



**GEORGE  
DUNBAR**

southern masters series

## GEORGE DUNBAR: SOUTHERN MASTER SERIES

George Dunbar's journey as an artist has taken him from Louisiana to Philadelphia and Europe then back home to New Orleans. He is a member of a generation of artists who matured during the golden age of American abstract painting and, as many of his generation, he has held fast to the basic tenants of his formative years. Dunbar began his search for personal understanding of Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940's at Tyler Art School in Philadelphia. Born into a prosperous New Orleans family (sugar cane planters on his mother's side and attorneys on his father's side), Dunbar might have been expected to adopt a traditional, secure career. After high school he served two years in the Navy, then decided to follow a more independent direction and become an artist. Dunbar chose Temple University's Tyler School of Art on the GI Bill because of its proximity to New York, the newly anointed cultural capital of the world. At Tyler, the artist came into contact with the ideas of the New American Painting, but also learned the traditional skills of grinding raw materials and mixing his own paint. His use of ideas culled from Abstract Expressionism combined with the use of traditional materials and techniques from his training at Tyler would come to define his mature work and remain the foundation of Dunbar's art from the 1960's to the present.

After graduating from the Tyler School of Art, Dunbar left for Europe and spent two years traveling and working on pieces for exhibitions at the Duban Luch Gallery of Philadelphia and the Palma Gallery in New York City. At that time the young artist assumed that upon his return to the states he would settle into a studio in New York City and pursue his own personal variant of Abstract Expressionist painting. However, due to the illness of his mother, Dunbar returned to his native New Orleans and began to make his way into a fledgling community of contemporary artists who later founded the Orleans Gallery, the spearhead of modern art in New Orleans for over a decade. Meanwhile, he began an art school with another founding artist of the Gallery, Robert Helmer, and supplemented his teaching by giving workshops at the Tulane and Louisiana State University Schools of Architecture. Deciding that teaching was not a viable second vocation, he began developing land in the expanding suburbs on the north shore of Lake Ponchartrain. At that time developers worked in virgin territory and remained free from governmental regulation. They could purchase land, reform it according to their wishes and resell it. Dunbar not only found that development allowed him a stable income with time to pursue his painting, but he derived a great deal of personal satisfaction from shaping his ideas into a finished development. He created waterfront sites that required dredging as well as leveling with a bulldozer, a form of drawing lines on the earth that, though different in intent, parallels the growth of the land art movement. Dunbar often operated the bulldozer himself and some of the lines in his paintings mirror these sinuous water-edges and sculptural masses of the large plots of earth he reshaped. Dunbar's land developments, like his artwork, coincided with a period of regional growth and cultural optimism. His participation in this expansionist era left an indelible mark on the ideas that underpin both his formative years and his mature work.

In the 1950's George Dunbar explored the abstract approach of Gesture Painting. Pioneered by Arshille Gorky, Wilhelm de Kooning and Franz Kline, Gesture Painting valued the spontaneity of the abstract mark intuitively mined from the subconscious mind. Rooted in Jungian



*Collage, 1976*  
13.25" x 10.5"  
Collection of the artist



*Clay Painting, Abstract, 1960*  
18" x 21.75"  
Silver, palladium and gold leaf with gesso  
Collection of the artist

psychology, these artists believed that the human mind was a storehouse of universal archetypes, and that the technique of Gesture Painting could mine this cache of images that would connect contemporary painting with the great art of the past. Dunbar admired de Kooning for his potent combination of drawing and gestural painting in a single image. However, his own work of the period was closer in sensibility to the elemental forms of Robert Motherwell and the calligraphic marks of Franz Kline, with whom Dunbar exhibited at the Duban Lush Gallery in New York City. Like many artists working away from the epicenter of major cultural movements, Dunbar developed his own variant of the dominant mainstream style. These small paintings and collages were executed quickly with a few bold strokes on a textured surface of collaged paper. Instead of relying on the sharp emotional charge of the gesture, his works from this era communicate with the viewer more on the level of essential form presented on a small, intimate scale. The culmination of Dunbar's early period was an exhibition in 1964 at the Isaac Delgado Museum, today the New Orleans Museum of Art. By then he had begun experimenting with a new direction and new materials, and began making a new body of small works with bisymmetrical images incised on a surface of gold and silver leaf on a clay ground. This new approach abandoned the importance of the spontaneous gesture for a more rational use of essential geometries suspended in a unified, minimal surface.



