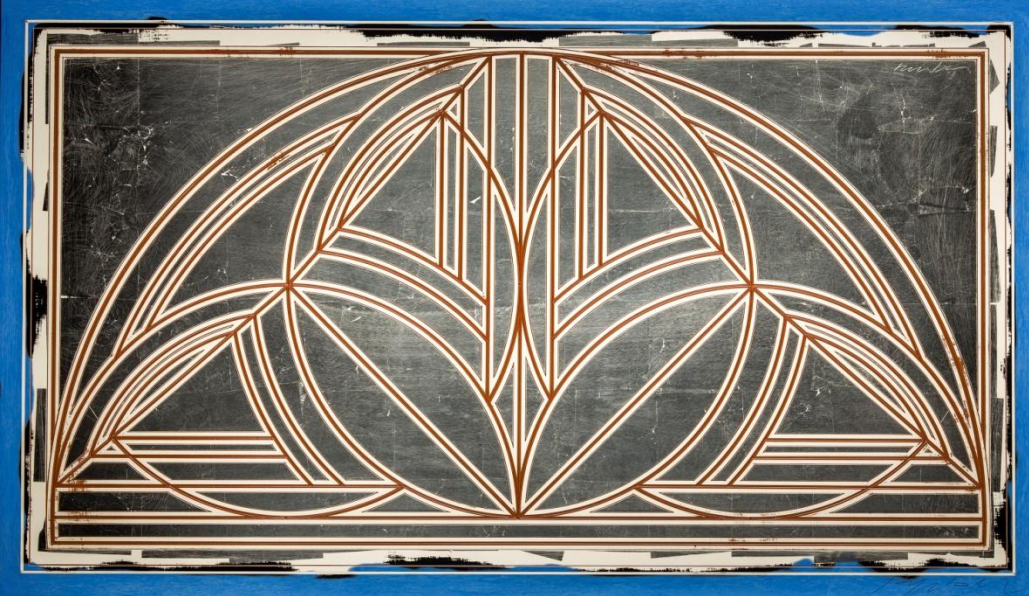


MODERN LOUISIANA

Professional Development for Educators

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Coin du Lestin, 1996, George Dunbar (American, b. 1927), Silver leaf, pigment, and clay, Gift of Richard Johnson, 96.353

George Dunbar and Louisiana Modernism

Louisiana artist George Dunbar (b. 1927) studied in Philadelphia, Paris, and New York before returning to Louisiana in the 1950s. His paintings, sculptures, assemblages and prints marry the stark geometry of modern art with the lush, natural environment of south Louisiana. Along with other New Orleans artists, he founded the cooperative Orleans Gallery to showcase their work. Over the course of his 70 year career, Dunbar introduced new ideas about art-making to New Orleans. He continues to experiment with new methods and materials in inventive ways. The exhibition *George Dunbar: Elements of Chance* on view at NOMA from November 4, 2016 – February 19, 2017 is his first comprehensive museum retrospective. This educator packet includes works by Dunbar and his contemporaries from the collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art.

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George Dunbar: Elements of Chance

by Katie Pfohl, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

George Dunbar played a key role in introducing abstract art to the South. His 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. Dunbar's work and the community of artists, patrons, collectors and critics who rose up to support and champion his art established Louisiana as a place for modern art.

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."

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 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 his *Coin du Lestin* series, the perfect geometry of his exactly etched medallions disobeys the thick layers of elemental organic clay on which they sit. "The thing about giving up control," Dunbar says, "is that there are just so many different ways of doing it."

George Dunbar's life, like his art, has been a study of contrasts. He grew up in New Orleans surrounded by 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



Red M, 1959, George Dunbar (American, b. 1927), Acrylic and paper collage, Collection of the artist

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abstractions in gold and silver leaf. 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. Dunbar continues to offer a unique vision for American abstraction, creating an art that both embraces and transcends place.

Excerpted from the exhibition catalog *George Dunbar: Elements of Chance*, New Orleans Museum of Art, 2016

Orleans Gallery

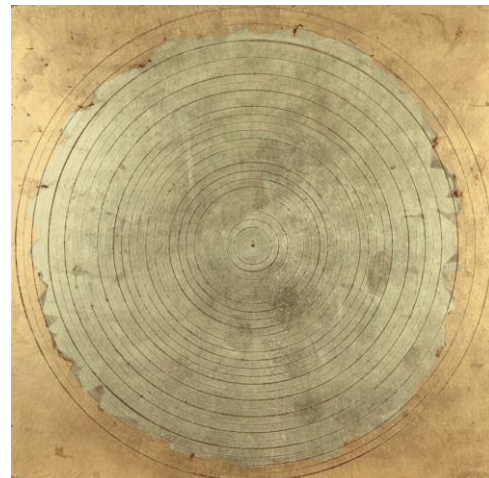
When George Dunbar returned to New Orleans in the mid-1950s, he realized that he would need to help create a culture for contemporary art. With a group of artists including Robert Hellmer, John Clemmer, Jean Seidenberg, Lin Emery and others, Dunbar formed the Orleans Gallery. The artist owned and operated gallery was the first contemporary gallery in the South and helped advance the rise of contemporary art in New Orleans. According to Dunbar, the artists concluded that in order to stay in New Orleans “We need a better gallery.” Previously in New Orleans fine art was shown in decorators’ shops and other stores rather than in white-walled galleries.

Orleans Gallery dissolved after Simonne Stern came to New Orleans and opened Gallerie Simonne Stern in the French Quarter. Stern brought in painters from New York to show alongside local artists. Today, Stern's gallery is known as Callan Contemporary Gallery and is located on Julia Street. Dunbar is one of the artists represented there.



George Dunbar (American, born 1927), *Untitled*, circa 1965-1970, Metal leaf on panel, Gift of Aruth Aitkens, 97.26

Dunbar's richly textured works incorporate a range of materials, including clay mixed with rabbit skin glue, egg tempera, metal leaf and other pigments. His "hard edge" works of the 1960s like *Untitled* pictured at right, often temper strict geometry with subtle gradations of gold, palladium, and metal leaf that connect the hard edges of minimalism to more organic forms and elemental processes. This early work is an indication of the geometric focus that his later series would have.



Dunbar came of age as an artist during a time of immense transformation in the field of American art. While he was still a teenager, the New York School was on the rise and artists from around the country were flocking to Manhattan to study the works of Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. Major national art magazines such as *Art in America* took note, and in 1955 began to speculate on the "collapse of regionalism." A feature article in the same issue of *Art in America* was devoted to highlighting the work of 36 promising "young and not yet famous" artists and included Dunbar. The article situated Dunbar within a broader conversation about identity and place in American art and implied that as his art became more abstract, it became further and further removed from any concrete sense of place or context.

***Coin du Lestin*, 1996, George Dunbar (American, b. 1927), Silver leaf, pigment, and clay, Gift of Richard Johnson, 96.353**

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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.

Dunbar creates the medallion-like etched forms of this 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, then finally coating that ground



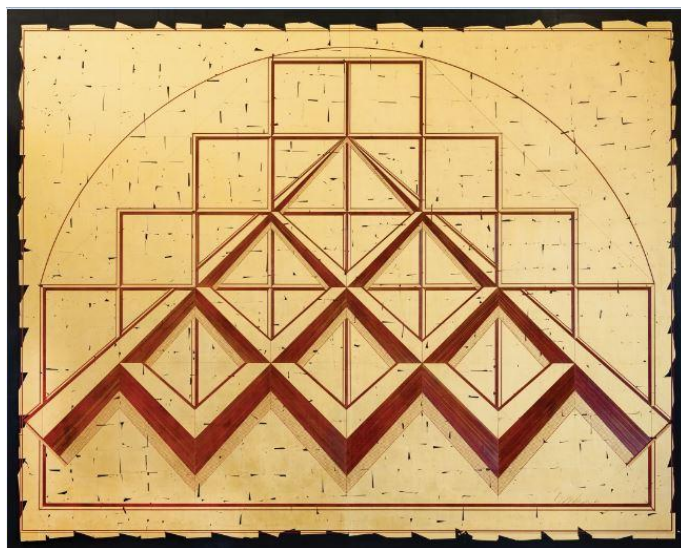
George Dunbar, Drawing of *Coin du Lestin* Subdivision, Slidell, Louisiana, c. 1970-80, Collection of the Artist

with metallic leaf. Dunbar experimented with a variety of colors, forms, and finishes in this body of work, ultimately completing over 200 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.

***Pyramid*, 1992, George Dunbar (American, b. 1927), Gold and silver leaf on panel, Gift of Donna Perret Rosen, 93.136**

Pyramid is an exploration of geometry. From the squares of gold leaf laid on the background to the arc and squares of the central motif, the precise rendering recalls the segmentation of land plots Dunbar created as a land developer. 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. Dunbar, in a sense, sculpted the land as he followed the natural curvature of the roads and canals as a land developer, a profession he pursued in tandem with his art making for his entire career. 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.

Dunbar was influenced to use gold leaf partly through travel to the Philippines and Mexico. He is especially interested in texture, and continually innovates new ways to distress the metal leaf and mine the surface of his works to reveal the layers below.



Will Henry Stevens (American, 1891-1949), *Abstraction*, c. 1940, Oil and tempera on masonite, Museum purchase, Harrod Fund, 46.1

Will Henry Stevens was one of the pioneers of abstract art in the American South. Praised as an innovator and a master of his materials, Stevens began the introduction of modernism to New Orleans. A professor at New Orleans' Newcomb College from the 1920s through 1940s, Stevens' art followed two different paths, one abstract and one representational, with a different art dealer for each. His art is influenced by Paul Cézanne and Wassily Kandinsky.

His work often explored spiritual themes. Even his more abstract works seem to reference the human form, such as the hand shape at the left of *Abstraction*. For Stevens, this mixture of figurative and abstract forms was a way of connecting himself to universal forms of experience. As Stevens wrote, "The best thing a human can do in life is to get rid of his separateness or selfness and hand himself over to the nature of things—to this mysterious thing called the Universal Order."



Fritz Bultman (American, 1919-1985), *Sun Figure*, 1955, Oil on canvas, The Muriel Bultman Francis Collection, 86.157

Fritz Bultman was born into a prominent and cultured New Orleans family. Bultman left New Orleans for New York where he became associated with the Abstract Expressionists. In the wake of World War II, American artists achieved international acclaim for this daring new style. To many, the boldly expressive, large-scale abstract paintings of these young American artists seemed to express American post-war vitality and strength. Such works were seen as something entirely different from anything being made in Europe at the time.

In *Sun Figure*, which Bultman considered one of his most important works, the viewer sees the characteristically heavily painted canvas and mythic subject matter common to Abstract Expressionism. With his exuberant handling of pigment, he echoes the modern era's social, moral, and psychological concerns. The painting is vividly colored and the abstracted figure has been etched into the paint with the end of the paintbrush. The yellow and orange radiate from the canvas, creating a sense of sunlight and energy. Bultman, like many other Abstract Expressionist artists, recognized the sun as the symbol of life and the ultimate wholeness of man.



Rebus 3D-89-3, 1989, Ida Kohlmeyer (American, 1912 – 1997), Painted aluminum, 98.137

Ida Kohlmeyer was born in 1912 to Polish Jewish immigrants. She had a privileged upbringing and was educated in private schools. Kohlmeyer was 37 years old when she took her first painting class. Her artistic self-discovery developed into an original form of expressionism. Kohlmeyer's work was greatly influenced by two artists: Hans Hofmann and Mark Rothko. A giant in 20th century abstraction, Hofmann inspired her with his theory of painting as invention. Through Rothko she adopted his contemplative nature and physical involvement in the act of painting.

Ida Kohlmeyer's art is often an exercise in color and shape. She created a unique pictorial language by combining gestural and symbolic influences with the teachings of modern masters. Rebus means a riddle made up of pictures and symbols. The visual riddle that Kohlmeyer presents in *Rebus 3D-89-3* presents playful combinations of color and form, but the artist left no system for decoding her secret language. The viewer must contemplate this riddle for himself.



Robert Gordy (American, 1933 – 1986), Senegal, n.d., acrylic on canvas, Gift in memory of Marion and Steven Millendorf, 84.1.7

Robert Gordy was born in New Orleans and moved with his family to New Iberia, LA as a child. He received a BFA and MFA from Louisiana State University and by the 1970s he was a nationally recognized artist working in New Orleans. He was greatly influenced by the works of Cezanne, Gauguin, Matisse, and the American Abstract Expressionists. Like Kohlmeyer, Gordy was a student of Hans Hofmann.

Gordy fills his canvases by incorporating figures and symbolic elements into a rich, visual fabric where content and form combine and support each other. In flat, bright colors, Gordy's anonymous figures are packed into a shallow space. His sharp-edged modeling of form gives the flattened figures an unexpected sense of weight and three-dimensionality while the solid forms play with positive and negative space creating overall patterning.

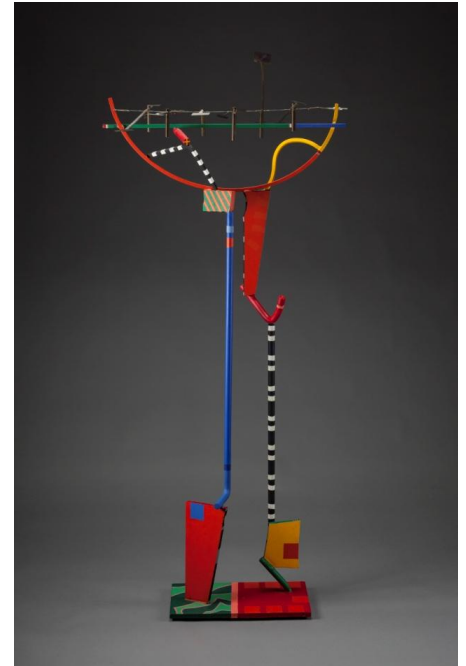


Alanda's Dream Tree, 1985, John T. Scott (American, 1940–2007), Painted steel, brass, stainless steel cable, The Muriel Bultman Francis Collection, 86.292

John Scott is a native of New Orleans and an African-American artist who grew up near the Desire Housing Project. His cultural heritage resonates loudly through his work. Scott attended college and later taught at Xavier University, and received a Master of Fine Arts degree from Michigan State University. His artistic methods were galvanized after receiving an invitation to work with kinetic artist George Ricky. Ricky encouraged Scott to create what Scott called a “kinetic vocabulary” that developed throughout his career.

Scott brought together influences from African, Caribbean, and African-American music and culture to create vibrantly colored kinetic sculptures like *Alanda's Dream Tree*. The colors and rhythms of his sculptures come out of his New Orleans childhood, with moving parts and clashing patterns and colors that particularly reflect the influence of jazz music. Discussing the influence of jazz in his work, Scott once said “one of the most powerful things in [jazz music] is the silence between the notes. In my kinetic work, there’s an awful lot of space, and I play with the shifting movement of that space.” Scott’s kinetic sculptures helped him see the relationships between things, with moving parts that constantly put different elements and forms into dialogue.

Alanda's Dream Tree is a visual love poem for his youngest daughter. Scott chronicled the African hunting ritual in which after killing their prey, African hunters would honor the soul of the animal they killed by overturning their hunting bows and playing them as an instrument. The bows are known as “diddle bows”. To Scott this is a reference to his African heritage and the musical culture of New Orleans. The diddle bow holds the moving parts and is an important element of the kinetic sculpture. The vibrant colors are reminiscent of African textiles.



Wave, 1988, Lin Emery (American, b. 1928), polished aluminum.

Born in New York, Lin Emery made her home in New Orleans. She was greatly influenced by the Russian-born artist Ossip Zadkine. She met Zadkine in Paris where she became his apprentice. Emery was particularly influenced by his philosophy that art should create a nervous tension. Emery found abstraction to be the best means of expressing herself. Additionally, her desire to examine objects from multiple perspectives led Emery to the addition of a kinetic element to her work. She experimented with water and magnets as moveable forces, and eventually adopting wind for her work. Unlike water or magnets, wind is not supplied by the artist, but rather by the environment.

Emery's aluminum abstract sculpture *Wave* harnesses the power of the wind to provide a graceful and ever-changing interpretation of natural force. The gentle motion of the kinetic piece evokes the up and down motion of a wave, while the abstract crescent forms of the moveable pieces recall the physical configuration of a wave. Emery captures the spiritual harmony of the relationship between nature and energy in her sculptures. Here, the graceful movements of the arcs and shadows combine with reflections in the highly polished surface causing the sculpture to blend seamlessly into its garden setting.

