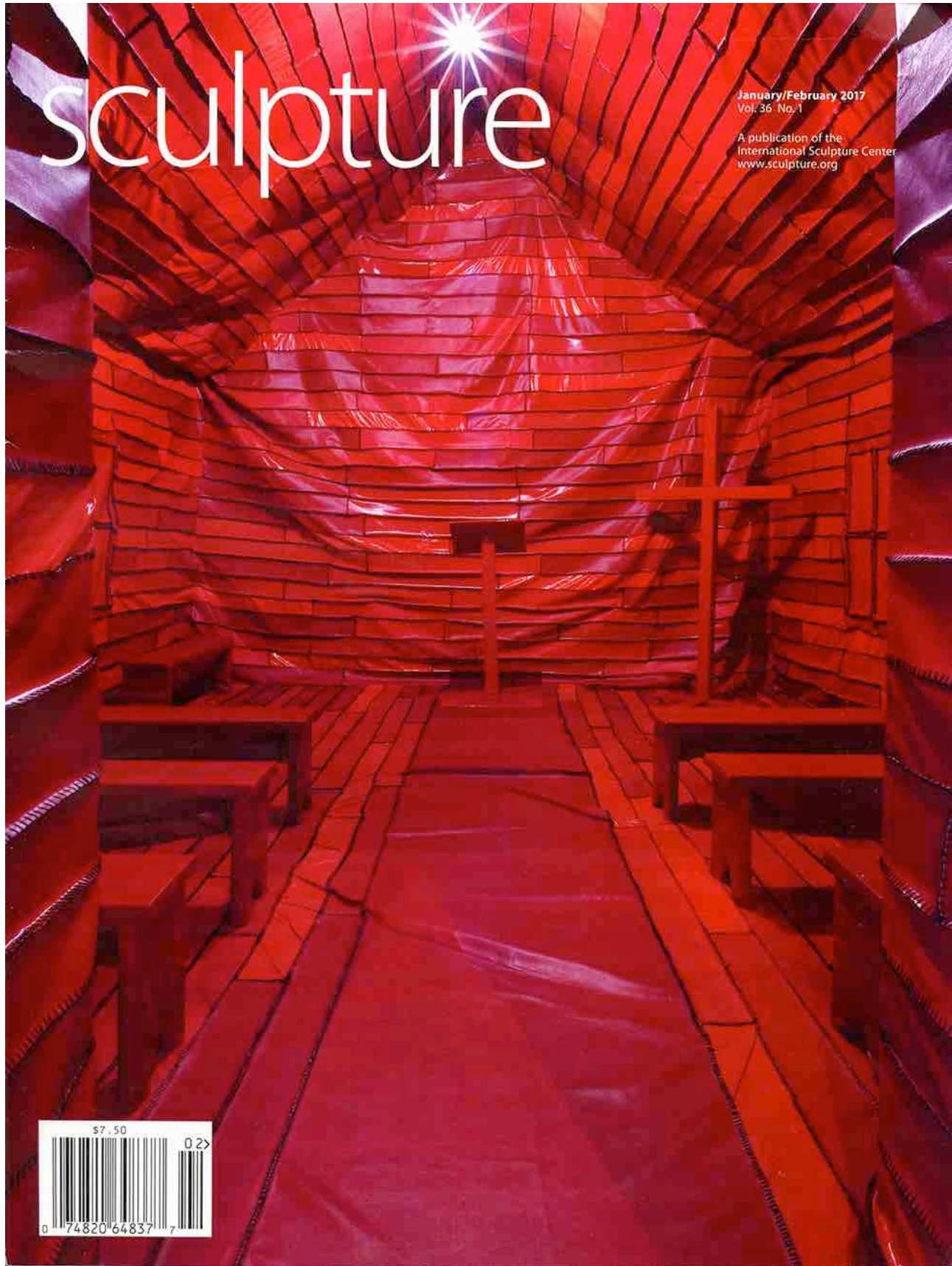


RODNEY MCMILLIAN

"Waging an Artist's War"