*Early Collage, 1961*  
12" x 14"  
Acrylic Collage  
Collection of the artist

Abstract Expressionism's dominance of the American art scene peaked in the late 1950's. After losing its outsider, avant-garde status and being embraced by museums, critics and collectors, the movement remained an important presence in an increasingly pluralistic art world. By the mid-1960's the New York art scene was splintering into divergent trends, with the purpose of several of them being to challenge the primacy of abstract painting. For many artists who had matured at the height of Abstract Expressionism, the question was not which of the new directions to explore, but how to move abstraction beyond the clichéd territory of Abstract Expressionism's emphasis on large scale, bold gestures and the belief that art was the outcome of intuitive self-expression. For George Dunbar, the solution for this impasse was not the abandonment of the project of abstract art, but the exploration of essential geometries revealed in surface and form that may be understood as a variant of post-painterly minimalism. Dunbar was in sync with one of the most important trends of the 1960's in rejecting the romantic introspection of Abstract Expressionism in favor of a more objective approach to abstract painting. However, he also eschewed the Puritanism that drove many artists of the period to use industrial materials or insist on an absolute neutrality of surface and content. One of the major influences on Dunbar's new direction was his frequent trips to Mexico. There, he fell under the spell of the gilded interiors of the Colonial Baroque churches. His earliest use of gold leafing was more painterly than his later work, creating an all-over image by applying precious metal leafing to gessoed canvas. By 1967 he was inlaying precious metal leafing on a ground built up with multiple layers of clay bound with rabbit skin glue. These metal leaf works differ from his earlier gesture paintings in their strong bisymmetrical compositions and the use of essential geometric forms. In the first metal leaf works, the leafing covers the entire surface and his use of line and form are reminiscent of the small collages from the early 1960's. As this new direction evolved, Dunbar's use of the centralized geometric image became less dominant, and the role of the clay surface became



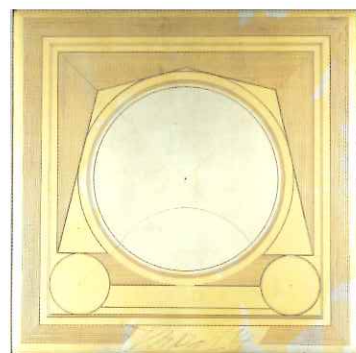
*Untitled, 1960s*  
9.5" x 8"  
Acrylic Collage  
Collection of the artist

more important in establishing the mood of the work. The twenty to thirty layers of the clay surface were increasingly abraded to create a Rothko-like patina which defined a shallow sense of space that creates a subtle tension between the edge, the ground and the image. Having found his own unique direction in the evolution of abstract painting, Dunbar began producing several series of works whose development spans several decades. The most significant of these are the *Marshgrass Series*, the *Quatrafoil* (called the *Coin du Lestin Series* after one of his land developments), and the *Minimalist Series* of horizontal and vertical bars. Though different in composition and character, these works all share common materials and rely on a sure sense of composition and a strong sense of traditional craftsmanship.

Dunbar's work brings together an interesting combination of the local and the universal. Although we can understand his trajectory from the mid-1960's to the present in terms of mainstream directions in American painting, his *Marshgrass Series* is an interesting response to his immediate environment. Living and working in the bayous of Louisiana has left an indelible imprint on Dunbar, and his long obsession with rendering the reed-like form of the region's marsh grass in shallow relief mediates between the flat pristine surfaces of the geometric compositions and his highly textured sculpture. The *Marshgrass Series*, the *Coin du Lestin Series*, and names like *Borgne* and *Bonfouca*, are all abstract in character, but reveal the deep influence of place on an artist who makes images with clay and who has reshaped the earth for decades with a bulldozer. In fact, part of the appeal of Dunbar's art is the oppositions at play in both his work and ideas. He simultaneously explores the purity of the minimal and the extravagance of the Baroque, and plays the abstract sublime against forms found in nature, the perfect against the imperfect, and the timely against the timeless. Many of those oppositions are inherent in a body of work that uses old world materials and craftsmanship to create contemporary works descended from modernist abstract essentialism. However, they are also the result of a lifetime of experience distilled into a body of work that follows the inner logic of personal choices, conscious and unconscious influences, and an unshakeable belief in the power of abstraction.

George Dunbar's recent work pushed his minimal work back into more expressive directions. The pristine grounds have developed into even more painterly patinas, and he has gradually reintroduced a subtle play of color into the work; both devices that suggest an enhanced sense of shallow space and visual complexity. In many ways these recent changes bring Dunbar's work back to his origins in the emotional emphasis of *Gesture Painting*. As the art world has continued to manufacture trend after trend with fracturous regularity, George Dunbar has held fast to the belief in the importance of abstract art. This career overview is at once indicative of many of the issues facing the artists of Dunbar's generation, as well as his highly personal response to the last fifty years of making art in a rapidly changing cultural environment. This unbroken exploration of abstract painting, coupled with the fact that some of his most compelling works are of recent vintage, suggests that the ideals of American Modernism are not yet fully exhausted. This exhibition chronicles the path of this patient search.

David Houston  
Chief Curator  
Ogden Museum of Southern Art



*Gold Circles*, 1974  
12.5" x 12.5"  
Gold leaf over clay, engraved  
Herliard-Cimino Gallery



Detail: *Marshgrass No. 8*, 2000  
Palladium leaf over gray and tan clay, rags  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Gary Campbell



*Figure XVI*, 2005  
43" x 49.25"  
Clay, rabbit skin glue with oil glaze  
Herliard-Cimino Gallery