

## ‘What is Southern?’: A Conversation with Museum Curators

Valerie Cassel Oliver and Kevin W. Tucker examine evolving perceptions of art from their region and its promising future

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BY VALERIE CASSEL OLIVER AND KEVIN W. TUCKER IN INTERVIEWS | 30 OCT 24



**Terence Trouillot** Valerie, as someone from Houston, do you consider Texas to be part of the American South?

**Valerie Cassel Oliver** Well, what constitutes ‘Southern?’ I am sure we will delve deeply into that during the exchange. I will say that people tend to think of Texas as southwest, but it is a very large state that encompasses several regions. The idea of ‘Southernness’ is most palpable on the more eastern side of the state: the northeast and southeast borders that link to Arkansas and Louisiana. That’s where you find an interesting Southern mix.

**Kevin W. Tucker** You make a great point, Valerie, in terms of thinking about the South: it’s not about lines and boundaries, it’s about people and communities.

**TT** In the years that you’ve been working in the South, do you think there’s been a shift in how the international art world perceives the region?

**VCO** I see the South as very forward-thinking. The Southern regions represent what the future of America could look like: a true melting pot. The South is largely viewed through what was most visible about the region during the mid-20th century: the civil rights struggle. This vision of the South – a place defined by politics and racism, where enslavement of Black people took root, where there are deep cultural divisions – has really been codified and seared into people’s minds. There’s an arrested development of perception in terms of how people view the South.

**KWT** When you ask about the biases that arise when labelling something as ‘Southern’, it’s important to consider what that term means to different people. Each individual will have a unique perspective of the word based on their own experiences.

All history is fraught and, as art historians, we are obligated to confront it. The genesis of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston-Salem, for instance, stemmed from the museum’s founder, Frank Horton, overhearing the northern curator Joseph Downs say at a 1949 antiques fair in Williamsburg that nothing of artistic merit was created south of the Mason-Dixon Line.



I guess I’m hopeful that, in the current era, we’re growing an appreciation for and knowledge of the South’s vibrant artistic legacy, both contemporary and historical, despite all those very real and distressing aspects – the racism and poverty – that tend to get lumped into a limited notion of ‘Southernness’.

**TT** Do you find yourselves organizing shows that pitch counter-narratives against these outmoded notions of what the South represents?

**VCO** I don’t see it as the intention of my work to counter narratives specifically about the South. My work has always been about bringing light to what has been hidden in plain sight. It is about responding to the blind spots so that we can more accurately reflect the humanity around us and celebrate the artistic ingenuity that has existed, or is currently unfolding, in the region. My exhibition ‘The Dirty South’ [2021] at Virginia Museum of Fine Arts [VMFA] took into account a century of artistic production that has taken place in the South. It attempted to interlace music with the visual arts and see all facets of creative expression as extensions of the complexity of Black culture.

By way of a counter-narrative, the exhibition took into account the fact that Black culture is not monolithic. It also showcased artists who are not academically trained, who are oftentimes placed in a box as being ‘primitive’

or 'self-taught'. We miss the point when we want to embrace such artists as savant: a tremendous amount of intellect goes into the creation of their work. If people embrace jazz as the original American music form, why can't we draw an aesthetic parallel to African American quilts? Why are they not an original American art form? It stems from the same mixture of culture and embraces that same ideas of improvisation.

**KWT** Absolutely. One of the reasons I was compelled to come to Atlanta to work at the High Museum of Art was knowing the history of collections development here, both as a student and as a design curator, and the acknowledgement within that programme around what we continue to call 'folk', 'self-taught' and 'decorative' arts.

We've already had internal conversations at the museum about the words 'self-taught' and 'folk', about how loaded and challenging they are. But one of the things that we did recently to really acknowledge that larger body of work was to reinstall our collections in 2018, including, among other linkages, bringing the folk and self-taught works together with that of our modern and contemporary department and African diasporic art; this year we joined our folk and self-taught department with that of American art to further underscore that these works are all of equal consideration no matter how, with what or by whom they are made.

**TT** As quilting, pottery and similar art forms gain international recognition and legitimacy, do you think they're starting to evolve in sync with current contemporary art trends around the globe?

**KWT** One initiative we have is to look at the work of a wider pool of Black artists who are connecting to different aspects of quilting traditions and, often, their own Southern histories. That's an important part of what Katie Jentleson [Senior Curator of American Art and Merrie and Dan Boone Curator of Folk and Self-Taught Art] is doing in terms of developing that collection. We're not looking *purely* at the history of American quilt-making, we're looking at artists working today who allude to the quilt-making process. There is certainly a broader engagement with and recognition of that work.

**VCO** I agree. You have artists like Bisa Butler or Sanford Biggers, who are utilizing quilts in their work, or Theaster Gates, who's looking at pottery as an expression of African American and Japanese-inspired forms. When we try to identify the connective tissues to those contemporary voices, we always find ourselves being led back to seminal figures like the potter David Drake or the many women quilters of Gee's Bend, such as the Bendolphs and the Pettways. I also want to take a moment to thank curators like Regenia Perry who collected and celebrated this work, as well as the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, whose mission it is to bring visibility to African American artists from the South

**KWT** Yes, absolutely. That work is key in getting those collections into museums, both within and beyond the region. Just seeing that increased recognition happening on an academic level, within the museum community and, frankly, within the art market outside of the southeast has been vital. Creating context and integrating work across departments is also crucial. During the High Museum of Art's 2018 reinstallation, we transformed our galleries to include what we called 'nexus spaces', featuring works from as many as four different departments, which brought together civil-rights photography, contemporary sculpture and self-taught art, by artists such as Thornton Dial and Beverly Buchanan, as a means of disrupting old boundaries of classification and to foster dialogue.