By Becky Huff Hunter

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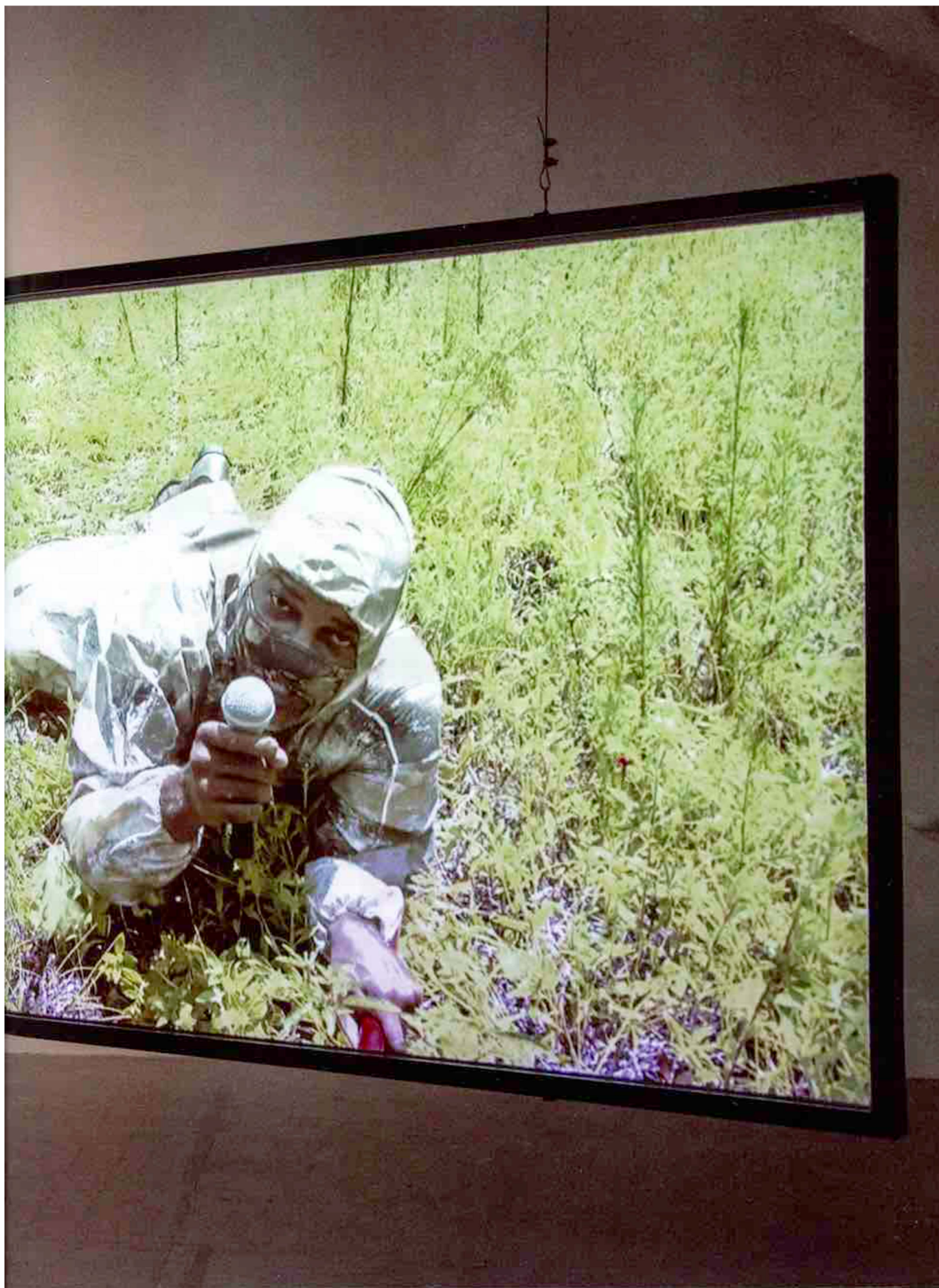
Rodney McMillian



Waging an Artist's War

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Installation view of "Rodney McMillian: The Black Show" with (left) *Wizard (for Doro)*, 2013, vinyl, zipper, and thread, and (right) *Shelter (Crawl)*, 2015, single-channel video, color, and sound.





Installat on view of "Rodney McMillian: Views of Main Street" at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 2016.

