

5 *Untitled (The Great Society) I*
2006
Single-channel color video
15:48 minutes

Courtesy of the Artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

In this seemingly simple oratory video, McMillian recites President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 University of Michigan commencement address at Bard College in upstate New York. In LBJ's paradigm-setting speech, which unofficially launched the extensive domestic policy agenda meant to transform America into a "Great Society," Johnson calls for help to end poverty and racial injustice, and to improve the lives of all Americans through reformed public education, collective labor, and moral enrichment. In its sweeping mandate, the Great Society pledged to build upon Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, with added emphasis on meaningful civil rights legislation, education programs, healthcare, the arts, the environment, and rural development. However, 56 years later, while many of the programs created under Johnson's administration like Medicare, Medicaid, and Head Start continue to shape American life, much of the plan's promise for bettering the lives of African Americans and the economically disadvantaged remain unfilled. By embodying Johnson's speech, McMillian raises questions about how history and politics are themselves repeatedly performed and for whom. How do the words and ambitions this speech espouses change when voiced by one of the citizens the Great Society was meant to address?

Rodney McMillian (b. 1969, Columbia, SC) received a MFA in 2002 from the California Institute of the Arts, a post-baccalaureate degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2000, and a BA in Foreign Affairs from the University of Virginia in 1991. His work is held in a number of museum collections worldwide, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Art Institute of Chicago; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Studio Museum in Harlem; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the San Antonio Museum of Art; the Saint Louis Art Museum; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; among many others. In 2016, McMillian was the inaugural recipient of the Suzanne Deal Booth Art Prize at The Contemporary Austin. He is currently Professor of Sculpture at University of California, Los Angeles.

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6 *A Migration Tale*
2014–15
Single-channel color video
10:00 minutes

Courtesy of the Artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

In this performative, but historically grounded tale, a costumed individual clad in a silver Ultraman mask and floor-length black cloak travels on foot and via subway to multiple locations in the Eastern United States. On his journey, he first rests upon a residential South Carolina porch, then traverses the steps of the SC statehouse building which still waves the Confederate flag, rides the New York City subway, participates in impromptu dancing in Harlem, and comes to rest again in Central Park. This path references the "Great Migration": a massive movement from 1916 to 1970 in which thousands of Black Americans left the embedded racism of the rural South for the promise of a better life in northern states. Over 40 years later, McMillian makes a condensed version of this northward journey in the guise of an anonymous, ominous, and absurdist figure who goes largely unnoticed by those he encounters. In so doing, the artist raises questions of the role of the invisible "other" throughout American history, revealing the many ways that location and identity continue to inform our understandings of racial and class disparity.

Rodney McMillian: Historically Hostile is organized by Tyler Blackwell, Cynthia Woods Mitchell Curatorial Fellow at Blaffer Art Museum.

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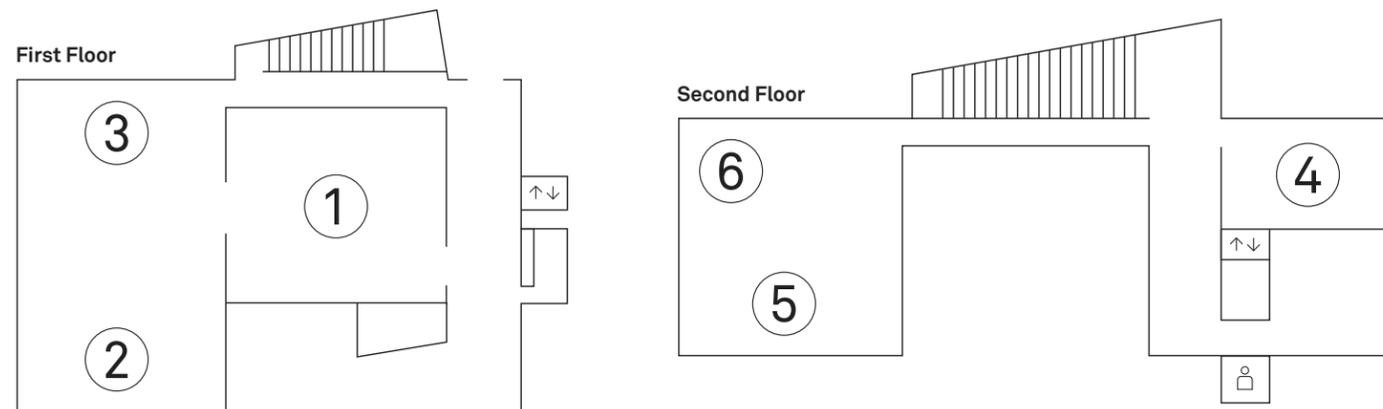


Rodney McMillian, video still from *A Migration Tale*, 2014-15. Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

Rodney McMillian: Historically Hostile

South Carolina-born, Los Angeles-based artist Rodney McMillian creates sculptures, paintings, installations, videos, and performances that explore how the accumulated ideologies, policies, myths, gods, and monsters of American history and politics shape experience, identity, and our sense of place. Through his performative reinterpretations of political texts, historical events, oral histories, and popular culture, McMillian confronts the social and economic legacies of race-driven actions and oppression. By deconstructing and restaging these diverse narratives of power, violence, and possibility, McMillian offers an alternative reality while also illuminating the power of people to affect change and transform the future.

