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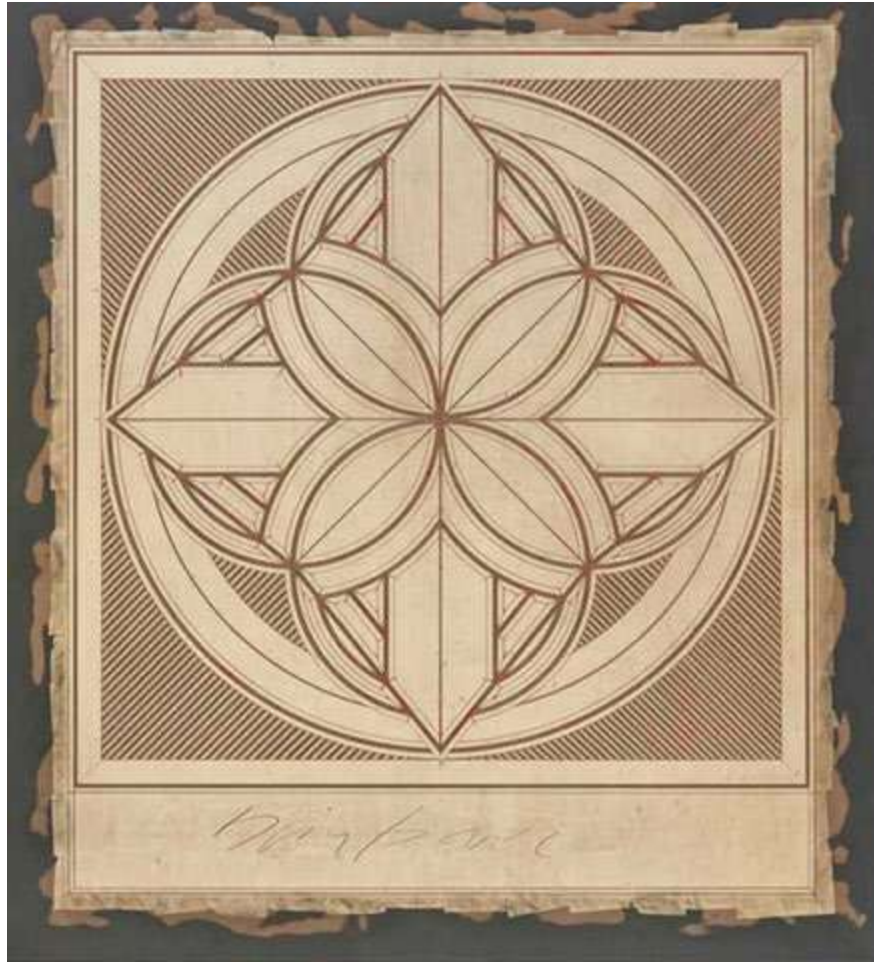
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DOUBLE ISSUE:

*Anarchitecture at the CAC - Raine Bedsole - Dawn DeDeaux - George Dunbar
Louisiana Contemporary at the Ogden - "Seeing Nature" at NOMA*



George Dunbar: *Coin du Lestin XXXVI*, 1997. Moon gold, palladium with clay, 54.75" high.

George Dunbar: Beyond Style

BY TERRINGTON CALAS

GEORGE DUNBAR
“Elements of Chance”
A Retrospective
The New Orleans Museum of Art
New Orleans, LA

THE STRANGE AND confounding and irresistible art of the modern era has several facets. That is one reason it continues to stir us. And it has never been as tidy or as ostensibly rational as traditional art. It has never settled for the obvious: Behold nature, the human pageant; re-state pictorially. After Cézanne, that notion soon became quaint. One forceful and purist strain of modernism has always insisted on the artwork’s autonomy, on a resolve to create objects that had little or nothing to do with the visible world. It gloried in the artist’s right to center on her/his inner landscape — the private ponderings, the private demons — or, in the fact, on art itself.

Among the consequences of this aesthetic impulse is

something that might be fancied “modern classicism,” a splinter group, mostly abstract, devoted to the nobility — the almost Renaissance nobility — of the sensuous object. Painter George Dunbar is essentially of this faction.

Today, standing apart and taking a focused look at this pivotal New Orleans artist is an odd experience. In the late 1950s and 60s, when his art began to reach its stride, it was still doctrinaire — on the national scene — that none other than abstract art was really sanctioned. It was the moment of “authoritarian abstraction,” the moment when Clement Greenberg’s Kantian police kept the art culture in purist tow. Dunbar, in a certain sense, was a part of that; he was among the small group who spearheaded the embrace of modernism in New Orleans. He helped establish a local milieu — certain artists, collectors, art professionals — for whom abstraction became the capstone of advanced contemporary art. Thus, the local scene, or at least a vital part of it, assumed the New York hierarchy of the time.

