

PAULA COOPER GALLERY

McFadden, Syreeta. "The Artifacts of Bygone Lives: Remembering the Dead Through Beloved Objects,"  
*The Atlantic*, December 12, 2020

## *The Atlantic*



Estate of Terry Adkins / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Lévy Gorvy

VIEWFINDER

# THE ARTIFACTS OF BYGONE LIVES

Remembering the dead through beloved objects

By Syreeta McFadden

Photographs by Terry Adkins

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**W**HAT YOU ARE looking at is the afterlife of memories.

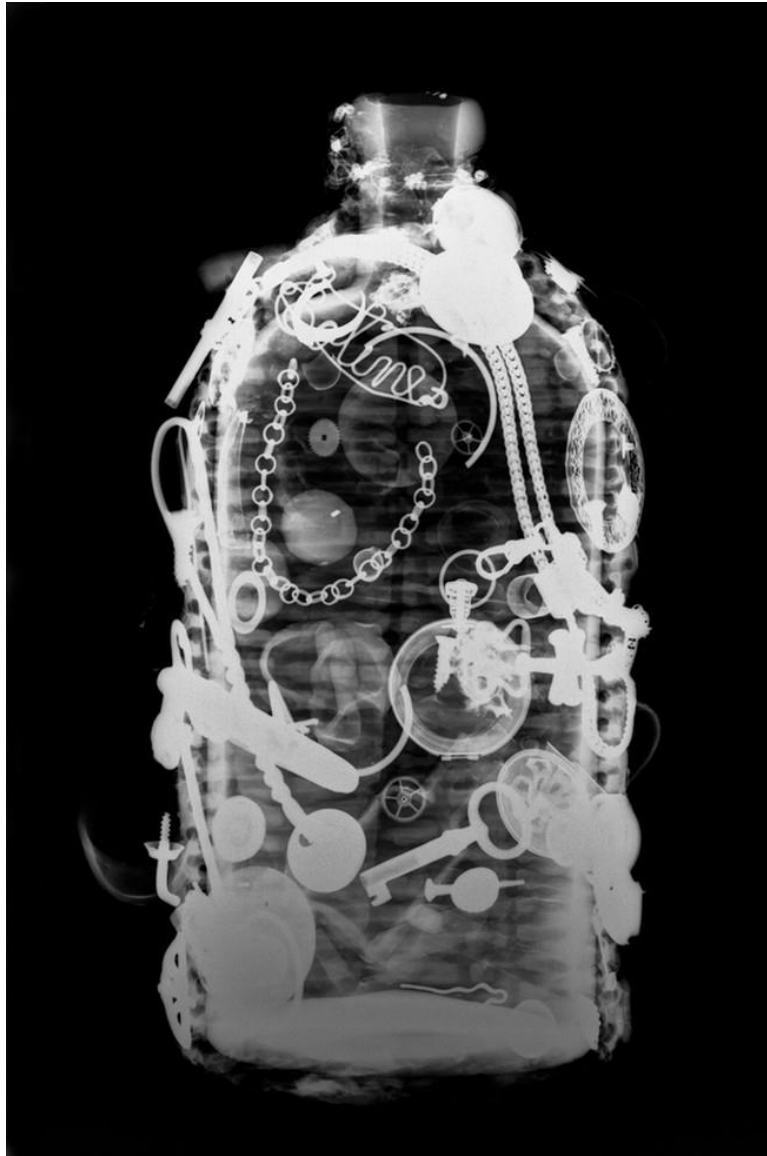
Memory jugs were funerary objects found in the South on the graves of African Americans through the mid-20th century. These small stoneware vessels were adorned with fragments—broken china, glass shards—and items beloved by the departed. The ritual is said to have its origins in Central Africa's Bakongo culture. It was brought here by enslaved people and continued by their descendants, mainly sharecroppers.

The artist Terry Adkins (1953–2014) had seen one such vessel in his grandmother's home, in Upperville, Virginia, as a young boy, which fueled his fascination. He collected hundreds of memory jugs from the mid-1990s until his death, and began taking X-rays of them while he was a professor of fine arts at the University of Pennsylvania. This quartet of images is featured in a forthcoming exhibition at New York's New Museum, titled "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America," a show conceived by the late curator Okwui Enwezor.

Adkins's X-rays transform the jugs into heavenly bodies, encouraging contemplation. The images feel intimate, ethereal, and futuristic. The stories of the lives of ordinary African Americans and their forebears are often distilled into a sweeping narrative—invisible, monolithic masses questing for dignity and recognition of their citizenship or humanity. But if the historical record tends to overlook the simple moments of pleasure and joy in the lives of these men and women, Adkins brings them to the forefront. A hobby-horse toy, a pewter spoon, a mother-of-pearl hair comb, a pocket watch, buttons from a well-loved calico dress or coat, charm necklaces and shells, crosses and lace—photographed in this manner, the items take on a sacred quality. Adkins's work uplifts the ordinary, asking viewers to make "modern memories," as his widow, Merele Williams-Adkins, told me.

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These images resonate in a year overflowing with eulogies for hundreds of thousands of American dead, disproportionately Black, at a time when public mourning is itself deadly and, all the while, Americans wrestle with the country's past and future.

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