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ART
AGENDA

"The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse"

by Noah Simblist

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"The South got something to say!" declared André 3000 at the 1995 Source Awards, after Outkast were awarded Best New Artist to boos from the audience. Goodie Mob, another Atlanta-based hip-hop group, released a track called "Dirty South" that same year. Both these events are cited by curator Valerie Cassel Oliver, who also notes in her catalogue essay for "The Dirty South" that the term had been in use since at least the 1980s. So what does it mean? We know that the American South is below the Mason–Dixon line, but what's dirty about the prevalent image of it? Is it the paradox of living with violence and corruption while also celebrating its finer qualities, as Goodie Mob suggests? The Northern fantasy of rural life and unpaved roads that resist Cartesian order? An intermingling of African, European, and Indigenous traditions?

This is not the first exhibition to focus on the American South in recent years. In 2016, "Southern Accent" opened at the Nasher Museum: a thirty-year survey show that treated the region as an "emotional idea," a term borrowed from William Faulkner. What's new about the VMFA exhibition is its focus on the particularities of Black culture in the region, particularly the ways in which musical and visual histories are entangled. "The Dirty South" proposes a look back after the Great Migration—during which over six million African Americans left the South for the North—at a time when figures such as journalist Charles M. Blow have argued for a reverse Great Migration. In doing so, it embraces the South's vibrant mixture of cultures perhaps best characterized by the grinding slowness of its swampy summers, as evoked by the slowed-down, "chopped and screwed" hip-hop pioneered by Houston's DJ Screw.

The show opens with a modified 1990 Cadillac called a SLAB (short for Slow, Low, and Banging) owned by rapper Fiend aka International Jones, which highlights the link between music and material culture. *Summer Breeze* (2018) by Paul Stephen Benjamin emphasizes the theme. This pyramidal arrangement of TV monitors showing Billie Holiday and Jill Scott singing "Strange Fruit" sets a haunting tone. Nearby, Beverly Buchanan's abstract sculpture *Untitled (Frustula Series)* (c. 1978), a trio of concrete blocks placed on a low plinth, nods to Southern vernacular architecture. Projected onto a nearby wall is Allison Janae Hamilton's 2019 video *Wacissa*, which dips the camera just below the surface of water. It's a disorienting experience that places the viewer in a dense tangle of reeds.

In the following room, Nick Cave's *Soundsuit* (2010)—a tall, fetish-like character made of dark brown twigs and crimson synthetic berries—stands in front of Michi Meko's painting *The Seasons – Summer* (2019), a dark canvas dappled with a glowing network of golden lights, like stars in the night sky. Kevin Sipp's *Take it to the Bridge/Trance-Atlantic* (2009), a drum connected by a piece of driftwood to a turntable, is displayed on a low plinth nearby: it links both different media and African and American rhythms. The room exemplifies the Afro-diasporic traditions that have characterized Southern culture since the Middle Passage.