

# FORT GANSEVOORT

ART THUG MAGAZINE (ATM) **THE VANGUARD**

## Studio Visit: Keith Duncan

Terrence Sanders-Smith – June 18, 2024

***“Keith Duncan is an artist and art educator who’s finally receiving his due. Sold-Out solo exhibitions in New York City at Fort Gansevoort Gallery. 2025 exhibition at the Ogden Museum in New Orleans. A commission by the famed Helis Foundation and the Arts Council of New Orleans to create a 90-foot Public Mural on the exterior of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art. Maestro Keith Duncan has arrived.”***

I’ve known Keith Duncan for a little over 3 decades. We met in New York City in the 90’s through noted artist Gregory Coates. I was fortunate to get to know Keith as a fellow human being before I was introduced to his artwork. Keith is a gentleman who cares more about people than he does about wealth, status, and ego.

Keith is unique in his signature, but it’s apparent his influences are Faith Ringgold, Archibald Motley, and Robert Colescott. The connective tissue they all have in common is articulating the African American community and black experience being a person of color in America. He’s an artist/activist who is invested in his community. His work celebrates and critiques American and African American culture and how it intersects with mainstream culture and societal norms.

Keith was the reason I created Artvoices Magazine in 2008. He had a solo exhibition at GSL Artprojects in New Orleans and no one reviewed the show. I couldn’t believe that his monumental exhibition received no coverage nationally or locally. I was angry and felt a sense of disrespect being an artist of color and someone who created socio-political visual artwork.

Keith Duncan is arguably one of the great visual artists of Generation X. There are two perspectives to Keith Duncan, images that mirrors and celebrates African Americans individuals in our community and the art/activist addressing socio-political issues with the intent to encourage public engagement bringing about social change.

Below is my conversation with Keith Duncan.

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**TERRENCE SANDERS-SMITH** - Man, it's been a long road for you to arrive at this period in your career and life. First, let's talk about the year you relocated to Nola (New Orleans) and what made you leave New York and return to New Orleans?

**KEITH DUNCAN** - It was 2008 when I arrived back in NOLA, first I was in Abbeville, Louisiana which is 15 minutes from Lafayette where my parents relocated after Hurricane Katrina. I spent 3 and a half months in rural Louisiana after being in New York City for fifteen years. Even though I loved being in the company of my parents, I knew that I had to get back to the city life where I felt productive. My leaving New York was a combination of financial and social change in the fact that some of my closest friends were leaving the big city and the cost of living was getting too high, especially after 9/11. I was in New York City, living in Harlem, when I witnessed the "Twin Towers" destruction. I saw it all on TV, on the world stage like everyone else did. Therefore, just like when Hurricane Katrina made landfall on my hometown Empire, Louisiana, in Plaquemines Parish, I watched it on TV, again, coupled with the devastation in the City of New Orleans, it was like a bad dream all over again. Both of my beloved cities devastated. So, in 2007 I had enough of New York City and thought I could help with the "Rebuilding" of NOLA in any way that I can. I thought being an Art Teacher of 12 years in NYC, I could contribute to my city by teaching kids in the inner city.

**TSS** - When you arrived back in New Orleans, what obstacles did you face being an artist of color who wasn't provincial in his visual dialogue?

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**KD** - Well, first I was just trying to find a job, any teaching art program I could get my hands on. I had worked for the Boys & Girls Club in the Bronx, NY, and found out that they had a branch down here in New Orleans. I worked for various programs: KidSmart, the CAC summer camp and the Ogden Museum residency program. I worked on paintings dealing with the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. I think the fact that I was unaware of the politics of the art scene in NOLA I wasn't affected by the lack of showing my art.

**TSS** - In your opinion, has the New Orleans contemporary art scene evolved since you first relocated back here in 2008? What or who do you credit with that transformation and or cultural evolution?

**KD** - Absolutely it's changed a lot! With Prospect New Orleans and the Joan Mitchell Foundation starting an Artist Residency, in which I was a recipient in their Pilot program in 2013, and the extension of the Art galleries beyond the commercial galleries of Julia Street, the New Orleans art scene is exciting and relevant, it's "on the map." The New Orleans contemporary art scene is on the same level as other leading contemporary art cities in the South. Furthermore, I would be a fool not to mention you, my brother Terrence, for being that thread that connected so many artists to each other. I don't have a number of how many artists, Black, White, Latino, Asian or whatever, it was you who did the incredible task of connecting artists, who had no experience in exhibiting their art, that were excluded and not represented by the galleries on Julia St. These artists were Artists in the French Quarter, Street Artists, Festival Artists, Muralists and so forth, it was you that connected us all! Hell, I think you introduced me to my wife Amy Bryan! Terrence, my brother, that is your "Legacy", what you contributed to the Art scene in this city is unmatched, so thank you for that Bro!

**TSS** - Thank you Keith for the kind words but I think Dan Cameron the founder of Prospect New Orleans was instrumental as well. What are your thoughts on Prospect New Orleans? Prospect 6 is being curated this year by Miranda Lash and Ebony G. Patterson. Why do you think you haven't been chosen to date to exhibit during Prospect?

**KD** - I forget when the first Prospect was, but I know that Dan Cameron had a great vision to bring a Biennial-like art event to this city. He is really the reason, I feel, that New Orleans is looked at as a city that showcases Contemporary Art and not just regional/local art. My thoughts on Prospect are mixed, some years it's exciting and some years it's off target. The geographical layout of NOLA is probably difficult to have such a large art event like this. I know Miranda Lash because she visited my studio down in the upper 9th ward off St. Claude Ave. I think she's going to do good because when she was a temporary curator at NOMA, she was very creative, I thought too creative, for that institution. It was Dan Cameron who saw my art show in NYC at the CUE Arts Foundation in 2010, in which noted artist Willie Birch curated the exhibition.

