FEBRUARY 3–AUGUST 14, 2016

Rodney McMillian: The Black Show
Gallery Guide

The Eleanor Biddle Lloyd Gallery
The Black Show forms an extended meditation on the United States in patterns cut by class, economic status, culture, race, gender, and history. It brings together a tightly focused selection of new and recent work that offers blackness as subject, form, process, emotion, and politics. The exhibition pivots around approximately 45 minutes of coordinated video, marking the most extensive use of this medium by McMillian to date. Additionally, in late spring McMillian’s off-site performance, Hanging with Clarence, offers an engagement with history as a dark, messy, and incomprehensible material that must be remembered and reformed.

Having studied foreign affairs at the University of Virginia as an undergraduate, McMillian is deeply attuned to the social systems, economic forces, and policy decisions that shape our histories, bodies, and minds; these forces appear regularly as inspiration, subject, and form. McMillian engages these disembodied forces directly to make physical these abstractions. One way is through the use of post-consumer products and everyday materials in his paintings and sculptures.

These systems and forces also find form through the protagonists of his performances and videos. These characters are the spirits of history: an axe-wielding Nat Turner, for instance, leader of an infamous 1831 Virginia slave rebellion, now dressed in a hazmat suit and an Iron Man mask, taunting a house at Dockery Farms. Or a ventriloquist puppet who perches on a front porch pantomiming a notorious recording of Republican election strategist Lee Atwater, revealing the Southern strategy (to fuel irrational racism
amid working class whites) that would help propel Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980.

In The Black Show the first such character is an old-fashioned preacher, and his nighttime sermon sets the tone. Borrowing words from jazz composer Sun Ra, the sharp-tongued wordplay sets peace and death into taut—if starkly fatalistic—cohabitation. From this lesson onward unnerving encounters multiply throughout the videos: a silent figure—part Ultraman, part cassock-garbed priest—beats a deep organic rhythm into fleeting focus, and elsewhere winds a stoic path from South Carolina to Harlem, New York. An earnestly hopeful man reads a beloved A.A. Milne children’s tale to a dilapidated Dockery, Mississippi, home absent of children. A solitary figure tends to gravestones. A camouflaged mercenary drags himself through tall grass, hoarsely intoning the Rolling Stones bleak 1969 hit “Gimme Shelter” as death rattle. These five figures go unidentified by proper names, functioning instead as archetypes. Portrayed by McMillian, they become flesh and blood embodiments of forces that lurk in the United States landscape. The implications are precise. Both a dedicated desire for a different state born out of deep-seated structural malevolence, and a lament for where we are today relative race and class and what used to be called the opportunity of a good life. McMillian draws the influence of science fiction on top of this political environment as a social force for envisioning places where fantastic transformation is one path to unraveling injustices.

The influence of science fiction is felt in the otherworldly pacing of the videos and in the jarring juxtapositions of
form in the paintings and sculptures that surround them. Many moons (2015) is a seventy-foot long painting made specifically for The Black Show. The loose architectural hanging emphasizes its fantastical landscape as it bends, curves, and transforms the space. Additionally two works from 2013, Wild Seed and Wizard (for Doro), directly reference speculative fiction author Octavia Butler, whose stories regularly address the oppressive forces of power with figures who battle self-destructive urges and social patterns. Of particular note here, Butler’s novel Wild Seed (1980) disregards the usual trappings of science fiction—space ships, far-flung solar systems, advanced technology—to tell the tale of two African immortals, Doro and Anyanwu. Over centuries of conflict, through slave trade and segregated communities spanning Africa to the United States, these two characters use their distinct shape-shifting powers to breed and build colonies of super humans. The communities are not utopian, though they do model new opportunities for society out of the sorrow-filled routines of history. Science fiction here is a method for twisting accepted histories into unanticipated trajectories.

Likewise, McMillian’s works are sewn, gathered, and otherwise crafted from common matter around us: vinyl, plaster, paper, thread, chicken wire, burlap, zippers, bed sheets, children’s stories, pop songs, and history. We can recognize the efforts and methods by which their transformation occurs: visible stitching and raw edges throughout. And at times the sculptures extend into shapes that recall torsos, lungs, bellies, wounds, or orifices. Taken together, the sagginess, tautness, and encumbered weights of
McMillian’s art in turn reminds us that the United States can proclaim (in the words of the dust jacket copy of Toni Morrison’s 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*, first edition): “This is a love story—except there isn’t much love in it. It’s also a fairy tale—except only the fondest nightmares come true. It’s a murder story—except the victim lives. It’s not only a black story—it’s a very dark one.” Luckily, this country is not yet a finished story.

