

FORT GANSEVOORT



Ogden Museum opens show of Keith Duncan's paintings of HBCU marching bands on Feb. 15

By Will Coviello



Keith Duncan in front of his mural on the the Ogden Museum of Southern Art
Photo by Chris Granger / The Times-Picayune

Keith Duncan and his brother got called out of class from time to time while they were in Buras High School in Plaquemines Parish. But they weren't in trouble. They were artists on call.

"They would call us to the principal's office because they needed us to draw something, like the high school football banner," Duncan says. "I say banner because, in a way, my paintings still resemble banners. It started way back when we were in high school, painting on unstretched canvas flat against the wall."

In his practice, Duncan has often used unstretched canvases. His latest solo show features many fabric and textile canvases. It's also a return to school colors and pride. His show "Battle of the Bands," celebrating the marching bands of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), opens at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art Saturday, Feb. 15.

The show is a fitting expo inside the museum after Duncan created a 90-foot mural of a marching band drum major on the outside of the building early last year. The drum major has one knee kicked high and leans back in a dramatic dance step.

"They set the tone and the mood of the crowd," Duncan says. "Everything starts with the drum major."

While it was inspired by the dynamic marching bands of HCBUs, Duncan originally had wanted more of a New Orleans subject. He gave the figure several gold fleur-de-lis insignia on his uniform and put "NOLA" across his arm. Duncan's both proud of his hometown, and he often champions or addresses local culture and sociopolitical concerns in his work.

The show "Battle of the Bands" features 15 HBCU bands, including the Southern University Human Jukebox, Bethune-Cookman's Marching Wildcats, Grambling State University's Tiger Marching Band, Jackson State University's Sonic Boom of the South, Texas Southern University's Ocean of Soul as well as the bands of Howard University and Morehouse College.

The show has 45 paintings, with three for each school in the appropriate school colors. The works are on unstretched canvases, textiles or paper. For each school, there are two works capturing drum majors in action. Florida A&M's drum major does a jumping split in his orange and green uniform. Norfolk State's green and gold drum major struts with his mace, the ceremonial staff carried by the band leaders.

For each band, there's a wide horizontal work with marching musicians and majorettes caught in dance steps spread around the canvas. He also includes each school crest. The paintings of bands also feature patterned backgrounds, which reflects that Duncan sometimes paints on materials that already have patterns. The mural was given a blue and white background that looks like Moroccan patterned tiles. Duncan compares some of that effect to the work of quilters.

Duncan traces his interest in HBCU bands back to his days at LSU, when he went to watch the Southern University band perform. He was more interested in the bands showing off their music and moves. He also notes the importance of the schools, and that many were formed during or right after the Civil War. The bands also have garnered wider spotlights, like Southern University's being part of the Super Bowl's ceremonies.

After graduating from LSU with a BFA, Duncan studied painting in New England and New York, first at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. He earned an MFA at Hunter College in New York. In New York in the 1990s, his art circles included other budding artists like Kehinde Wiley, Mickalene Thomas, Wangechi Mutu and Derrick Adams, who was the curator at Rush Arts, a gallery opened by Danny Simmons, the brother of rap mogul Russell Simmons, who funded the gallery.

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He also met fellow New Orleans native artist Willie Birch, who became a sort of mentor. Duncan has had several solo shows in New York and is currently represented by Fort Gansevoort in New York.

Duncan returned to New Orleans in 2008. A series of his unstretched canvasses with paintings about the BP oil disaster and environmental scenes were featured in the art triennial Prospect.2.

For a show at the Joan Mitchell Center in New Orleans, Duncan did a series titled “The Times-Picayune,” which featured cultural elements such as local food, music and landmarks, and also addressed issues of poverty and crime. A later series called “Black Plight” was a sort of timeline from the era of slavery through the presidency of Barack Obama, which included the civil rights movement, Black Power in the 1970s and an era of Black affluence and celebrity picturing Michael Jordan and Oprah Winfrey. More recently, he turned to HBCUs and what was originally a group of works about Southern University and Gambling.

In addition to his practice, Duncan has always taught art to young people, including current programs through NORD.

“If you can teach, you should always give back,” he says.

Duncan and curator Bradley Sumrall will lead a walkthrough of the HBCU band show at 2 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 15. There’s a teacher’s workshop on the expo at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 18.

Duncan is currently working on his next large-scale mural. On a wall at the nearby WDSU TV station, it’s titled “Orleans to Plaquemines Parish” and will include various elements of both, from musicians to cypress trees and the local fishing industry.