**TSS** - Do you have gallery representation in New Orleans? If not, why not? Why do you believe an artist of your stature is not represented in your hometown?

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**KD** - No, I don't have any gallery representation in NOLA. I have shown at Octavia gallery, Stella Jones Gallery and Arthur Rogers gallery and had Pamela Anderson of Octavia gallery visit my studio in the 9th ward and purchase my art and had Arthur Rogers visit my studio, but nothing materialized. Maybe my works were too socio/political, and the gallerists felt that they couldn't sell them. I don't know.

**TSS** - How did Adam Shopkorn from Fort Gansevoort Gallery in NYC discover you and your work? How has gallery representation in NYC assisted you and your ambitions?

**KD** - Adam Shopkorn showed up on the scene or "in my life" in the fall of 2018. He heard of me through Dan Cameron, who told him about me and my art. In my first meeting with Adam, it was like magic. He flew down to visit me in my studio and stated that he wanted to give me a solo exhibit in NYC in the new year, in mid-January, and the rest is history! Fort Gansevoort Gallery has been a blessing for me, but I must admit we didn't sell anything at first. After the opening we sold two small works. Then in 2020 during the Pandemic my larger paintings started to move and when I had the "Bayou Classic" series, works that showcased HBCU's marching bands - the Grambling St. University and Southern University, a combination of 22 artworks, the entire online show sold out! Adams' vision for my art is to have my works in private collections and museum collections all over the world. And it is what I want for my art and career as well, the gallery has assisted me in finding an art market that is willing to buy and collect my works. In addition, they have supported me by paying my studio rent so that I can be productive in my practice.

**TSS** - What's your critique on the gallerists and collector base in New Orleans? Do you think art dealers should educate their collectors on what artist is important and or relevant? Or do you believe art in New Orleans is viewed as decorative, gimmicky and or derivative and the artist articulating our times are aligned with museum collections and not private collections?

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**KD** - I used to be oblivious to the functions and workings of the collectors and dealers of the art market in NOLA, but after having gallery representation I have come to understand, somewhat, the importance of educating yourself on who is relevant, and what institutions are interested in expanding their collections and is your art a part of that dialogue. I feel that you must be a socialite and meet the "movers and shakers" in the art scene, no matter what city you are in.

As I had mentioned before, the art scene in New Orleans has changed a lot and I would like to see a more emphasis and focus on Artists that are underrepresented and undiscovered.

**TSS** – The Ogden Museum of Southern Art is really championing New Orleans artists who are living and working in Nola. The name I hear quite often is Bradley Sumrall. I first met Bradley when former Ogden Museum director David Houston and I curated EMERGE: St. Claude Arts District & Beyond 41 Artists from the Saratoga Collection at the Ogden Museum. How has Bradley and or the Ogden Museum assisted you in sustaining your practice?

**KD** -Well, Bradley and the entire staff of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art are like family to me. The Ogden Museum was the first museum to put my painting in their private collection. It was the first institution that employed me with work by having me teach art in their field trip, residency, and summer camp programs. Also, the executive director, Mr. William Andrews has embraced my art by supporting me with a commissioned to execute a 90-foot mural on exterior back wall of the museum. He, along with the Helis Foundation and a panel of 20 members from Arts Council of New Orleans have selected me (out of 10 Artists) to paint a mural on the museum. Furthermore, Bradley has recently informed me that the Ogden Museum will give me

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a solo exhibition in 2025 with a catalog publication that will showcase 36 artworks of my HBCU marching bands on the entire space of the 5th floor of the museum. I consider Bradley an amazing and insightful curator and the New Orleans art scene is better off because of his contributions.

**TSS** - Are you going to continue to live and work in Nola? Can you sustain your family and practice on NYC art sales alone? Why not move closer to the art market that supports you? Is there another determining factor or reason you feel as a sense of community here in New Orleans other than the fact that you were born here?

**KD** - I have been asked that before, will I ever go back to New York City to live, and my answer is NO! Don't get me wrong I still have love for NYC, because I keep in touch with friends there and me and my wife visit there every summer, it's like my second home but I will never live there again. As for my NY gallery, we will ride this wave for as long as we can! Adam and the team at Fort Gansevoort have plans for my art career that I feel confident in their support and decisions going forward. Therefore, currently, NOLA is my home and I feel that it's still one of the best cities (with all its problems) in the country, hell it's one of the best cities in the world! The Food, the Music, the Culture, and now, the Art is unique just the way it is!

**TSS** - If you were to die tomorrow, what is your legacy? How do you want your life work to be viewed and or interpreted for the now and next generations?

**KD** - I was born in Charity Hospital in NOLA, like most New Orleanians my age. I was raised in Empire, Louisiana, in Plaquemines Parish and I was fortunate that my art talents took me to the Empire State of New York City.

I have to say that I don't see myself as an "Undiscovered Genius" but more like an 'Unsung Hero.' I want to be remembered as the 'Unsung Hero of the Louisiana Bayou.' I feel that I have been prolific in my art career, and I have touched many lives, especially little kids in the inner cities of NYC and NOLA. I feel, that is heroic, and I always wanted my art to inspire and impact the next generations of young Artists. That, my friend, is my legacy.

**TSS** – Thank you, Keith. It is always a pleasure to visit with you. I consider myself blessed to know you and your work.

**KD** - Thank you, Terrence and congrats on your magazine's success, I know it will do great, thanks for everything Bro!

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CONTACT: [keithduncan2015@gmail.com](mailto:keithduncan2015@gmail.com)

5 Ninth Avenue, New York, NY 10014 | [galler@fortgansevoort.com](mailto:galler@fortgansevoort.com) | (917) 639 – 3113