— Anthony Elms, Chief Curator

Rodney McMillian’s (born 1969, Columbia, SC; lives Los Angeles) artistic practice embodies a wide range of media and techniques. McMillian had recent solo exhibitions at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects; Aspen Museum of Art, Colorado; and the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), Boston. His work has been included in numerous group exhibitions worldwide, including the 2008 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the 2008 California Biennial, Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach; *Philosophy of Time Travel*, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; *Ordinary Culture: Heikes/Helms/McMillian*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; *Painting in Tongues*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the traveling exhibition *Uncertain States of America*, Astrup Fearnley Museum of Art, Oslo; USA Today, Royal Academy of Art, London; *THING: New Sculpture from Los Angeles*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; and *Frequency*, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

Organized by Chief Curator Anthony Elms. The exhibition is presented concurrently with *Views of Main Street*, an overview of Rodney McMillian, organized by Naima Keith, Associate Curator, at the Studio Museum in Harlem. A fully illustrated joint catalogue of the exhibitions, with writing by Elms, Keith, Charles Gaines, Rita Gonzalez, Dave McKenzie, and Steven Nelson, will be published in Spring 2016.
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<td>Public Opening Celebration: Rodney McMillian: <em>The Black Show</em></td>
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<td>6:30–9 PM</td>
<td>Angel Nevarez and Valerie Tevere</td>
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<td>5 PM (MEMBERS ONLY)</td>
<td>Preview and conversation with artists and curators</td>
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<tr>
<td>WEDNESDAY, MARCH 30</td>
<td>Conversation: Anthony Elms, Naima Keith, and Rodney McMillian</td>
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<td>WEDNESDAY, APRIL 20</td>
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<td>WEDNESDAY, JULY 13</td>
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<td>CHECK WEBSITE FOR DETAILS</td>
<td>Performance: <em>Hanging with Clarence</em></td>
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VIDEOS

*Preacher Man*, 2015
Single-channel video, color, sound
6:08 minutes
Courtesy the artist and Maccarone, New York

*A Migration Tale*, 2014–5
Single-channel video, color, sound
10 minutes
Courtesy the artist and Maccarone, New York

*Shelter (Crawl)*, 2015
Single-channel video, color, sound
4:18 minutes
Courtesy the artist and Maccarone, New York

*a beckoning: We are not who we think we are*, 2015
Single-channel video, color, sound
5:20 minutes
Courtesy the artist and Maccarone, New York

*Storytime in Dockery*, 2015
Single-channel video, color, sound
14:17 minutes
Courtesy the artist and Maccarone, New York

*Maintenance (Effingham, S.C.)*, 2015
Single-channel video, color, sound
11:38 minutes
Courtesy the artist and Maccarone, New York

SCULPTURES

*Many moons*, 2015
Latex, acrylic, and ink on paper mounted on fabric
Courtesy the artist and Maccarone, New York

*Succulent*, 2010
Vinyl and thread
Courtesy the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

*Column*, 2015
Vinyl, thread, and zipper
Courtesy the artist and Maccarone, New York

*Untitled (flag IV)*, 2012
Burlap, thread, plaster, and latex
Courtesy the artist, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, and Maccarone, New York

*Untitled (lungs)*, 2008–13
Acrylic, fabric, and chicken wire
Courtesy the artist, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, and Maccarone, New York

*Untitled (target)*, 2012
Vinyl, thread, and zipper
Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects / Collection of Blake Byrne, Los Angeles

*Wild Seed*, 2013
Vinyl and thread
Courtesy the artist, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, and Maccarone, New York

*Wizard (for Doro)*, 2013
Vinyl, zipper, and thread
Courtesy the artist, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, and Maccarone, New York
Major support for Rodney McMillian: The Black Show has been provided by the William Penn Foundation. Additional funding has been provided by Dorothy H. & Martin N. Bandier, Maccarone, New York, Norma & Lawrence S. Reichlin, Lori W. & John R. Reinsberg, Stephanie K. & David E. Simon, Brett A. & Daniel S. Sundheim, and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

ICA is always Free. For All. Free admission is courtesy of Amanda and Glenn Fuhrman.

ICA acknowledges the generous sponsorship of Barbara B. & Theodore R. Aronson for exhibition catalogues. Programming at ICA has been made possible in part by the Emily and Jerry Spiegel Fund to Support Contemporary Culture and Visual Arts and the Lise Spiegel Wilks and Jeffrey Wilks Family Foundation, the Ruth Ivor Foundation, and by Hilarie L. & Mitchell Morgan. Marketing is supported by Pamela Toub Berkman & David J. Berkman and by Lisa A. & Steven A. Tananbaum. Additional funding has been provided by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, the Dietrich Foundation and the Daniel W. Dietrich II Trust, Inc., the Overseers Board for the Institute of Contemporary Art, friends and members of ICA, and the University of Pennsylvania. General operating support is provided, in part, by the Philadelphia Cultural Fund. ICA receives state arts funding support through a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a state agency funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency. ICA acknowledges Le Méridien Philadelphia as our official Unlock Art™ partner hotel.

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