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Battle of the Bands brings HBCU pride and pageantry to The Biggs Museum

Kerri Lacey – September 21, 2025



Keith Duncan, *Alabama State University Drum Major*, 2024, Acrylic, marker and Fabric work on unstretched canvas. Courtesy Of The Artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

This fall, the Biggs Museum of American Art pulses with rhythm, energy and cultural pride as it presents "Keith Duncan: Battle of the Bands, The HBCU Marching Bands Series," on view through Jan. 25, 2026. This powerful

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exhibition of 45 dynamic mixed-media works by New Orleans-based artist Keith Duncan celebrates the enduring tradition of Historically Black College and University marching bands – institutions known not only for their musical excellence, but also for their role in shaping community and identity. The exhibition arrived in Dover through the support of Art Bridges, a national arts foundation that partners with museums to provide strategic and financial support to get American art out of storage and into communities nationwide. Their loan of "Battle of the Bands," organized by the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, makes it possible for regional audiences to engage with a major contemporary body of work that might otherwise remain out of reach.

"Having a nationally ranked HBCU right here in our hometown, we felt there was no better place to celebrate the rich cultural heritage and significance of HBCU marching bands than at The Biggs," said Hassan Najjar, executive director of Biggs Museum of American Art.

Each of Duncan's large-scale fabric paintings and smaller works on paper captures the movement, pageantry and storytelling power of 15 Southern HBCU marching bands and their iconic drum majors. His layered compositions – incorporating textiles, collage and vibrant color – are rooted in African and Southern traditions while drawing inspiration from artists such as Faith Ringgold and Mickalene Thomas.

At once celebratory and reflective, the works highlight both personal narrative and shared cultural history. Originally curated by Bradley Sumrall, curator of the Collection at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, this traveling exhibition brings a nationally significant artist's voice to Dover at a time when stories of Black excellence and community celebration are more important than ever.

This presentation of "Battle of the Bands" at The Biggs is made possible through generous support from Art Bridges, as well as the Choptank Foundation, the Delaware Division of the Arts and Delaware State University. The DSU connection is especially meaningful, as the university's own contributions to HBCU band culture are explored in the Biggs' complementary exhibition, "Echoes of the Storm."

On view through January 11, 2026, "Echoes of the Storm" focuses exclusively on the history and impact of the DSU marching band, the Approaching Storm. This show features artwork created by DSU students, archival artifacts and materials highlighting the university's legacy as one of the nation's top-ranked HBCUs. It opened earlier this month with a lively community happy hour reception that welcomed both students and local residents.

The Biggs–DSU collaboration is also rooted in student engagement and leadership. This fall, five DSU interns joined the Biggs' team, working across departments to gain real-world museum experience. In addition, seven DSU students contributed directly to the development and installation of "Echoes of the Storm," curating content, researching band history, and preparing a mural and other interpretive materials for display.

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Band Days at the Biggs



Keith Duncan, *Howard University Drum Major*, 2023, Acrylic, marker and patterned paper on paperwork. Courtesy Of The Artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

As part of the celebration, the museum is hosting two special Biggs Band Days for middle school band students, Oct. 14 and Oct. 21, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. These free, immersive field trip experiences are designed to connect young musicians with the art, culture, and energy of HBCU marching bands.

Highlights include:

- A guided tour of "Battle of the Bands" and "Echoes of the Storm"
- Exploration of DSU's special installation honoring HBCU music and culture
- Conversations with professionals about musicianship, leadership and future opportunities
- A spirited group pep song performance
- Hands-on art workshops inspired by marching band traditions
- Reflection on the role of marching bands in cultural identity and community pride

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Transportation and lunch are provided for registered student groups. Teachers must register their ensembles directly with Kate Huffman, director of Learning and Engagement, at kate.huffman@thebiggsmuseum.org. Spaces are limited and will be filled on a first-come, first-served basis. Together, "Battle of the Bands," "Echoes of the Storm," and "Band Days" offer a powerful look at the past, present and future of HBCU marching band culture — celebrated through world-class art, community partnerships and inspiring opportunities for the next generation.

About Biggs Museum of American Art



Keith Duncan, *Grambling State University Marching Band*, 2022, Acrylic, marker and fabric on upstretched canvas. Courtesy Of The Artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

Biggs Museum of American Art, located in the heart of downtown Dover, Delaware, transforms the community through the art of our region. Featuring American fine and decorative arts from the 18th century to today, the museum offers rotating exhibitions, educational programs, and community events that connect audiences to creativity and culture. As a welcoming hub for discovery and collaboration, The Biggs champions the arts as essential to civic well-being. The museum is located at 406 Federal St., Dover. Hours are Thursday to Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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