**TT** While your focus is clearly on bringing visibility to Southern art and scholarship, does the idea of gaining international presence factor into your work or institutional goals?

**VCO** I should say that, as an encyclopaedic museum that is also a state institution, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts has fashioned itself as a space for its audiences to experience the world, from antiquities to the present day. Virginia has several museums in the state network, but the VMFA is by far its crown jewel. We bring the world to our visitors. It exists right in their backyards. And, the museum has placed a high focus on artists living in the Commonwealth, supporting them through biennials, scholarships and fellowships; in fact, in the early 1950s, Cy Twombly received two such fellowships and the artist Betty Blayton received a scholarship.

**KWT** It goes back to another of our primary responsibilities at the institution: to amplify Southern artistic voices – be that on a regional, national or international level. Once you start specifying Southern artists, however, you're circling back to our initial question: What is Southern? Who identifies as Southern, and when do they choose to do so? Is it expressed through their art? Is it explicitly stated or merely hinted at? And in what ways do artists convey this identity?



I'm thinking about our current exhibition of photographic work by Tyler Mitchell. Does Mitchell identify as a Southern artist? Would those in New York regard him as a Southern artist? So, again, it depends on who is applying that label, whether it's self-chosen or it's applied by others. I don't think Jasper Johns has spent too much time talking about the fact that he's from the South.

Thornton Dial, Sr., *Smooth-Going Cats and the Hard-Headed Goat*, 1990, oil on canvas, 1.7 x 2 m. Courtesy: © Estate of Thornton Dial/Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, and T. Marshall Hahn Collection



**VCO** That's such a great point, Kevin: in the art world people tend to pick and choose who and what they want to focus on. Twombly was from Lexington. Betty Blayton was from Williamsburg. Terry Adkins was from Washington – his family was from Virginia – Melvin Edwards was from Texas and Jack Whitten was from Alabama. But nobody wants to talk about these artists as Southern.

**TT** I'm curious about the cultural landscapes of your respective cities, Richmond and Atlanta. As they grow and attract new residents, there seems to be an increasing focus on the Southern art scene.

**VCO** Richmond is wonderful. In addition to the VMFA, we have the Institute of Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University. Although Richmond lacks big commercial galleries, we have numerous artist-run spaces, like Candela Gallery, which focuses on photography, 1708 and Art 180.

**KWT** There was a bit of a sea change nine years ago at the High Museum of Art with the arrival of our current director, Randall Suffolk, with whom we have worked on reimagining our educational and curatorial programmes. The institution deliberately moved away from bringing in large-scale traditional exhibitions centred on the canon to instead emphasize engagement with the strength of our curators, collections and surrounding communities. This approach has resonated strongly – a fact particularly evidenced by the transformation of our audience demographics. A decade ago, people of colour made up 15 percent of our attendance; now, we see an average of around 52 percent – a figure that reflects Atlanta's diverse population.

How has this impacted our relationships within Atlanta's ecosystem and beyond? I believe the more we engage with this approach, recognizing Southern art as part of our broader strategy to contextualize it nationally, the better. Locally, we aim to provide a hub, complementing sister institutions like Atlanta Contemporary, Museum of Design Atlanta, SCAD FASH Museum of Fashion and Film, and the city's array of galleries, both commercial and non-profit. As Valerie mentioned, I wish we had a stronger presence of commercial galleries here in Atlanta, and a larger, more active collector base. Patronage is a key opportunity for growth in our ecosystem.

**VCO** I also do not want to leave out historical black colleges and universities [HBCUs].

**KWT** Absolutely. We have had great partnerships, including with Spelman College for instance.

**VCO** Yes, and the role they have played historically in maintaining a repository of artistic production by African American artists who were not collected by major institutions. Their endeavours have been significant. The majority of that repository is still with those HBCUs today, so kudos to them. They don't get enough acknowledgement in the art world.

**KWT** Yes. I just saw curator Denise Murrell's exhibition 'The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism' [2024] at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I remember seeing the credit lines and thinking: 'Oh, there's another one from Spelman. There's another one from Howard.' It just went on and on. It was fantastic.

**TT** Looking ahead, how do you envision the South's role in the art world evolving over the next few years?

**VCO** It's an upward trajectory. Innovation has always happened outside of the West and the East Coasts. The South is a great place to be looking towards to see what conversations are taking place and where that ingenuity is taking us.

**KWT** Very much so. One should not shy away from engaging with complexity. Curiosity about that complexity leads to creativity, which in turn leads to understanding. That's what I'm really hopeful for: a deeper knowledge and understanding of the complexities that are part of the legacy of the South.

*This article first appeared in frieze issue 247*

*Tyler Mitchell's **Idyllic Space** is on view at The High Museum of Art, Atlanta, from 21 June – 1 December 2025.*

**'Patterns in Abstraction: Black Quilts from the High's Collection'** is on view at The High Museum of Art, Atlanta, from 28 June – 5 January 2025

Main image: Beverly Buchanan. St. Simons, Georgia (detail), 1989, oil pastel on paper, 97 x 130 cm. Courtesy: © Beverly Buchanan and Heritage Auctions/HA.com