That climate of stylistic hegemony, of course, has long



George Dunbar: *Red M*, 1959. Acrylic and paper collage, 50" high.

vanished. In the past twenty-five years — an aesthetically perplexed period that, nonetheless, finally concedes the continuity of art history — the notion of a single reigning orthodoxy would seem unthinkable. And today, abstract art is regarded as one valid approach among several others — certainly venerated but, in some measure, nostalgic. In some quarters of the art world, however, it has attained new authority. This is based, apparently, in a revived awareness of its potential richness. The genre has advantages. One — and the most conspicuous — is its ability to afford unalloyed visual pleasure, something easily overplayed but also crucial for engaging the viewer. Another, which seems to matter more than ever, is the psychic objective long associated with particular branches of abstraction. This latter can provide a density — both of meaning and of feeling — that is sorely missing in much of today's art.

DUNBAR'S WORK, with its breadth of content and form, attempts to mine the potency of abstraction. His route, as I say, is a variant of classicism. For him, classicism does not mean easy

loveliness. But it does mean the dignity and cogency of marshalled form. And this, of course, invites the concept of Beauty. Classicism, whatever its kind, always pursues beauty. But in the modernist sense, it also pursues truth — or rather, a particular take on truth. It attempts to dazzle you with fabricated sensuousness, all the while admitting the contingencies of the artist's domain and practice: the studio, the processes. And, at best, admitting also the artist's subjective reality. It is classicism of a slightly flawed variety, beauty with its human source in plain view. With few notable exceptions, the major modern classicists — from Cezanne to Cubist Picasso, from Pollock to early Frank Stella, to Brice Marden — all produced work with a decidedly "direct" quality.

For Dunbar, this is fundamental. In his handsome retrospective, "Elements of Chance," expertly curated by Katie Pfohl for the New Orleans Museum of Art, you can see that this has always been so. There is the sense that the reality of art as physical work is basic to him. He often notes a fondness for the degree of "ugliness" that results from undisguised process. The very nature of his classicism keeps him well aware of the spectre of cloying

beauty. This wide-ranging exhibition reminds you that he has long been associated with a unique brand of grace and elegance. No matter what he did over the span of his career — the early torn-fabric collages, the insouciant abstract paintings, the constructions fashioned from scrap canvas, the ornamental yet punished metal leaf pictures — there was always present the mitigating element of perfect taste. No artist ever pursued ugliness with such refinement.

The inherent paradox in this was central to Dunbar's appeal. His first authoritative work appeared in the late 1950s, when audiences conditioned by School of Paris suaveness had just begun an infatuation with New York School grit. It is easy to imagine them drawn to the tensions of such a variance. On the technical level, this was the logical art for its time, the fitting artist's response to our collective aesthetic education.

And yet, philosophically, it was perhaps a deterrent. Dunbar's technique was so fascinating that it veiled his core meaning. His local devotees were absorbed with his innovations. Certainly no New Orleans artists before him had followed the modernist course so fervently. And, more than anything else, that course was characterized by his compulsive embrace of technical proficiency in the service of itself. If ever there was a stylist, it then seemed, Dunbar was surely it. One could look at an early work and truthfully refer to it as a calculated celebration of Prussian blue or, in another case, a sustained study of the force of a brushstroke. Consider the extraordinary *Red M*, from 1959, a painting that rivals de Kooning in sheer virtuosity and in its chromatic sophistication.

SUCH SOPHISTICATION is part of the larger, ruling temperament of Dunbar's art. His view of the world — and, in turn, his fundamental aesthetic — is an intellectualizing one. His is a system-drenched province of abiding balance. Most of his works seem to rest on a severe governing scheme, even if that scheme is barely perceptible — as in the more dynamic instances: his “action paintings,” like *Red M*, or his later *Marshgrass* series. At all times, though, you perceive a certain eccentricity, indeed a waywardness, regarding pictorial syntax. This is a key aspect of Dunbar's originality. (Hence the validity of this exhibition's title.) In the magnificent strict-edged mandalas and painted reliefs — like *Coin du Lestin* (1999) or *Coin du Lestin XXXVI* (1996) or *Le Rouge Grande* (2015) — he submits a Renaissance-like symmetry and calm, then swiftly undermines them. Each painting is centered with a hovering motif — usually a classic geometric configuration — but irregular layers of clay or metal leaf surround it.

The effect is not very unlike the freely gestured contours in Kenneth Noland's early targets. And there is a similar tension, albeit more complex. A kind drama is created in the Dunbars: an unmistakable emotional unrest. This is a consequence of technical nuance. Every detail of these paintings suggests disturbance, not merely the contrast of geometry versus gesture. Within the crisply delineated motifs — perfect interlocking circles, triple-lined semi-circles, elegant rounded triangles — there are also persistent imperfections. The metal-leaf surfaces, especially, betray a wounding course of direct-hand work. Slight tears and scars, tonal shifts: they all disrupt the precision and, clearly, any sense of composure.