BY BECKY HUFFHUTER

It has been a big year for Rodney McMillian. In a rare achievement for any artist, three major East Coast institutions mounted simultaneous solo exhibitions of his multimedia work, spanning more than a decade. At the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia, and MoMA PS1 in New York, McMillian's shows laid bare the complexities of racial violence and injustice in the United States. As McMillian told *Artforum*, the exhibitions presented "different modes of engagement within my practice" across forms, conceptual strategies, and themes—including the class-based politics of domesticity, the liberating construction of identity in science fiction, and the bloodied history of the American landscape. In conversation with McMillian, curator Heidi Zuckerman described his body of work as fulfilling the "intention to communicate some of the complexities of things that are taken for granted if people do not ask questions." This statement parallels James Baldwin's oft-quoted imperative, a

rallying cry for creative practitioners: "The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides." Baldwin was talking specifically about the hidden, oppressive social structures that artists like McMillian so thoroughly expose. Baldwin's great hope, writing in 1962, was of the U.S. finally "moving beyond the Old World concepts of race and class and caste." While progress has been made in the past half century, race, class, and gender are still major social problems that demand artistic interrogation. At the Studio Museum in Harlem, McMillian's sculptures and wall-based works constructed from broken furniture, smashed appliances, and shoddy textiles materialized an environment of domestic distress. These ironic "Views of Main Street" served as a powerful counterforce for video works that took direct verbal aim at problematic government policies. Together, the works in this exhibition (March 24–June 26, 2016) exposed individual and community struggles hidden behind a bucolic vision of the American dream and exacerbated by national economic directives that hit poor,

often African American populations the hardest. *Untitled* (2011) is a huge maroon carpet crusted with trodden-in dirt and cut into the shape of a floor plan, probably of a low-income studio apartment. A long rip in the fabric has been sewn up. It smells dank, indicating its origin in a neglected building, and its patterns of wear map out the ghosts of its former home. A single clean rectangle preserves its velvety pile, perhaps protected at one time by a corner couch or refrigerator, the worn pathway is an index of limited human movement. Reoriented onto the wall, the carpet juts out onto the floor like a welcome mat. Like a similarly scaled, cracked and peeling linoleum work (*Untitled*, 2006), it speaks to architectural space as social space. Though absent, this space is palpable—messy, smelly, aged, never purely theoretical or abstract. Four works made from found seating reinforced the sense of domestic insecurity, even danger. *Untitled* (2009) violates a near-archetypal piece of middle-class furniture: a birch-framed, beige upholstered Ikea Poang armchair. A slicily painted, rough, black column penetrates the seat

ADAM KEITH



Above: *Chairs and Books*, 2004. Found armchairs and books, installation view. Right: *Untitled (refrigerator)*, 2009. Refrigerator, 64 x 29 x 25 in. Below: Installation view of "Views of Main Street" with (left) *Untitled (The Supreme Court Painting)*, 2004–06, poured acrylic paint on cut canvas and (right) *Untitled*, 2006, linoleum and mixed media.



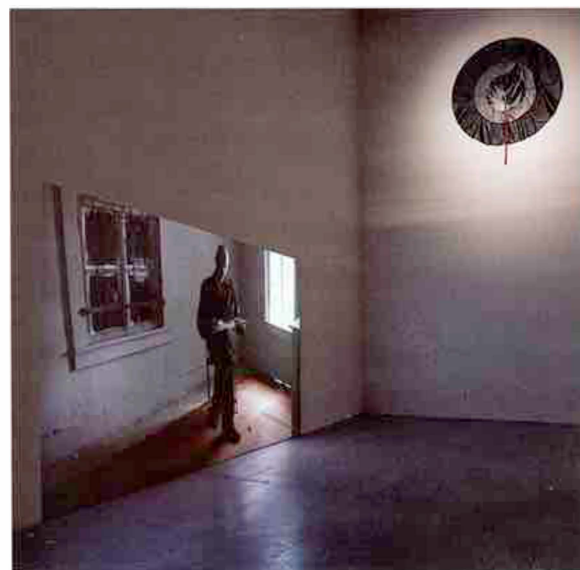
LEFT: JAMIE REEKY / RIGHT: COURTESY THE ORANGE COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART AND BISS PHOTOGRAPHY

