**GEORGE DUNBAR: ELEMENTS OF CHANCE**

**November 4, 2016 – February 19, 2017**

*George Dunbar: Elements of Chance* is the first comprehensive museum retrospective for the artist George Dunbar (American, b. 1927), 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 abstraction. It explores the evolution of Dunbar’s art from his early action paintings of 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 lush, elemental materials that evoke the Gulf Coast’s distinctive 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 underestimated—role in the broader story of 20th century American art.

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 1957 coexist with the absolutely symmetrical medallions of his *Coin du Lestin s*eries. Even within individual works, intention often cedes to accident and design devolves into disarray. The works in this gallery showcase Dunbar’s constant exploration of new techniques and materials, from his envelope assemblages to his rag paintings and most recent body of prints. These works highlight the inventive and experimental methods Dunbar has employed to coax forward the chance effects and accidental triumphs he celebrates in his art. Over the course of his seventy-year career, Dunbar has introduced New Orleans to radical new ideas about art making, embracing elements of chance in ways that continue to shape contemporary art in the city today. “I am always pushing towards that next step,” Dunbar says. “I think it’s very dangerous to have a favorite painting…you need to always feel like you can do better. If I had a favorite painting, then I wouldn’t still be working as hard as I do!”

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**George Dunbar, *Red M*, 1959, Acrylic and paper collage, Collection of the Artist**

Best known for his work in metal leaf and clay, Dunbar began his career as a painter. While taking classes at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia and visiting New York on the weekends, Dunbar encountered the bold, abstract paintings of artists like Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. The “action paintings” of the New York School inspired Dunbar to embrace a more gestural, intuitive approach to art making. To create Red M, Dunbar collaged a group of brightly painted fragments of crinkled paper into a composition of inverted red triangles that recall the letter “M.” Fascinated by the effects of chance, Dunbar often spent hours on a painting only to find a more perfect composition in the spilled paint and discarded scraps of paper on his studio floor, and often collaged them into his early paintings.

**George Dunbar, *Untitled*, c. 1950-60, Metal leaf on panel, Gift of Arthur Aitkens, 97.26**

By the mid-1950s, Dunbar began translating the painterly conceits of the New York School into dynamic assemblages composed of metal leaf and clay. For Dunbar, working with these more organic elements allowed his art to take on its own independent spirit of animation. He fully embraced the changeable, fugitive qualities of metal leaf and clay, letting, as he said in a 1968 interview, “inspiration and accident take over the reins.” In this work, the random twists, turns and textures of organic metal and clay disobey the geometry of the concentric circles that radiate from the work’s center, creating a contrast between order and entropy that appears throughout Dunbar’s career.

**George Dunbar, *Untitled*, 1967, Silver leaf over clay, Collection of Mark S. Richards, Covington, LA**

**George Dunbar, *Untitled*, 1970, Silver and gold leaf over clay, Collection of the Artist**

Dunbar’s fascination with earthy materials like metal leaf and clay came in large part from his work as a land developer. The titles for his most famous series of works, Coin du Lestin, come from the name of one of his land development projects, the Coin du Lestin subdivision in Slidell. Both his early Coin du Lestin artworks and his plans for his development sites reflect a similar reverence for the natural properties of earth and element.

**George Dunbar, *Untitled*, c. 1970-5, Gold and silver leaf on panel, Collection of Anne and Bill Grace**

When Dunbar returned to New Orleans after art school, he realized that he would have to help create a culture and context for contemporary art in New Orleans in order to sustain his own practice. Together with a group of young artists, Dunbar formed the Orleans Gallery, the first artist-owned and operated collective art gallery in New Orleans. Many of these artists shared Dunbar’s fascination with changeable, organic materials like tempera, clay and metallic leaf. To many at the time, these elemental materials seemed to bear an intrinsic relationship to Louisiana’s distinctive landscape, providing a vision of abstract art that felt in tune with local culture. As one reviewer wrote in 1968 of a group exhibition at Orleans Gallery that included Dunbar’s work, these artists shared a “Louisiana aesthetic” that helped a community with little exposure to abstract art understand, absorb and identify with the vanguard art movements of the time.

