

PAULA COOPER GALLERY

Volk, Gregory. "Terry Adkins' Objects of Wonder," *Hyperallergic*, May 29, 2022

HYPERALLERGIC

Art **Reviews**

Terry Adkins's Objects of Wonder

An exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery underscores not only how engaging and innovative, but also influential and visionary Adkins really was, and remains.

by Gregory Volk



Terry Adkins, "Mrs. Brown" (2010), sousaphone, aluminum bells, and silver drum with drum head, 74 ¼ x 30 x 30 inches (all images © 2022 The Estate of Terry Adkins / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photos by Steven Probert)

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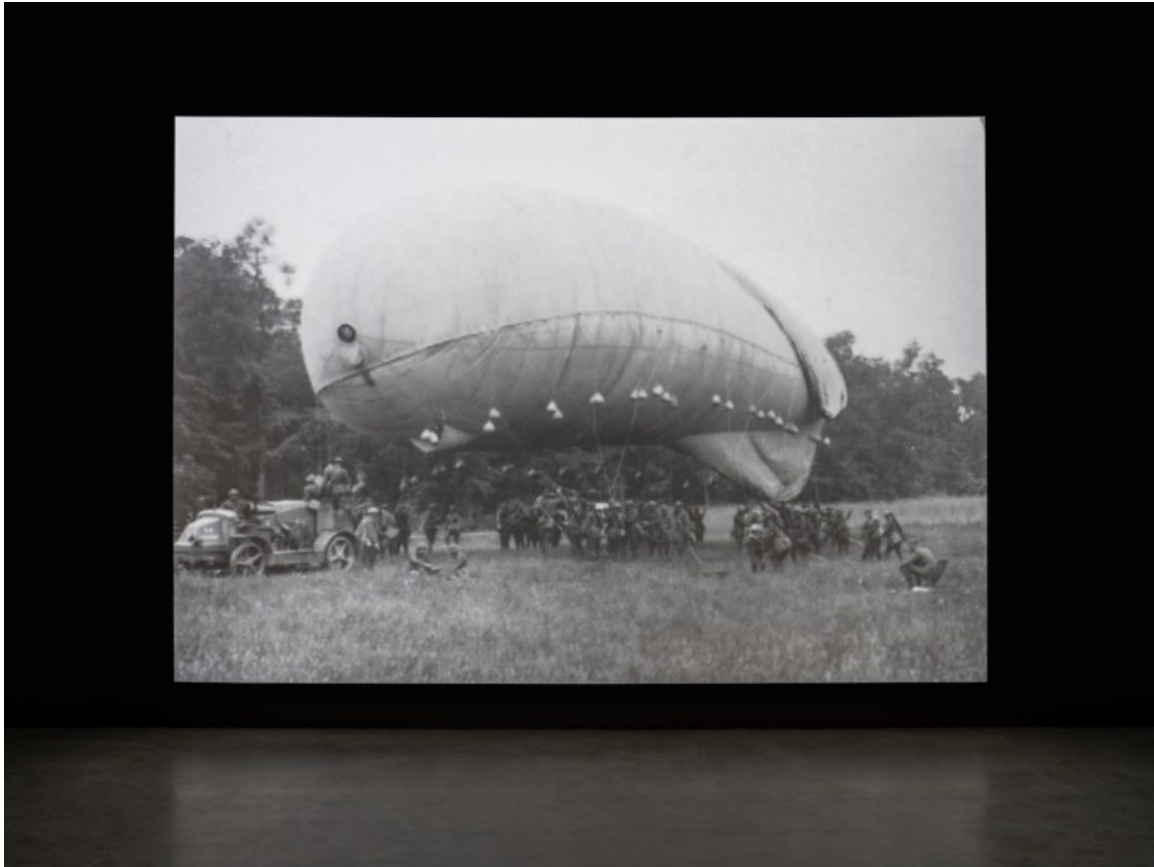
It is striking when an artwork from several years ago, conceived in very different circumstances, becomes searingly relevant right now. This is the case with conceptual artist Terry Adkins's mesmerizing 41:37-minute stereoscopic digital video *Flumen Orationis* (from *The Principalities*) (2012). Upon entering his self-titled exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery, the video is visible in the distance, covering much of a large back wall.