of the chair, leaving a dark stain reminiscent of forensic evidence surrounding a wound. While the column is made from cardboard, it looks heavy and irremovable. The absence of a seated person brings to mind a near-miss. This work is often read as representing sexualized violence, but the tableau feels somber in its stillness; the

scene is inert and unmovable, perhaps capturing the sense of inevitable defeat wrought by poverty. Though McMillian appropriated his own Ikea chair for this work and often uses his body in performances, he does not intend a personal expression or claim autobiographical significance. "Th[e]se works have nothing to

do with my life, but they have to do with certain ideas within culture that relate to the body," he explains. "It's about the idea I'm trying to communicate. Once I understand or decide what it is I intend to say, I then seek out a way to say it. So, one approach is to think through the idea from the perspective of different material possibilities, questioning which one enables the idea to be the most apparent. I'm usually not too concerned with trying to master a technique...I'm usually just happy I have an idea and a plan of action. Once I have that, it's about the physical work, the labor, and staying focused on the why."⁵

"The Black Show" at the ICA (February 3–August 14, 2016) featured textile and paper sculptures, as well as videos in which McMillian performs, all revolving around science fiction as a means to reconstruct identity. A massive black, white, burnt orange, and blue-painted paper curtain snaked diagonally through the gallery's main space, suspended from the high ceiling



Above: Installation view of "The Black Show" with (left) *Column*, 2015, vinyl, thread, and zipper, and (right) *Many moons*, 2015, latex, acrylic, and ink on paper mounted on fabric. Left: Installation view of "The Black Show" with (left) *Untitled (lungs)*, 2008-13, acrylic, fabric, and chicken wire.

through shiny, domestic-looking eyelet- stitched into a stiff black vinyl hem. Layers upon layers of ink, acrylic, and latex paint created the startling impression of a forest of flailing limbs, or the fleshy insides of a body, lit suddenly by a camera flash. (The reverse side, in contrast, is matte black.) A monumental, yet brittle intervention, *Many moons* (2015) dwarfed visitors and choreographed a curving pathway around McMillian's videos, wall-based sculptures, and teatiles. He describes the effect of the work as "being inside and outside; being an image while also creating a darkened space for a video; perhaps delineating the space into night and day... I think it provides multiple ways of moving through, viewing, or grasping the exhibition." Discussing a similar work, *Representation of a Landscape as a Wall* (2012), he explains, "I wanted to shrink the space, to make a painting that was as much about a viewer's physical presence in front of it as it was about looking... [*Many moons*] was made with similar concerns, so it's about architecture as much as it's about painting and sculpture." In contrast to the critical perspective on urban housing in "Views of Main Street," "The Black Show" treated architectural space as something malleable in ways both hopeful and sinister. These varied bodies of work installed in different cities and institutions remained in constant conversation. As McMillian explained to me, "It's a matter of location. If we're in Central Time, Pacific Time, or Eastern Time, right now we're in different time zones but we're talking at the same time."

Sculptural form played a major role in "The Black Show," from the monumental curtain to the large- and smaller-scale, wall-mounted pieces in stitched black vinyl and latex paint that animated the space. McMillian used the entire gallery from top to bottom, turning the exhibition into an essayistic constellation of works. *Untitled (lungs)* (2008-13) and *Untitled (target)* (2012), two textile sculptures hanging diagonally opposite each other, brought the

Installation view of "The Black Show" with (left) *Storytime in Dockery*, 2015, and (right) *Untitled (target)*, 2012, vinyl, thread, and zipper.

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Wizard (for Doro), 2013. Vinyl, zipper, and thread, approx. 72 x 48 in.

