

Louisiana: This Land Is Your Land...
—Cameron Shaw

Keith Duncan doesn't have a studio. He works out of a ground-floor apartment he shares with his brother in Gretna, Louisiana. On the day I visited him, the sliding doors to the concrete porch were open. A boy—still in diapers—eyed us from a balcony above, but Duncan is used to the attention. Neighbors in the artist's sprawling housing complex often wander in to check out the latest painting tacked to the wall. He is no doubt the only working artist they know, and consequently many often mistake his profession for a hobby. That hasn't prevented them from making suggestions for how he can improve his canvases, including some he doesn't take like: "You should add aliens to this one." Others, such as the recommended addition of a metal clothesline, provide the perfect dose of veritas. Duncan is a realist with a lowercase 'r.' He rarely paints a single scene; his canvases seem rather to be filled with every act from the whole damn play. The narrative, however, is resolutely Southern—here, with a pronounced and defiant capital letter.

When Duncan returned to Louisiana in 2007 after spending over a decade in New York, he immediately immersed himself in stories of New Orleans and its surrounding parishes. Working at an astonishing pace, he completed enough paintings for two solo shows, in addition to the current exhibition at the CUE Art Foundation. Duncan is acutely aware of the fact that few of his neighbors will ever see his work hanging in a gallery along New Orleans' Julia Street, much less in Manhattan, which is why his doors are always open. They and their shared experiences are the work's protagonists and subject. When earlier this year British Petroleum's negligence and corporate malfeasance unleashed an estimated 185 million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico, Duncan responded with *Upon this Land* (2010). Beside an actual Louisiana state flag adhered to the surface of the canvas, Duncan painted a black mother comforting her son in the face of oil-slicked wildlife and noxious fumes. Disregarding the sinewy mannerism that characterizes many of Duncan's figures, she could easily be a resident of hard-hit Plaquemines Parish—where the artist was raised—wearing a flimsy summer dress, while white workers in full Hazmat gear lurk in the background.

If Duncan's work should be considered political (and it must), its efficacy lies in the embrace of the familiar vernacular of everyday people: folk art in the most literal sense. As with any language, words and expressions in Duncan's visual vocabulary shoulder multiple meanings depending on context. A crumpled can of Miller "High Life" might be a condemnation in one painting and a celebration in another. In the painting *Eulogy for a "Nigga"* (2010), Duncan places the viewer squarely in the midst of a funeral, and while a garish ruby casket stands front and center, there is no corpse here. This is not a funeral for a single person, but rather for a totalizing idea—a tired conception of blackness made ubiquitous by the rise of gangsta rap in the 1990s. Rightfully then, red and blue bandanas flank the coffin, representing the Bloods and Crips but even more broadly the persistence of gang violence and black-on-black crime that blights many African-American communities not only as a reality but as an expectation. Miller beer cans join Old English 40s, liquor bottles, and handguns, yet Duncan doesn't limit his critique to contemporary stereotypes. This gravesite is also strewn with historical markers of racial identification: a slice of

watermelon, a fried chicken bone, a mammy rag doll, and the New Orleans-specific Mardi Gras minstrel, whom the viewer might recognize from his purple and yellow hat and bow tie.

As home of the first legally recognized slaves, the South is arguably the birthplace of many prevailing conceptions of blackness in America. With *Eulogy for a "Nigga"*, Duncan seems to suggest it should also be a final resting place for these exhausted stereotypes as they are both variably performed by and imposed upon African-Americans. However, in *Down By the Riverside* (2010), some of the self-same symbols are transposed into lighthearted merriment. Here, four brown-skinned men fish along the edge of the Mississippi—as Duncan remembers from his youth—relaxing with the very beers and liquor bottles that hastened the downfall of the “Nigga” and marked him as a drunk, or worse, a good-for-nothin’. The artist replaces each of the figures’ heads with products traditionally made in and associated with the South: a jug of whiskey (albeit empty), a boiled peanut, a whole watermelon, and a pecan in its shell. The watermelon that had previously functioned as a static icon of negative racialization is transformed into a point of regional pride. At the same time, the comic inversion recalls the popularity of playful nicknames in many African-American communities, where a moniker like Jughead, Peanuthead, Watermelonhead, or Pecanhead might serve as an endearing jab.

In his book *The Signifying Monkey*, scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes the practice of signifyin(g) in the black literary tradition. Derived from the trickster archetype in African mythology and perpetuated by American slaves, the practice and its power exist in the separation of denotative and connotative meaning. By drawing attention to the connotative significance of words, the speaker renders meaning accessible only to those who share his specific cultural context. The signifying monkey then must inherently occupy a place of privilege for he maintains an awareness of both sides—those who “get it” and those who don’t. Duncan advances this tradition in his paintings with his use of familiar yet malleable symbols, whose meanings are adaptable depending on how they are being used and by whom. In doing so, the artist thematizes a type of doubleness that exists within both black and Southern identities. He doesn’t deny the complexities and contradictions that define these groups as societal constructions, but rather acknowledges that a perceived need to position themselves vis-à-vis a dominant culture continues to produce the dichotomy of insider and outsider where an adaptability like Duncan’s remains one of the greatest political tools.

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