Adkins constructed this video from early 20th-century black and white stereoscope images of dirigibles, hot air balloons, airplanes, gathered crowds, and soldiers. Antiquated aerial weapons and garb evoke World War I, or perhaps the moments before the war when much of Europe was preparing to gnash itself to bits. Buoyant optimism is conveyed, but also agitation, as the still images fluctuate. Soon would be bloody mayhem.

The soundtrack leaps forward several decades to a famous 1967 anti-Vietnam War sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Jimi Hendrix's iconic 1970 antiwar song "Machine Gun." Dr. King's fierce, rousing oratory, Hendrix's spoken introduction and sung lyrics, and his extraordinary guitar (sometimes recalling the sound of a machine gun) entwine, while interacting with the slow parade of historical images. Also fascinating is the convergence between King and Hendrix. There is music in Dr. King's oratory; there is spiritual power and authority in Hendrix's music.

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Terry Adkins, *Flumen Orationis* (from *The Principalities*) (2012), stereoscopic digital video with sound, duration time: 41:37 minutes

The video positions two of the most renowned African American figures of their era in relation to a broad reach of history, including the many wars that predate Vietnam. It also points to a lesser-known event in Hendrix's life. Before this exhibition, I had no idea that Hendrix — often considered the greatest rock guitarist ever — enlisted as a paratrooper in the US Army in 1961 in order to avoid prison for an episode involving stolen cars. Had things gone differently — had he not managed to secure an honorable discharge after one year — he may well have been sent to Vietnam.

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While Dr. King's ringing words and Hendrix's song resonated at a time when so many young Black men were being conscripted to fight in Vietnam, both are especially pertinent now. Likewise, 10 years later Adkins's video assumes fresh significance, with Vladimir Putin's vicious war on Ukraine, featuring a multitude of aerial weapons employed by both sides (dirigibles and propeller planes replaced by helicopters, fighter planes, drones, and cruise missiles). "Now let me make it clear in the beginning," Dr. King intones in the video, his voice mixing with Hendrix's music, "that I see this war as an unjust, futile, and evil war." This could be a forceful indictment of Russia's war as well. Hendrix sings, "Evil man make me kill you/Evil man make you kill me/Evil man make me kill you/Even though we're only families apart." Nixon then, [Putin now](#).

This beautifully installed exhibition is Adkins's first at Paula Cooper Gallery, which has represented his estate since 2021. A mere 10 works, each allotted ample space, culled from Adkins's expansive, idea-driven, multimedia oeuvre showcase his transformative and supremely sensitive use of found objects in sculptures, as well as his lifelong engagement with music and musical instruments, his deep absorption with history, and his frequent invocation of crucial African American historical figures.

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Terry Adkins, "Matinee" (2007-13), brass drum with image, steel armature, welded bronze, 28 hangers-burnt cork

"Matinee" (2007-13) addresses famed blues singer Bessie Smith (1894-1937), the so-called "Empress of the Blues." A large brass drum on the floor sports an image of Smith's eye, suggesting her as a seer and spiritual guide. Protruding above is a bronze orb set in a steel armature; dangling from the edge are wooden coat hangers, each inscribed with a Smith song title, among them "Graveyard Blues," "Lock and Key Blues," and "The Has Been Blues" — a remarkable body of work that addresses poverty, incarceration, racism, stubborn endurance, and the desire for freedom, among other subjects.

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While primarily abstract, the sculpture loosely suggests an upright human figure — Bessie Smith onstage. It honors this foundational and inspirational artist who rose to fame in the 1920s and early 1930s from an extremely poor childhood as an orphan in Chattanooga, Tennessee, before her popularity declined during the Great Depression and Swing Era. As with many of Adkins's works, this one was once part of his "recitals," collaborative performances, often with music, that activated his sculptures. The sculpture "Matinee" was included in the recital "Belted Bronze."

Nearby, on the wall, are two black rattles, each sprouting black incense sticks that cast feathery shadows on the wall ("Pine," 2003). This elemental work, organic in appearance, is terrific. The checklist bills the rattles as simply that, but I'm guessing they are from Adkins's extensive collection of artifacts, which included various African musical instruments. With their implicit sound, aromas, lustrous hues, and varied materiality, these idiosyncratic objects have talismanic power.

Adkins found oblique ways of addressing historical figures that he considered essential. His works — some quite minimalist — are layered with references and animated by knowledge. "Mrs. Brown" (2010), according to my research, refers to abolitionist John Brown's devoutly Christian, anti-slavery mother, Ruth Mills Brown, who greatly influenced him, although she died when he was only eight years old.

