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Markham

George Dunbar: Elements of Chance

A PIONEERING LOUISIANA MODERNIST SHARES SEVEN DECADES OF STUDIO EXPLORATIONS

Opening this fall, *George Dunbar: Elements of Chance* is the first comprehensive museum retrospective for the artist George Dunbar, who played a pivotal role in introducing abstract art to the South. The exhibition tells the story of one of Louisiana's most beloved and important artists, and also chronicles the region's first encounter with abstract art. It explores the evolution of Dunbar's art from his early action paintings from the 1940s and 1950s to his most recent work in clay relief. A Louisiana native, Dunbar studied in Philadelphia, Paris and New York before returning to Louisiana in the 1950s to create paintings, sculptures, assemblages, and prints that marry the stark geometry of modern art with the lush, elemental materials that call forth the region's distinctive local landscape.

Dunbar's richly textured works explore abstract art's connection to landscape and place, and his unique vision for abstraction highlights Louisiana's pivotal—if widely underestimated—role in the broader story of twentieth century American art. Through his work as an artist, as well as his role as a founder of Orleans Gallery, New Orleans' first artist-owned and operated collective art gallery, Dunbar helped create a culture and context for contemporary art in the region. He introduced New Orleans to radical new ideas about art making, embracing elements of chance in ways that continue to shape contemporary art in the region today.

Without George's work—and the community of artists, patrons, collectors and critics who rose up to support and champion his art—Louisiana art would not be where it is today. The opportunity to showcase George Dunbar's rich artistic contributions to the region is particularly meaningful this year, since his exhibition coincides with the fiftieth anniversary of NOMA's Odyssey Ball. Celebrating George's work, this exhibition also honors the many patrons and supporters who have created such a sense of shared community around art in this city over the course of the last fifty years. NOMA gave George his first solo show in the 1950s, and it feels only fitting that this museum should be the place where he receives full credit for his contributions to the art and life of this city.

As a young artist, George Dunbar would often spend hours on a painting only to look down and find a more perfect composition in the spilled paint and discarded scraps of paper on his studio floor. He appreciated the paintings his mentor Franz Kline scrawled across telephone book pages, but saw in the inverted "V" of an envelope flap an already ideal geometry. He liked John Chamberlain's carefully composed sculptures of welded automobile parts, but often preferred the arrangements he saw in piles of crushed cars peeking out of low bed trucks on Louisiana's highways. Looking back over a seventy-year career, Dunbar recently characterized his art as one of "accidental triumphs." As he says, "sometimes something just drives by on the highway and it's already perfect."¹

FACING PAGE George Dunbar, *Coin du Lestin*, c. 1999, Gold leaf over mauve clay, Collection of the Artist

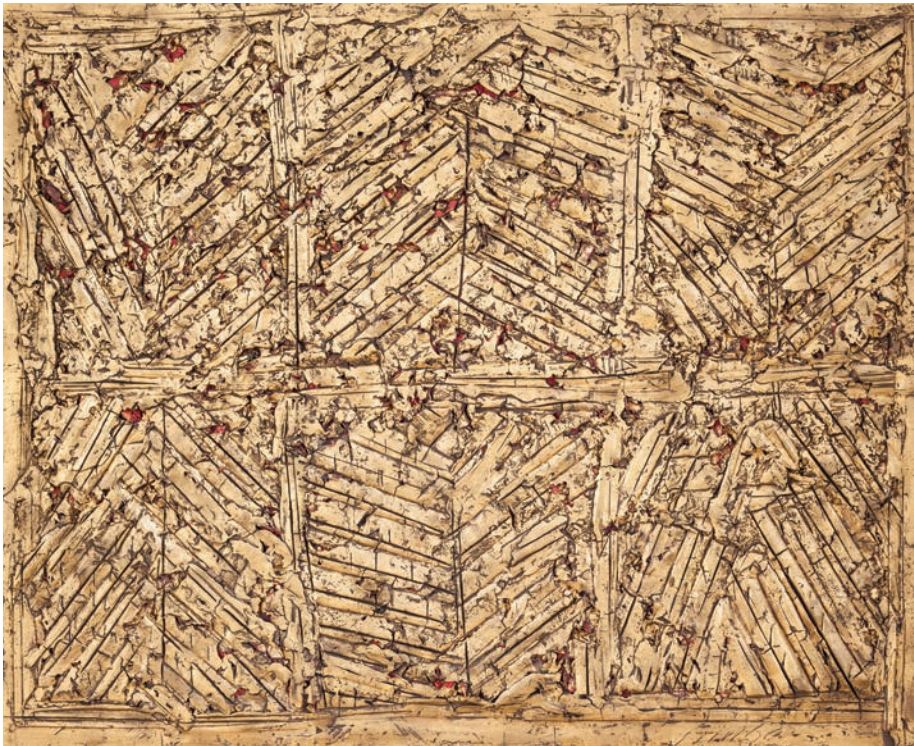


ABOVE George Dunbar, *Bridge XI*, 2011, Palladium over white clay, Collection of Hugh Uhault

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From its inception, George Dunbar’s art has explored the relationship between chance and intention; order and entropy; freedom and restraint. In his work, unbridled abstractions like *Red M* (seen on cover) coexist with the absolutely symmetrical medallions of his *Coin du Lestin* series. Even within individual works, intention often cedes to accident and design devolves into disarray. In early paintings like *Red M*, seemingly slapdash brushstrokes coalesce into inverted triangles to form the letter “M,” and, in his *Coin du Lestin* series, the perfect geometry of his exactly etched medallions disobey the thick layers of elemental organic clay on which they sit. On a recent visit to Dunbar’s art studio, lyrical abstractions made by dragging a paint-saturated mop across the studio floor sat side-by-side carefully controlled compass-drawn abstractions and rough layers of modeling clay. “The thing about giving up control,” Dunbar says, “is that there are just so many different ways of doing it.”²

George Dunbar’s life, like his art, has been a study of contrasts. He grew up in a New Orleans of lush bayous and ornate wrought iron railings, and spent his most formative years as an artist amidst the clean, whitewashed walls of the 1950s New York gallery scene. A successful land developer, he spent his days moving rough earth from the front seat of a bulldozer, and his nights composing ethereal geometric abstractions in gold and silver leaf like his *Coin du Lestin* series. After embracing the



radical new abstract painting of the New York School while living in Manhattan in the early 1950s, he returned to New Orleans to spend the rest of his life in a city that, for much of the 20th century, was largely indifferent to abstract art. Throughout his career, Dunbar has named most of his artworks after Louisiana towns and bayous—*Bonfouca*, *Rouville*, *Coin du Lestin*—yet emphasizes in conversation that his work should not be interpreted as too closely connected to Southern landscape or culture. Today—over seventy years after he completed his first painting—George Dunbar continues to offer a unique vision for American abstraction, creating an art that both embraces and transcends place.

George Dunbar: Elements of Chance will be on view in NOMA's Frederick R. Weisman Galleries, The Helis Foundation Gallery, and the Great Hall from November 4, 2016 – February 19, 2017. This article is excerpted from the foreword and essay that appears in a catalogue of the same name, which will be available for purchase in the Museum Shop. Copies signed by the artist will be available in limited quantity.

Susan M. Taylor, The Montine McDaniel Freeman Director

Katie Pfohl, Curator for Modern and Contemporary Art



ABOVE LEFT George Dunbar, *Marshgrass XXVI*, 2007, Red gold over brown clay and red rags, Collection of Olivia and Archie Manning

ABOVE RIGHT George Dunbar, *Diety IX*, 2001, Gold leaf and clay over dental stone, Collection of Jim Perrier and Jim Ashby