violence and systemic racism condemned by the Black Lives Matter movement into full view. The half-collapsed, blackened lungs molded in painfully angular chicken wire and fabric viscerally recall the last words of African American father Eric Garner as he was held in an NYPD chokehold: “I can’t breathe” became a mantra of national protest at peaceful rallies and on social media.⁶ At the time of McMillian’s Studio Museum exhibition, one of the museum’s windows bore an “I can’t breathe” sign to signal community solidarity. McMillian’s black vinyl target used art historical references—Eva Hesse’s bodily abstractions of circular and dangling parts such as *Vertiginous Detour* and Jasper Johns’s now-canonical *Target with Four Faces* (1955), a painted representation of a shooting range target with cast faces mounted above—to draw attention to the act of looking as an act of violence. In today’s surveillance culture, which affects nonwhites the most, we are all familiar with this condition. Installed high on the wall (close to the ceiling), *Untitled (target)* cast an ominous presence, like a security camera looking down on gallery visitors and the vulnerable lungs alike, its form a reminder of the consequences of being seen, of being a target. Such strategic placement of works reinforced the sense that viewers were, even if only momentarily, inducted into a very specific, and traumatic, lived state. The museum’s security cameras and alarms took on a hyper-visible aspect as the viewer became alert to this pervasive system of watching. As McMillian explains: “Since the time I could walk and talk, I have been aware that every time I leave my house, I can be misidentified and end up with a State-sanctioned bullet to the head...There is no way to represent trauma. I have no interest in trying to. I’m more interested in presenting a representation of our lived state that includes trauma.”⁷

Wild Seed and *Wizard (for Doro)* (both 2013), which take their themes from science fiction, also address bodily trauma. While much mainstream science fiction has been criticized recently for its straight, white,



male-centric attitude, McMillian draws on the dark literary fantasies of Octavia E. Butler to feed his vision: “These works were inspired by Octavia Butler’s *Seed to Harvest*, from her *Patternist* series [of novels]. Butler’s work is a challenge to hegemonic structures, among other things.” *Wizard (for Doro)* consists of a black vinyl, hooded costume with a sadomasochistic feel, hung on the wall as if left behind in a dungeon; like a remnant from a performance, it resembles a skin that might have been shed and

reanimated. *Wild Seed* is an expectant, bulbous outgrowth stitched in vinyl. Doro, the psychic African protagonist of the *Patternist* books, can steal others’ bodies in an alternative world, where the body is something that can be slipped into and out of, violently controlled. Butler’s novels circulate around a persistent set of questions about whether and when people are really free.⁸

The phallic *Column* (2015) at ICA, which covered the gallery’s central load-bearing



There are veins in these lands, I, 2007–13. Acrylic and latex on bed sheet, 135 x 80.5 in.

comets. The rivulets and globs of blue and brown paint on *Blue Sun* (2014–15) appear to be in motion, like still-settling seismic layers or a shadowy eclipse-in-progress. Other works flow toward the floor or bundle up like giant knapsacks. Nailed askew to a wall, a creased, inflammably shiny, blue bedspread appears pregnant with a black reptilian lump the size of a human torso. This work, *Wildseedling: it was already there* (2014–15), also acknowledges Butler's writings in its title.

At the far end of this gallery at PS1, partially hidden behind a temporary wall, a monitor screened one of McMillian's first video works, *Untitled (sheet performance)* (2005). The grainy, looping film opens on the artist's head, body, and limbs obscured under a white sheet, which gently billows over his outstretched arms like theater curtains drawn closed in anticipation of a show. Slowly, the sheet undulates in response to McMillian's movements. Soft light and shadow pick out folds in the fabric, recalling a dissonant variety of cultural and ideological tropes: classical statues, cinematic Ku Klux Klan imagery, and the fluid costumes and gauzy sets used by contemporary dancers, such as Trisha Brown. As the movement evolves into writhing, thrashing, and bending, the body finally appears trapped in a veil of whiteness. "My interests in performance sprang out of necessity," McMillian explains. "There were things I could communicate through performance that were not possible through other mediums or forms. My understanding of the history of performance in art is that it originated out of a need for immediate political engagement. That, I'd say, has been the predominant motivating factor for my use of it in my practice. The video, *Untitled (sheet performance)*, was shot on a Super VHS camera, which I liked because of its video quality [or] materiality. It also happened to be the only camera I had for many, many years."