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Installation view of Terry Adkins, "Audience (from Belted Bronze)" (2007-8), 28 framed drawings, 5 plastic milk crates and taxidermy peacock; each frame: 19 1/4 x 25 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches; overall: 77 x 177 x 1 1/2 inches, 84 1/2 x 31 x 24 inches



Terry Adkins, "Audience (from Belted Bronze)," detail

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Atop a base made of a silver drum is a bell that resembles a dress and a weathered sousaphone, connoting a torso and head; the assemblage suggests a buoyant and energetic female figure. The sousaphone was invented in 1893, which takes us back to the 19th century and Jim Crow. It became a staple of marching bands, including renowned HBCU ones, as well as New Orleans brass bands. The sculpture, which seems like a cross between a body and a parade, celebrates Ruth Mills Brown as an important, although usually overlooked, figure in the struggle against slavery; her son's daring yet doomed 1859 raid on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, meant to foment a revolt among enslaved people, foreshadowed the Civil War.

Adkins often favored ignoble or discarded found objects, each with its own history and each once in use; he invested items from junkyards and construction sites with new life and spirit. According to the checklist, the compact "Smoke Stack" (2003), a small stack of worn, rectangular materials resting on the floor, is composed of "copper, aluminum, tar," but some parts sure look like radiators. With subdued colors and several textures this minimalist work is surprisingly layered and complex.

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Terry Adkins, "Pine" (2003), rattles and incense; each: 18 x 18 x 16 inches

I get the distinct impression that Adkins approached his materials with unusual empathy, openness, and care — he was in dialogue with them, and vice versa; they mattered. The enigmatic title also suggests possible references. The group singing sessions in which noted blues and folk singer Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter participated were called "smokers." "Smoke Stack" might also refer to factories in the industrial North so essential for the Great Migration, in which some six million Black people left the South for jobs and, hopefully, better lives. A vast range of African American culture and history is condensed into this single sculpture.

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Several other works refer to Jimi Hendrix's stint as a paratrooper, some enfolding him within Catholic iconography and mythology (Adkins was raised Catholic). A black and white silkscreen on polyester portrait of Hendrix appears on a red velvet flag; he's positioned as a saint in a work that recalls a religious artifact ("Hendrix Flag," 2012). In the same room are two upright sculptures, both made of a microphone stand, a parachute, and feathers; both titled after archangels. In "Adnachiël" (2012), a parachute suggesting an angelic robe envelops part of a microphone stand; atop are dyed black feathers, perhaps alluding to the feathers that Hendrix often wore. Hendrix's paratrooper experience, his spectacular musicianship, his political and mystical import are succinctly conveyed.

"Audience (From Belted Bronze)" (2007–8) was part of the same recital as "Matinee." Twenty-eight framed drawings displayed as a grid on the wall show silhouette-like people, mysterious beings, and various objects. To the right of each drawing is an excerpt from a 1926 *Vanity Fair* review by Carl Van Vechten — the white critic, author, and photographer so identified with the Harlem Renaissance — of a Bessie Smith performance. Adkins altered the typography to accentuate different parts of the text. While Van Vechten extols and indeed marvels at Smith, almost 100 years later it is disconcerting, even painful, to read of her "wild, rough Ethiopian voice" and her face "with the rich, ripe beauty of southern darkness."

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From left: Terry Adkins, "Hendrix Flag" (2012), velvet with silkscreen on polyester, 43 x 80 inches; Terry Adkins, "Barchiel" (2012), microphone stand, parachute, and dyed feathers, 70 x 17 1/2 x 15 inches; Terry Adkins, "Adnachiel" (2012), microphone stand, wooden dowel, parachute and dyed feathers, 79 3/4 x 12 x 12 inches

Surveying the drawings from a distance is a taxidermy peacock, likely a stand-in for the flamboyant Smith, perched atop five black milk crates. The peacock is gorgeous and dramatic, but the milk crates — mundane, much-used, rickety, and oddly transcendent — are just as compelling. Adkins had an almost alchemical ability to transform forgettable, workaday stuff into resonant objects of wonder. While he exhibited extensively during his life, many of his shows were at venues like university galleries, far from the limelight. This exhibition underscores not only how engaging and innovative, but also influential and visionary Adkins really was, and remains.