**George Dunbar, *Untitled*, 1971, Gold and silver leaf on shaped board, Private Collection**

In the 1970s, Dunbar began making a group of monumental, shaped artworks in which the overall shape of each piece mimics its internal geometry. In this example, incised paths of gold and silver leaf meet at the bottom of the composition and diverge at the top, recalling the natural curvature of the roads and canals Dunbar created as a land developer, a profession he pursued in tandem with his art making for his entire career. Spending his days with a dragline and a bulldozer on the bayou, and his nights poring over new compositions in the studio, the practices subtly merged. As with his artwork, Dunbar approached his development sites with no preconceived map or plan, letting the subtleties of earth, elevation, and vista dictate the placement of roads and canals.

**George Dunbar, *Bridge II*, 2006, Mauve clay, palladium, and moon gold leaf, Collection of Metairie Park Country Day School Lent to this Exhibition in Honor of the Bright Family**

Dunbar’s work often makes subtle reference to Louisiana’s natural landscape in order to foster acceptance and understanding of the more revolutionary aims of his art. The design of Bridge II, for instance, evokes the form of an overwater bridge. Dunbar began exploring this theme in the 1950s, when he entered a NOMA contest that invited local artists create artwork to celebrate the just-completed first span of the Mississippi River Bridge. Throughout his career, he has returned to the idea of the bridge as both form and metaphor, creating a large group of artworks like this one whose titles and forms reference bridges, but which also function as entirely abstract compositions. In so doing, Dunbar brought abstraction into local landscape terms—and sometimes even hinted at representational imagery—without losing abstraction’s experimental energy.

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

Dunbar creates the medallion-like etched forms of his Coin du Lestin series by building up thin layers of colored clay across the whole surface of the composition, then methodically incising the clay with compass-drawn geometric abstractions, and finally coating that ground with metallic leaf. As the many Coin du Lestin works on view downstairs in NOMA’s Great Hall demonstrate, Dunbar experimented with a variety of colors, forms, and finishes in this body of work, ultimately completing over two hundred different versions of this composition during his career. The stark geometry of the compass drawn forms play against the subtle imperfections and irregularities of the clay and gilding, an effect Dunbar further cultivates by sandblasting, weathering, and sometimes even shooting these works with buckshot.

**George Dunbar, *Le Rouge Grande*, 2015, Red clay with palladium leaf, Collection of Donna Perret Rosen and Benjamin M. Rosen**

In the past twenty years, Dunbar has created a group of minimalist works in which a single etched or clay strip divides the composition. Some of these works, like *Iphis* (on the left), distill the complex etching of Dunbar’s Coin du Lestin series into an arrangement of stark sequential lines. In other works from this series, like *Le Rouge Grande*, Dunbar models this strip in relief, building up thick layers of rough clay upon a much more monochromatic, minimal ground. In *Le Rouge Grande*, Dunbar demonstrates how the raw energy of his gestural shapes and organic materials always escape the strict order of even his starkest, most minimal designs.

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

In his Marshgrass series, Dunbar buries strips of coiled canvas beneath thick layers of clay, and then slowly excavates these canvas elements by filing patterns into these dense materials. This precise carving produces an imprecise pattern on the work’s uneven ground. As the coiled canvas strips buried beneath the work’s surface push back against this pattern of inverted V’s, the incomplete chevron patterns begin to recall the gestural brushstrokes of his early action painting *Red M*. This brings his art full circle from his action painting, to his compass-drawn Coin du Lestin series, to the palpable tension between order and chaos that defines his most recent work, which continues to embrace the entropy of natural elements, as well as the elements of chance.

**George Dunbar, *1957*, 1957, Oil on board, Collection of Kathryn and Jeff Scurlock**

*1957*, one of Dunbar’s earliest extant paintings, foreshadows his interest in rough, organic surfaces and gilded materials. Here, Dunbar builds up thick layers of white paint that almost obscure the gold leaf and subtle gradations of color beneath. So doing, he creates with paint the kind of earthy surface texture he would later fashion from clay and metallic leaf. While hints of his later preoccupation with geometric form exist in the inverted Vs of gold leaf on the canvas’s lower left, this work possesses a brushy softness that shows Dunbar experimenting with how to capture in paint the organic qualities he later achieved with clay and precious metals.