The fascinating point, however, is that in the midst of his tasteful technique-centered maneuvers, Dunbar was striving for a meaning beyond style. During a certain period, beginning in the early 1990s, that meaning came closer and closer to the surface. It

has never become entirely clear. Dunbar's art is one of intimation, not of declaration. In his sleekly elegant mandala paintings, he remained shrewdly taciturn. But the adoption, in the late 1980s, of the human torso as a recurrent motif provides a valuable clue. At first, it seemed that its choice was simply in deference to a classic, enduring image that lent itself to the abstracting contrivances of a true modernist. That seems less true now. This motif, seen in the context of his entire oeuvre, helps to disclose a side of Dunbar we never expected to see.

I mean an emotional, and perhaps tragic, side. It is intriguing to watch an artist of such extreme discretion move in this direction — even if intermittently. It is also supremely rewarding, since he relinquished none of his famous gallic taste: his student days in Paris clearly have left a permanent mark. Even in the face of a basically expressionist theme, Dunbar enveloped these works in an aura of pure visual hedonism — though hardly enough to subdue the startling and urgent meaning.

Over the course of a few years, his torsos — initially, the wall-hung pieces — became disquieting metaphors of emotional anxiety: they are breached, truncated, scarred, fairly obliterated by the artist's hand. It is impossible to overlook the unrest in these works. They possess the raw passion of 1980s neo-expressionism and something of the despair of pre-war German art. There is in them, simply put, the ring of human truth. It is as though the aesthete-to-the-fingertips, the polished Francophile — for a brief time — opened his soul to you.

This is so, but he did it in a way that no true expressionist would. The neo-expressionists communicated their meaning by triggering poignant recognitions in us, often by signaling specific events in history. Dunbar's torsos (he has described them as “baroque”) connect more slyly. And without specifics. The outcome is not the predicable surge of feeling. Rather, it is a suffused redolence — but unmistakable.

To accomplish this, he summoned up the intricate technical strategies that characterize his more formal works — that abiding stylistic tact. Even the impassioned topic does not disrupt that impulse. The intensity of his wall-hung pieces, for example, is mitigated by utter sensuousness. They fairly celebrate the medium itself: the rich, patinated clay. His art of intimation remains undiminished, based in a considered fusion of Symbolist obliqueness and Matissean hedonism. In other words, he took a squarely German subject — the disquieted human figure — and lavished it with the utmost in refined French taste: perfect muted color, rhythmic calligraphic scorings and, frequently, a discreet use of metallic leaf. This was subjectivity smartly veiled.

And yet, the Dunbar torso smolders as an expressive image — clutched into memory. In his total oeuvre, it seems something of an anomaly, but it may be the most revealing facet. This is notably evident when he extends the theme to three-dimensional form. In that instance, he ennobles it, suavely condenses it. The result is crisply lucid: sculptures that shatter his style-imposed obliqueness. And you grasp more surely the subjective core.

That core, it would appear, discloses a singular metaphysical quest. *Diety IX*, a commanding example from the series, is simultaneously a formalized schema and a haunting spiritual presence. Works like this may be as close as Dunbar now gets to a religious art — something he touched upon in his youth. A small, incendiary *Crucifixion* (1957), a painting, is one of the gems of



George Dunbar: *Deity IX*, 2001. Gold leaf and clay over dental stone, 52"high.

this exhibition. Indeed, his *Diety*'s antecedents might include the crucifixion — the ultimate symbol of human vulnerability and sacrifice. But a more persuasive reference is the *Nike of Samothrace*: goddess of triumph, emblem of noble unassailability. The tenor of this sculpture affirms it. Within Dunbar's steadfast honing of form, you sense a distilled hauteur. The torso seems to soar.

At the same time, however, you detect something akin to religious spirituality: a reach of feeling that encompasses both anxiety and hope. This *Nike*, if one might call it that, seems not entirely unassailable. Again, technical treatment is the key. Predictably, you see a classicist at work, burnishing an idol-like object until it is, indeed, idol-worthy. But here, as in most of the sculptures, Dunbar manipulates the stone like an Action Painter's brush — as if impassioned. The stone looks animate, "slashed on." You imagine Franz Kline as sculptor, uttering disquiet with every "stroke." There is control, no question: the sleeked form. But now, Nike's loftiness is humanized — a trace of the emotional, and perhaps a tacit longing. The *Diety*, in this incarnation, creates an aura of prayer.

AS I SAY, DUNBAR'S breached torso is an enduring mental image. What remains with you is a conflicting idea of art on the axis between refined rigor and unequivocal emotional content. You conclude that Dunbar is saying something about human anxiety but also something about his aesthetic mechanism. It is this hybrid that makes the torsos so compelling. They disclose the reasoning of a mainstream modernist confronted with the difficult but urgent task of grasping the unpalatable and transmuting it into the palatable. This is why you can look at one of these pieces and walk away both moved and gratified.

This exhibition surveys Dunbar's entire body of work. The greater part of it, as we expected, is a manifestation of classical restraint made modern, the prudent revelation of a thinker with a fluent touch. At a certain moment, some of that restraint was modified and, apparently, sullied by human truths. This defines Dunbar's career as richer than most. □