

# Artist Statements

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## About Simplicism

By McArthur Binion

[Text from lecture presented at G. R. N'Namdi Gallery, Detroit, October 3, 2004.]

Firstly, you should know that this show is dedicated to my mother, Martha Stowers Binion, and my father, Reverend Earl Binion. I lost them both in the last eighteen months. Since I began writing poetry (I was a poet before I was a painter, I wrote because I couldn't speak), they have and even now continue to guide my work, my work ethic and the choices I consider and choose. They gave me simplicism.

Simplicism comes from humble beginnings. Simplicism employs only necessary tools. Simplicism stays focused and works hard because it values focus and work; but also in the service of a larger purpose. Sometimes family, sometimes justice, sometimes money, sometimes abstract art. Simplicism is the evolution of a process I created in New York over twenty years ago called *handmade geometry*, and of an enterprise I later called *modern : ancient : brown*. I see simplicism as a world-wide movement.

My family moved to Detroit from Mississippi with hundreds and thousands of other families making their way to northern cities from the south. My father and my uncle (they'd married two sisters) came to Detroit, got work in the Cadillac plant and sent for their families. There were 18 of us in a two-bedroom house at 8 Mile and Monte Vista.

Tenant farmers turned factory workers.

We broke the color line in our neighborhood in 1952.

After the move, my mother raised eleven children and cleaned other folks' houses five days a week.

I was the first black person to graduate from Cranbrook Academy of Art with a Master of Fine Arts degree.

Consistent with earlier work, the *simplicism* series involves a laborious application process that forms the "under-work" of each piece. Autobiographical preoccupations frame and filter this structure, which relies on color, chance and strength to determine where and how the layering is built up in the finished piece. The intense physicality of this technique owes as much to the action painting tradition as it does to the field labor of sharecroppers—the same hands that bled picking cotton as a child now bleed from the abrasion of colored wax on wood. I am a worker; I come from a family of workers; this is art/work. Simplicism is Mississippi and Cranbrook Academy, Detroit and New York and Chicago: an attempt to align my histories. My field-hand-to-auto-worker ancestry and my classical art education collide, revealing the under-conscious only I know.

Until now.

# Artist Statements

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## About Simplicism, *continued*

For me, and I hope for you, what is abstract is not a mystery. It is an acceptance, a welcome, a joint venture. It is a convergence disallowed by language. It is an opportunity to see something not seen before.

My work comes from a place not involved so much with art history as with my own history. And my history is somewhat unusual in the art world and it leads me to take a non-traditional approach to making paintings.

Yes, it's a voice. Yes, it's an expression. Yes, it's an expression of a particular voice, with a particular history. But the particularity is the thing; the depth below the surface is the thing.

If you see, as opposed to look, and like or don't like the particularity, then you are moved to look further. Maybe you choose other work to go to, but you go somewhere.

The artists I look for, the ones I pursue and even revere, are not primarily painters or printmakers. They are musicians and they are sculptors. Two visual artists that I have been close to and who have impressed me with their will to offer something complete and to compose in a new idiom are Judy Pfaff and David Hammons. Judy reinterprets painting and sculpture to produce a unique personal vision. David likes to pick up trash-like things on the street and make them into art, or bounce a charcoal-covered basketball on paper to create drawings. But his visual interests are always about the work ethic and its interaction with the black community.

Fundamentally, the work ethic in my work is the same thing as my work. The materiality I create is the image. The materiality I create is the image. Since 1973, when I left Detroit, I have positioned my work not so much between, but alongside, pure abstraction and figurative imagery. In past work, there has been the grid, the documentary photograph, the map, the root vegetable. The figurative image in this work is me, I am literally the dimensions of the work. This is where my parents come in. The connection, the focus, me—the product.

My paintings, all my paintings, explore modernist iconography while conjuring cultural memory from personal history. Essentially, I hope to evoke the tactile pleasure of all-over abstraction and combine it with the responsibility of representation and association: I want to trigger the viewer to mine the surfaces and posit questions and answers in confronting the canvas, the wood, the paper. I understand the power of painting as a historical document: as an engagement with formal concerns; as a record of what the hand of the artist can and cannot do in the age of mechanical representation; as a struggle with the authority of memory and the media (which is the material) and the media (which is commerce).

This is what I understand, I see it all, and I keep to the work.