In the exhibition *Rodney McMillian: Historically Hostile*, the Blaffer presents six video works made between 2005 and 2017, installed across the entire museum. The videos were selected in collaboration with the artist, and they collectively reconsider the contemporary ramifications of slavery, the civil rights movement, white supremacy, and modern U.S. government policy embedded within our daily life. Several were filmed in South Carolina, where the artist grew up, in Austin, Texas, or at Dockery Farms—the infamous Mississippi plantation where Delta blues music was born. These works often feature a lone figure, alternatively clad in protective garments, superhero masks, a clergyman’s cassocks, or suit and tie—entwining the performance of the so-called “everyday” with science fiction. The steadfast protagonists are often set against American landscapes historically hostile to Black bodies, rewriting both place and personhood with new possibility.



- 1 *Untitled (neighbors)*
2017
Single-channel color video
19:04 minutes

Commissioned by The Contemporary Austin, with funds provided by the Suzanne Deal Booth Art Prize. Courtesy of the Artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

This dream-like video depicts four figures hooded and robed in white emerging from a shoreline at dusk and follows them as they ritually dance and saunter in silence through the landscape. *Untitled (neighbors)* was filmed on land once owned by Texas founding father, and confirmed slavery advocate, Stephen F. Austin. After nightfall, the quartet gathers to convulse and gyrate against the Doric columns of an illuminated, freestanding gazebo—a structure reminiscent of neoclassical government buildings, churches, and historic homes of the wealthy. The unsettling scene is emblematic of McMillian’s ongoing study of architecture and symbols of power. Eerie, mystifying, and alluring, the white-cloaked dancers are reminiscent of specters or of Ku Klux Klan members. But as the work’s title suggests, these phantom appearances are not unusual; in fact, they are perhaps as common as our own neighbors. In the artist’s words, “The idea of ghosts is always common, they have a place within our community. They chase what they know.”

- 3 *Preacher Man*
2015
Single-channel color video
6:08 minutes

Courtesy of the Artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

Preacher Man grapples with questions of religion, class, and the ongoing fight for racial equality in the United States. The video’s lone character, dressed as an old-fashioned preacher in suit and tie, emerges from the darkness to sit on a chair in a moonlit field to deliver a sermon. He then recites a section from a 1966 interview with the legendary experimental jazz composer Sun Ra, a figure whose performances and mythical persona were famous for their outlandish costumes and space-age aesthetics. Ra’s words starkly equate peace with death—implying that for the oppressed, life is inherently struggle. In this remote but noisy, living landscape, McMillian’s preacher tethers us to the earthly reality of Ra’s harsh message, raising questions about the effectiveness of protest and the ethics of agency in a society that is founded on systematic injustice.

- 2 *Dummies on a Porch Swing*
(Lee Atwater Interview, 1981)
2012
Single-channel color video
6:01 minutes

Courtesy of the Artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

McMillian presents two ventriloquist dummies here, perched on a porch swing at Dockery Farms—a cotton plantation established in 1895 in the Mississippi Delta. The puppets pantomime excerpts from an infamous 1981 recording of Republican election strategist Lee Atwater, where he recounts the party’s “Southern strategy” that helped propel Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980 and 1984. In the 1970s, Atwater rose to prominence in the South Carolina Republican Party, becoming well-known for managing hard-edged campaigns based on divisive issues; he would eventually serve as an adviser to Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and as chairman of the Republican National Committee. Atwater’s national electoral blueprint, which worked to increase political support among white working-class voters by fueling racist resentments against Black Americans, has since been described as the “smoking gun” for today’s hyper-partisan political climate.

- 4 *A Song for Nat*
2012
Single-channel color video
6:00 minutes

Courtesy of the Artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

A Song for Nat references Nat Turner, the enslaved preacher who led a rebellion of enslaved and free Black people in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831. Turner’s insurrection, which lasted only a few days before being quelled by a local white militia, caused a shockwave among slaveholders and politicians and has been described as a turning point for the Black struggle for liberation. In the video, the protagonist is dressed in a hazmat suit and an Iron Man mask—a futuristic costume that could serve as both an admonition and protection of/from the lush Southern landscape historically hostile to Black bodies. The figure also wields an axe as he surveils a house at Dockery Farms: the infamous former cotton plantation in Mississippi known as the birthplace of Delta blues music. By combining these histories, McMillian entwines the heroic story of Turner’s leadership and bravery with the plight of enslaved plantation workers elsewhere seeking solace and escape.