

McArthur Binion

Visual:Ear

Paper:Work

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Press Release

For his debut solo exhibition with the gallery, McArthur Binion (b. 1946, Macon, Mississippi), presents a new body of work created in Chicago, where he primarily lives and works. Large format oil-stick paintings are assembled in the Van Eyck gallery under the title *Visual:Ear*, a reference to Binion's abiding interest in the visual translation of music into colour and form. *Paper:Work*, on show in the Rivoli gallery, presents a corpus of recent drawings. The exhibition provides a comprehensive overview of the artist's oeuvre across a wide range of scales and showcase the latest developments in his decades-long practice.

The paintings in *Visual:Ear* draw a decisive loop in Binion's work and hark back to an idea that first crystallised over fifty years ago, while he was studying for his MFA in painting at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Deeply immersed in music, especially jazz, Binion became fascinated by non-verbal means of communicating his experiences. His earliest work on the theme was *Drawn Symphony:in:Sane Minor* (1971), a hand-drawn image atop ten pages of musical manuscript paper. The term 'visual ear' also dates from this period, with Binion first using it in his 1973 graduate thesis. These works—which represent Binion's earliest attempts to convey the rhythms and sensations of music in words and images—remained dormant in his mind, but nonetheless present, until they were reactivated and visualised for his on-going series of *Visual:Ear* paintings. The works make use of an abstracted, collaged image of a musical score, *Still Standing Stuttering*, by Pulitzer prize-winning composer Henry Threadgill (b. 1944), which Binion personally commissioned as a response to his painting *Stuttering:Standing:Still* (2013). The images in *Visual:Ear* are made up of varied compositions of *Still Standing Stuttering*. The inclusion of the printed music represents an unprecedented opening up of the oeuvre to external influences. Prior, Binion had almost exclusively used autobiographical source material in his work, most famously pages from his address book or passport, photos of his childhood home, his hands, or historical images pertaining to his early life in rural Mississippi. Working with the music score images was the catalyst for a *quatre mains* of sorts, one that resulted in what Binion calls the 'under conscious' of the work. The *Visual: Ear* paintings are a "handmade, geometric way to insert the music score into the work."

The 'under conscious'—whether autobiographical or music related—is a hallmark of Binion's work and is usually composed of printed material. On top of this, the artist adds a heavy layer of paint-stick marks. The visual language is that of minimalism and abstraction: lines, serial patterns and geometric shapes. To borrow a musical term, the works have a binary form, with the two elements ultimately merging into an indivisible whole. This interweaving, which lies at the core of Binion's practice, creates multiple fields of tension: between the personal and impersonal, between mechanical reproduction and slow, labour-intensive mark-making, and between the revelation and concealment of the 'under conscious'. The works not only testify to Binion's sustained interest in music but also his belief in learning to look by listening, and likewise, to listen by looking. As he himself states, the works in the *Visual:Ear* series represent "the clarification of [his] character as a painter."

Xavier Hufkens

44 rue Van Eyck & 107 rue St-Georges, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
www.xavierhufkens.com +32(0)2 639 67 30

An extensive selection of McArthur Binion's recent drawings are presented in *Paper:Work*. The artist creates these studies, as he does his paintings, using a two-handed technique. Replacing the 'under conscious' is an initial ground painting to which Binion applies a secondary layer of patterns, and marks, thereby mirroring the dual structure of the large-format paintings. The titles of the drawings, such as *DNA:Search* and *Self-Portrait*, allude to their deeply personal significance. Binion has long investigated the work of the black avant-garde through his own identity and broader collective, cultural self-hood. His recent work, titled *Modern Ancient Brown*, is the perfect summation of Binion's introspective yet outward-looking quest. It is also the name of the foundation that he established in Detroit, Michigan in 2019. The organisation actively supports the intersection between the visual and literary arts both nationally and in the Detroit community. In *Paper:Work*, the artist reveals his most personal studies, made during moments of intense concentration when, as he himself says, "I'm not discovering the under-conscious, I'm becoming it."

With thanks to Camille Bacon for her contributions to the text.

McArthur Binion lives and works in Chicago. His work were featured prominently in the 57th Venice Biennale, *VIVA ARTE VIVA*. Solo exhibitions of his work have been organised at Museo Novecento, Florence, Italy (2020); the Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI (2018); the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, TX (2012). Binion's work is in numerous public and private collections and his most recent venture is the Modern Ancient Brown Foundation that provides funding and workspaces to help young visual artists and writers of colour find their voices.

For further inquiries please contact the gallery at info@xavierhufkens.com or at +32(0)2 639 67 30. For press enquiries contact anazoe@xavierhufkens.com

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#xavierhufkens

Twitter: @XavierHufkens
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Facebook: Xavier Hufkens