

HYPERALLERGIC



Minnie Evans (American, 1892–1987), "Untitled" (1946–1968), pencil, ink, crayon, and oil on paperboard, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, purchased through funds provided by an anonymous donor to Collectors Evening 2011, 2011.4
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THE DIRTY SOUTH COMES TO DENVER

BY STACY J. PLATT
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DENVER — [The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse](#) is finishing its four-city exhibition run in its only non-Southern venue, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, showcasing over 100 works by 60 artists and spanning generations and genres from the past 100 years.

Organized thematically, the show begins with issues of and connections to land. Arguably the most affecting work in this section is [Allison Janae Hamilton](#)'s video "[Wacissa](#)" (2019), whose gurgling, aquatic sonic impact finds viewers before its intentionally disorienting camerawork does. Dragging a camera on top of and underwater in the Wacissa River — originally a slave canal in North Florida and now used as a run-off site for turpentine disposal — the vertiginous video references water as a point of entry for Black people crossing the Atlantic. [Aaron Douglas](#)'s delicate, ghostly 1934 gouache painting and [Minnie Evans](#)'s mid-century colored pencil works are in dialogue with visually and intellectually demanding contemporary works like [Nathaniel Donnett](#)'s reconstructed shotgun house in "[I looked over Jordan and what did I see; a band of angels coming after me](#)" (2017–19), and [Kaneem Smith](#)'s "The Past is Perpetual/Weighted Fleet" (2012), consisting of a reclaimed bale of cotton and the iron measuring and weighing tools used as markers of commodities made from Black peoples' labor.

Audio recordings of [Sister Gertrude Morgan](#)'s joyful sermons are integrated with her drawings, and [Rodney McMillian](#)'s "[Four Asterisks in Dockery](#)" (2012) dominates (visually and olfactorily) as a one-room chapel installation of sewn red vinyl that asks viewers to consider how the holy and profane influence and reinforce one another in the Southern Delta's musical and spiritual histories.

Other themes relate to corporeality and representation. With quiet understatement carrying an inversely proportional heavy emotional gut-punch, [Bethany Collins](#)'s "[In Mississippi](#)" (2019) makes the viewer work to see, in blind emboss on black paper, historic classified advertisements placed by recently emancipated enslaved people searching for their spouses and kin. [Rashaad Newsome](#)'s "[King of Arms](#)" (2015), a performance-based video work involving pageantry, voguing, and hip-hop is given a generous berth.

On the ground floor, a glass case shows objects that hold cultural and talismanic resonance like Ornette Coleman's white lacquered [Selmer alto saxophone](#); a sequined blue concert vest worn by James Brown, [a full-body floral suit](#) donned by CeeLo Green, and [Robert Pruitt](#)'s "[Glass Slippers](#)" made from Schlitz bottles. [Felandus Thames](#)'s absorbing "[Just Hangin](#)" (2018), a sculptural web of fatlace shoestrings and sneakers whose spidery construction was meant to evoke Black men caught in the US prison industrial complex.

The original exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) contained 140 works by 102 artists, and the accompanying [catalog](#) reveals what's missing in Denver. Some for reasons of safety for the art, as in [Paul Rucker](#)'s "[Storm in the Time of Shelter](#)" (2018), a mind-bending installation of Ku Klux Klan robes in "nontraditional" materials, others like rapper [Richard "Fiend" Jones](#)'s SLAB 1990 Cadillac Brougham d' Elegance because of space constraints, and still others because of some artists having recently shown here. Oliver's show [reveals](#) "a New South that's fashioned from the Old South, that carries with it the weight of all the rootedness, groundedness, and repositories that have been left as a storehouse to pull from." She asserts that each iteration has yielded new and surprising juxtapositions that were not present in her initial vision in Virginia. While the VMFA, Arkansas's Crystal Bridges, and the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, all make sense for the conceit of the show, it's a shame that Denver is the only place it will be experienced outside of the South.

[The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse](#) continues at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver (1485 Delgany St, Denver) through February 5. The exhibition was curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver.