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Art in America

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TK SMITH, ART IN AMERICA, JULY 20, 2021

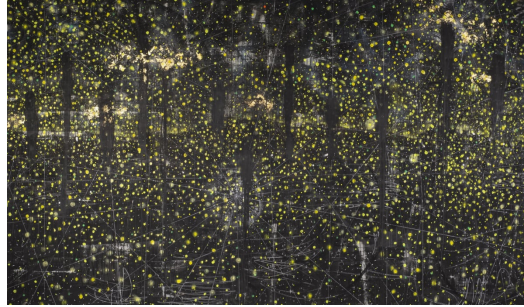


Image courtesy of the artist

"The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse" surveys the past hundred years of artistic expression by Black artists who have lived or worked in the American South. The exhibition claims that the culture and aesthetics of Southern hip-hop constitutes an American art form. It firmly situates the musical genre within the lineages of interdisciplinary Black cultural production, including and referencing forms not often recognized by museums, such as Black fashion, architecture, and contemporary music genres. The more than 140 works in the exhibition, on view at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) in Richmond through September 6, are united by what curator Valerie Cassel Oliver calls the "sonic impulses" of Black expression, which this intergenerational group of artists expresses as the compulsion to be not just seen but also heard and felt.

Visitors may enter "The Dirty South" expecting to find a definitive statement on what constitutes the American South. Subverting geographic, iconographic, and historical distinctions, the exhibition instead offers a range of depictions of the South directly through objects, images, and sounds. Among them are fantastical drawings by North Carolina artist Minnie Evans (1892–1987) of vivid mindscapes figuring vegetation and the human body. Her 1969 piece *Three Faces Surmounting Landscape* is placed in conversation with contemporary Atlanta artist Michi Meko's multimedia work on canvas, *The Seasons – Summer*, 2019, which suggests the cosmos or a lively field of fireflies against the night sky. The juxtaposition of the works points to a legacy of interrogations of the physical and psychological landscapes of the South, across time and space. Such artistic cosmologies can be identified throughout the galleries, through shared uses of materials, craft traditions, and cultural references.

This is an important exhibition. It does not attempt to explore the full history of Southern hip-hop; rather, "The Dirty South" illuminates the powerful influences—the body, the landscape, and spiritual practices—that undergird all forms of Southern expression. Aligned with the efforts of contemporary rappers, such as Jay-Z, the exhibition seeks to pay proper reverence to the hip-hop genre, claiming its mutual engagement with the artistic, intellectual, and spiritual experiences of Black people in the South. The sheer size of the show can make it feel disjointed at times, yet it does the essential work of illustrating that Black culture is not produced in a vacuum. Artists of all genders, trained and untrained, call and respond to each other across media, uncovering persisting themes, but ultimately presenting a non-monolithic and dynamic South. Including both Benny Andrews's 1994 *Revival Meeting*, a painted snapshot of a spirited congregation, and Felandus Thames's *Just Hanging* (2014), a sculpture that recalls the tradition of tennis shoes thrown over telephone wires, the show makes clear why we respond, "Na nah, na nah" when New Orleans rapper Master P calls, "Ungh!"