's the baddest. Northwestern is hosting a weekend conference for her work the weekend of your opening at Gray. So, I'll be in Chicago for your opening.
- MB I want to meet her. Bring her to the opening.
- TD Well, until then, you've got to finish this work, because they're going to hang the show soon.
- MB This exhibition is actually the very first time I've shown these drawings. Nobody else knows about them.
- TD Why is that? I think you should share them.
- MB I've always been a social genius, private kind of person. And social genius people are private people, they hide all their stuff, their work. And then, boom—nobody knows who you are, which is kind of where I'm at. The timing is finally right for me. I know I'm getting older. I know things are changing. But I'm at the top of my shit right now. And nothing else matters. I'm completely sure nothing else matters but the work. I do have a family and I love them much. But it's all about the work right now. And I have finally gotten to a place where I can share where I'm at.
- TD It's interesting to think about what people hide for so long, and what makes them decide to finally share it.
- MB Have you ever read *The Letters of Ralph Ellison*?
- TD No, I haven't.
- MB He was a private person like me. He had so many secrets that the world didn't know anything about until he was gone.
- TD It's crazy to me that someone would keep all of that hidden. It was clearly so important, he just didn't want it known until he didn't have to deal with it.
- MB Yeah. The handsome player. But I guess you never really know the truth until you know the secrets . . . because that's where the truth lies, right?

Torkwase Dyson is an artist concerned with environmental liberation and the climate crisis. Her research based spatial practice examines the relationship between architecture, infrastructure, and water. Dyson lives and works in New York.