# Artist Statements

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## Sardines : Sabbatical

By McArthur Binion

*[Text from a proposal written in 1999.]*

My family was part of the massive migration that many African Americans made in the 1950s from the agriculturally devastated South to the industrial North. We moved from Macon, Mississippi to Detroit, Michigan in 1951 after my father secured a job in an automobile plant. There is no doubt I would be a different person than I am today if we had not made the move. Yet, I feel I carry with me much of the mores and sensibility of a sharecropping southerner.

As I mature as an artist, I am increasingly interested in developing work that reflects and exposes my life and my family's history. In the 1960s and 1970s, as a young emerging artist, these autobiographical concerns often embarrassed me. I embraced the universality of formalism. But as I teach and speak to students, I find myself advising, even imploring them to make work from what resonates emotionally for them, that is, to examine that which is most familiar, to work from the heart. Curiously, I have begun to take my own advice. Exploring leavings and beginnings, the fresh and the stale, the tradition and the fad, the legacy and the revision, have become my chief content concerns. (Nonetheless, my structural approach remains rooted in abstraction.)


Thus, I have been doing paintings and drawings based on the house where I was born. The house had three rooms that sheltered 11 people. There was no running water. A wood stove provided the only real heat. My brothers and I started picking cotton at age four. Even so, our story is by no means unique. It is fairly typical of the African-American experience in the U.S. for a good part of the last two centuries. And, of course, this economic and cultural circumstance arose as a direct result of our nation's long commitment to slavery and its all too brief focus on undoing what essentially amounts to an American form of apartheid. My work, however, is not overtly about injustice or anger. It's about describing the experience (sometimes nostalgically, sometimes aesthetically, and sometimes critically) of so many people who moved reluctantly or were moved forcibly, packed into houses and before that into the bowels of slave ships. Like animals some say; like sardines say I.

I want to juxtapose my "migration work" to the cultural production of the African Diasporan population of Lisbon, Portugal. It was not the New World, but the Europeans who began the practice of burning villages and kidnapping West Africans from their homelands. As a result of being one of the early colonizers of African countries, Portugal has long standing black communities and cultural practices. As an American, I know my history is linked inextricably to Portugal, but I know very little beyond that. I want to visit, experience, and grow to understand these communities and see how my work will respond to a cultural environment with which I share a similar history. One particular aim is to connect African retentions, both here and abroad, as they relate to the black experience in the Diaspora.

# Artist Statements

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## Sardines : Sabbatical, *continued*



The intuitive connections continue. Portuguese cuisine relies heavily on the sardine. I am a cook and love the quality as well as the packaging of the small fish. There is the sardine analogy to those African captives packed into the lower decks of the slave ships during the Middle Passage of the Atlantic slave trade. I am the middle child of eleven. All this makes me feel a very direct connection across hundreds of years, to the early appearance of Africans in Europe and the so-called New World. I want to "draw" those connections more clearly, with greater knowledge and experience. While I do not know yet, and cannot until I get there and begin doing the work, exactly how the results will appear. One thing seems certain: this sabbatical will produce very exciting work.

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## *from Migration, A Project Proposal*

By McArthur Binion

Wood under paper under crayon; cotton fields under assembly lines under canvas. These are the layers that live in my work: the history of application, media on a surface. Crayons are shovels in my hands digging under and through, laying my histories bare. I choose simple implements for this excavation, employing crayon and concept. The juxtaposition produces what Cecil Taylor once called "elegance in the extreme"-making the most cerebral work with the most elementary tools.