**George Dunbar, *Ship Designs created for the Lykes Brothers Steamship Company*, c. 1950-60, Gold and silver leaf on board, Collection of Pia and Malcolm Ehrhardt**

Early in his career, Dunbar was offered a commission from the Lykes Brothers Steamship Company to create artworks for their ship cabins and meeting rooms. These are the only known surviving examples of the nautically inspired works in gold and silver leaf he produced for the ship. Although more figurative than his later works in metal leaf, these pieces prefigure the geometric forms and metallic materials he would come to employ in his later work. Here, Dunbar draws an early connection between metallic leaf and natural landscape features like ocean and sky through compositions that subtly reference ships at sea.

**George Dunbar, *Envelope Piece*, c. 1970, Acrylic and envelope collage, Collection of the Artist**

First exhibited at Galerie Simonne Stern in New Orleans in the early 1970s, Dunbar’s envelope collages elevate mundane, everyday objects to the realm of fine art. To create these works, Dunbar carefully arranges a group of standard stock white envelopes side by side so that the inverted Vs of the envelope flaps create a chevron pattern that runs across the entire composition. Painting in rough, gestural strokes upon each side of the envelope flap, he creates a stark contrast between the machine-perfect grid established by the envelope and his own, more spontaneous mark-making. These opposing grids and patterns reflect Dunbar’s interest in juxtaposing perfect, almost machine-like geometry with more impulsive gestures and forms.

**George Dunbar, *Rag Collage*, 1984, Rags and acrylic paint, Collection of the Artist**

During the 1980s and 1990s, Dunbar increasingly embraced accidents and chance occurrences in his art making, developing bold new methods to encourage his materials to act of their own accord. In the 1980s, he began to create what he called “rag paintings,” in which he dropped painted strips of rags upon a canvas laid on the floor, allowing the materials to coalesce into a composition organized almost exclusively through gravitational pull. Some of these works, like this Rag Collage, maintain a sense of composition by nodding towards the horizon-line of traditional conventional landscape painting. Others, like Katrina, dissolve into riotous tangles of painted strips that are often composed of found materials like file folders and envelopes.

**George Dunbar, *Mound Series IX*, 2009, Gold leaf and ink on paper, Collection of the Artist**

Dunbar’s art often incorporates materials drawn from his land development business, as in the company stationary that provides the background for Mound Series IX. In this work, Dunbar repeats a group of black, mountainous forms capped with gold, producing a grid that resembles three undulating horizontal lines. While the mounds initially appear identical, each one has distinctive textures and features. Similar to Dunbar’s Envelope Piece, also on view in this gallery, these repetitive forms generate tension by setting two patterns in opposition: geometric grid versus the rolling, organic pattern of gold ink painted across the crests of each mound.

**George Dunbar*, Black and White Series No. 3*, 2009, Acrylic wash on paper collage, Collection of the Artist**

In the past fifteen years, Dunbar has created a series of prints that look back upon the principles that have guided his entire career. To create his “multiple prints,” Dunbar extracts single, gestural brushstrokes from his action paintings of the 1950s and 1960s and fits them into gridded paper collages. These collages preserve the spontaneity of his action paintings amid the regimentation and order of the grid. They represent Dunbar’s art at its limits: a test for how long and how well the lessons of his art— his embrace of the elemental forces of nature and the power of spontaneity and chance— can stand against the forces of technology, repetition, and mass-production.

**George Dunbar, *Rouville No. 6*, 2012, Palladium leaf over grey/green clay, Collection of Kevin Clifford and Michele Reynoir**

In Rouville No. 6, Dunbar applies richly textured palladium leaf with the seeming effortlessness of paint brushed on canvas, creating an illusion of quickness and action in metallic materials that typically resist such spontaneous treatment. Liberating metal leaf from the geometric confines of many of his early works, Dunbar’s Rouville series returns to the experimental energy of his early action painting. Dunbar himself likens these works to painting, explaining that “they’re really a form of gestural painting; you’re really taking the modeling paste and using your whole arm in a very rapid movement to get this type of pulled movement across the canvas.”

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

In the 1980’s, Dunbar began experimenting with what he called “action sculpture,” using a spatula to build up thick slabs of malleable material into forms that recall ancient Greek and Roman sculptures. In these sculptures, Dunbar often used unconventional media, mixing colored clays, dental stone and rabbit skin glue to create dense, textured surfaces. Dunbar covered these surfaces with subtle gradations of metallic leaf to produce works that recall the look and feel of the human figure, but abstract it into the more elemental play of textures and forms.