

ARTNEWS

The Vinyl Edge: Rodney McMillian Delivers a Show Filled with Drama and Surprises at Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia

By Edith Newhall | July 21, 2016



Photo by Constance Mensh.

The Institute of Contemporary Art’s ground-floor gallery in Philadelphia has been considered a “difficult” space since the building made its debut in 1991. Its looming ceilings aren’t kind to small or delicate artworks, and the kinds of stand-alone works that would play off its plainness and vastness—say, a big, exuberant Nancy Rubins sculpture—are rarely the stuff of ICA exhibitions. Sheila Hicks’s 2011 retrospective of her expressionistic fiber works was a notable exception.

Now, five years on from Hicks, Rodney McMillian has made the most of the space, but in an entirely different way. For his exhibition of sculptures, wall-hanging works, and videos, titled “The Black Show,” the Los Angeles-based artist has treated the gallery as a giant stage set that can be approached from any angle. Wherever you are is where you should be.

The gallery is dimly lit, and there is no sense of hierarchy in the arrangement of works. One of the wall pieces is hung so high that it’s hard to see amid the shadows near the ceiling. A sprawling, 70-foot-long painting on paper (the only painting here) made specifically for this show, of a swamp as seen on a moonlit night, is hung from a ceiling track and divides the gallery diagonally. A black vinyl piece wraps around one of the gallery’s columns. Throughout the show, McMillian’s juxtapositions of videos and artworks are dramatic and unexpected. Walking from the entrance and trying to follow the progression of works feels like being on an old-fashioned amusement-park boat ride through a cavernous tunnel.



Rodney McMillian, *Many moons* (detail), 2015, latex, acrylic, and ink on paper mounted on fabric, installation view. Photo by Constance Mensh.

The main component of most of the sculptures and wall-hangings is black vinyl, and though the works are largely abstract, they are also suggestive of body parts, wounds, and, by extension, violence against black people. By stitching into the vinyl with thread and adding zippers McMillian reinforces the sense of threat. Anger simmers in a burlap wall piece that resembles a mural-size American flag with a square of black latex paint in its upper-left corner, where the stars would be. And instead of stripes, there is an incarcerated man's long indictment of the American judicial system, sewn into the fabric, line after line, in red thread.

McMillian's six videos, all made in 2015, are the most absorbing works in his show. In *Shelter (Crawl)* the artist is a camouflaged soldier dragging himself through a weedy landscape, clearly on the verge of death and shouting repeatedly a line from the Rolling Stones' 1969 song "Gimme Shelter" in a raw, exhausted voice. It's an extremely disturbing performance that evokes the experiences of escaping slaves.

A longer piece, *Storytime in Dockery*, is the most powerful and haunting of the videos, following McMillian into an abandoned house in Dockery, Mississippi, where he seats himself in a room and cheerfully reads aloud from *Winnie-the-Pooh* to an imaginary audience of children as he casually swats away insects and wipes sweat from his face. Is he mentally ill? Did he witness a dreadful event in this house? Was he one of the "children"? McMillian doesn't offer an answer. No, more terrifyingly, he puts the book down and leaves as quietly as he arrived.