# Artist Statements

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## Binion Drive

*Glen Mannisto on McArthur Binion*

Watching him not so much drive as slide his broken foreign car south, down Detroit's Woodward Avenue, his lengthy body seeming to be the whole apparatus called car, making it indistinguishable from him, and somehow more a phantom movement than driving. Not so much Negro (as in the Detroit driving posture called "copping a Woodward Avenue lean") but as a kind of omniscient horizontal fall through history, as an act of recapture, renewing and double-checking. After all it was his, this city—he owned it—this is, as Amiri Imamu Baraka said in *In Our Terribleness*, the terrible truth. This reconnaissance, sometimes night bivouac, sometimes simple daytime grid patrol, was part of a work of history he was "writing" called *Modern: Ancient: Brown* and it was a big work with muscular gestures that strained under the name of art or painting but had no other recognizable designation. Sliding through the narrowing of Woodward there at Six Mile, a seam that always makes you check what hybrid human is standing at the bus stop, then through Highland Park, tragically abandoned first Ford factory town, all the way down that big angry spoke of Detroit, to probably Lafayette Coney or Nemo's, for the taste. Here was the opposite end of his classical tether at Cranbrook Art Academy where somehow he studied and beneath chestnut and elm of this astonishingly beautiful planned educational community campus, he'd wandered with founder Eliel Saarinen's poetic text, *The Search for Form in Art and Architecture*, far from his tenant farmer origins in Mississippi. From this Cranbrook time, just before New York, there's a painting of great invention, *Circuit: Landscape: No. 5* (1972): beneath an eight foot square of unstretched canvas he laid a grid of string and with Dixon Paint Sticks he rubbed and scratched a phantom map-like grid. It is a light and airy painting that glows like a historied washed out bed sheet. It is like all of Binion's paintings an artifact that analogs the collision of Binion's obsessive survey of American culture and his obedience to his inheritance of the imperative of labor. His new works' confident, elemental shapes are like hides of skin that seem to be almost spiritual portraits. Binion's genius is to mock minimalism's reductivist discharge of history with an elegantly but laboriously charged sign that resonates with all of our awful histories.

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# Artist Statements

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## Handmade Geometry

Franklin Sirmans on McArthur Binion

*The emergence of abstract art is one sign that there are still men able to assert feeling in the world. Men who know how to respect and follow their inner feelings, no matter how irrational or absurd they first appear.*

—Robert Motherwell, 1951

Take the eclectic flair of the rock musician Cody Chesnutt, mix it with the old school jazz feel of Dizzy Gillespie, and add a touch of the R&B crooner R. Kelly, yes, R. Kelly, and you have an idea of the magic of McArthur Binion. Unlike them, he's no musician, but Binion's work sings sweet songs, just like those cats.

Historical and up-to-date is the feel of Binion's newest works. Connections to early minimalist painters like Robert Ryman, Ellsworth Kelly and Robert Mangold abound. Yet, equally prescient in consideration of Binion's work is his family history and the history of colored American aesthetics from the South to the North.

While decidedly minimal, Binion's work has never been generated, as was Ryman's, from radical reductionism. Always interested in the ability of color and form to tell a story, he has employed representational imagery to that end, but returns time and again to the expressive capabilities of abstraction. As if to explore that dichotomy more fully, Binion periodically embarks upon series of paintings that divide the surface in half, producing a juxtaposition of style and imagery. In a series of works from 2001, *Modern: Ancient: Brown*, he posits a grid of laser-copied images of stereotypical illustrations of blacks with a modernist grid in mauve tones. In another, a hot pink grid is mapped via beautifully crooked blue lines, offsetting the repeated minstrel images. Other works question the viewer's own perception of the painting. In one, the outline of Angola hovers over a black grid cut by thinly layered lines of white paint. Which is the representation? If you know something of geography and colonial history you may recognize the southern African country. If you recognize the omniscient power of the grid in modernist art history, the painting may provide another reading.


Ensnared in the tradition of abstract painting, Binion danced through a minimalist period in the late 70s (*1 + 1 = 3*), waltzed with soft-edged geometry in the early 80s (*Black: White: Relationship*) and did a representational turn in the late 80s (*Reflections on America*). Ever since, he has used combinations of all forms, but the essence of the artist's work remains in abstraction.

Here in his newest works, human body-length finger paintings and circular gouaches, the real action of the artist's process and attachment to abstraction is revealed. Utilizing his fingers directly on board, Binion's paintings release the normal conduit of the brush from its "heroic" duty. The technique brings the painting process from thought to action to within his fingertips. He does this not to

# Artist Statements

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## Handmade Geometry, *continued*



make a fuss or to pose a question regarding painting's history as a precursor and influence on conceptual and performance-based art. It is more personal and poetic than any such theoretical reading. More akin to labor; a labor that has its roots in the growth of America by black hands on crops like cotton and tobacco and colored hands on railroads. Like the fingerpaintings of young children, Binion's process is largely an unadulterated practice, the mark is pure. And each mark counts. Marks time, marks a beat.

Woven over the beat, there's a sweet melody in the form, color and line of these paintings. Listen closely.

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