Performance on video ran through all three exhibitions. Like the juxtaposition of the sheet paintings and sheet performance, in each space, the different mediums joined

pillar in a black vinyl skin, slips a new "body" over an institutional marker. This gesture, which reflects sci-fi's renegade creation of new ways of being, appears as an attempt to change the institution itself. McMillian has explained the attraction of such a strategy: "While reading *Wild Seed*, I was drawn to the transformative abilities of characters such as Anyanwu as well as Doro with his skin-snatching powers. They are able to move through, out of, into, or to a something or a someplace through their bodies and the bodies of others. The orifices, tubular forms, and cavities I've employed

in my work are portals, sites of transformation, confounding Euro-ethnic patriarchal stereotyping of Black bodies."⁹

The exhibition "Landscape Paintings" at MoMA PS1 (April 3–August 28, 2016) captured these desires and frustrations through tightly limited materials: 12 used, queen-size bed sheets purchased from thrift stores—many with price tags still attached—combined with latex, acrylic, and ink. Each painting builds on, drips off, and bursts from its intimate ground into a three-dimensional form that provokes visual associations with mouths and canyons, plants and

Wildseedling: it was already there. 2014–15.
Latex and chicken wire on bedspread, 92 x 74 in.

their voices together. In “The Black Show,” the videos were suspended in space on scrims or projected onto cavernous sections of wall, allowing visitors to walk around them, view multiple moving images at once, and hear overlapping sounds. It was almost as if we were in the long grass with McMillian as he crawls, painfully rasping the words to “Gimme Shelter,” or were invited to participate in the dance with death in *A Migration Tale* (2014–15). At the Studio Museum, *Untitled (the Great Society) I* (2006) played on a small monitor installed next to a battered, anthropomorphic refrigerator seemingly shot in the “chest” area, two worn armchairs sadly cemented together with romance novels, and small, sticky-shiny black reliefs (from the series “The Clampetts,” 2010) reminiscent of the reptilian surface of *Wildseedling*. The violence implied through this cluster of beaten-up domestic objects and flayed-looking skins bears witness to the so-far failed dream of an Inclusive Great Society. As McMillian has said of this exhibition: “I hope to question what ‘Main Street’ means. When I’ve heard that expression, I have never believed it referred to me or other African Americans, regardless of our economic station.” In the video, McMillian recites President Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1964 “Great Society” speech in a dry, reserved tone, with small shifts of facial expression and hand gestures: slightly furrowed brow, slow up and down movements of the hand. The speech thematically focuses on urban growth, education, and social improvement—that illusionary sense of domestic security denied by the works in “Views of Main Street.” Johnson’s central claim—that “The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands



an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time”—feels as unsatisfied today as it did half a century ago.¹⁰

James Baldwin’s essay on the creative process was published just two years before Johnson’s speech. For Baldwin, the price of progress is “a long look backward when we came and an unflinching assessment of the record...the war of an artist with his society is a lover’s war, and he does, at his best,

what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and, with that revelation, to make freedom real.”¹¹ McMillian certainly does not flinch at the past or the future. Through carefully chosen materials and means, he reveals the ways in which freedom is still not real for many Americans—and declines to offer tidy solutions.

Becky Huff Hunter is a writer and artist based in Philadelphia.

Notes

¹ Alex Kierke, “Affirming 500 Words: Rodney McMillian,” May 4, 2016. <<http://artforum.com/words/id=55171>>
² Hish-Dimarian, “Painting the Domestic,” in Rodney McMillian: *Landscape Paintings*, exhibition catalogue, (Ayeri: Aspen Art Press, 2015), p. 22.
³ James Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” in *Creative America* (New York: Ridge Press, 1962), pp. 17–19.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ All quotations from the artist unless otherwise noted are from a phone interview and e-mail exchange between Rodney McMillian and Becky Huff Hunter, June–July 2016.
⁶ See <www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2014/dec/14/15ami/breath-e-gamer-chokehold-death-video> and

<www.cnn.com/2014/12/04/justice/new-york-gambling-chokehold>
⁷ Rodney McMillian, “Wildseedling: there are veins in these lands,” in *Landscape Paintings*, op. cit., p. 110.
⁸ Thanks to Dr. Marika Rose, postdoctoral fellow at Durham University, U.K., for an illuminating conversation about Octavia Butler’s *Patternist* novels.
⁹ Rodney McMillian, “Wildseedling: there are veins in these lands,” op. cit., p. 106.
¹⁰ The text of the speech is available at <www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanspeaks/feature/primary_textures/16michigan/>
¹¹ James Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” op. cit.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PHOTOGRAFED BY JEFFREY M. HUNTER FOR LOS ANGELES PROJECTS