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VISUAL ART

## The South Still Has Something to Say

CAMH's Dirty South exhibit makes a bold statement about the intersections between Southern culture, visual art and music.

By [Amarie Gipson](#) December 31, 2021 Published in the [Winter 2021](#) issue of *Houstonia*



RaMell Ross, Caspera, 2020. Large scale archival pigment print, 40 x 60 inches.  
IMAGE: [RAMELL ROSS: IMAGE AND WORK COURTESY THE ARTIST.](#)

**SOUTHERN HIP-HOP CULTURE IS RARELY AT THE FOREFRONT** of art exhibitions, but *The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse* at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH), demonstrates why it's important to consider placing it in contemporary art spaces.

For nearly two decades, Cassel Oliver has dedicated her career to championing the work of Black artists, especially those from the U.S. South. Before embarking on her role as the Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the VMFA, she spent nearly 17 years as the senior curator at CAMH, where she organized an array of groundbreaking exhibitions. Conceived by Houston-born scholar and noted curator Valerie Cassel Oliver for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) in Richmond, the exhibition's Houston debut marks a historic homecoming. *The Dirty South* explores 100 years of Black visual and sonic traditions. Rooted in three central themes—landscape, religion and the Black body—the exhibition is richly expansive, featuring over 140 artworks by a multigenerational roster of self-taught and academically trained artists.

Towards the end of her tenure, Cassel Oliver idealized a project that would investigate how hip-hop provided contemporary artists of the 1980s with what she describes as, “a real sense of self.” The exhibition idea followed her to Richmond, where she has spent the past four years deepening her research and building the VMFA's permanent collection. “I felt that I could better tell this story if it were across a century, and that it would allow people to see and embrace it,” she says on a Zoom call from Richmond, in October.

After a month's delay due to COVID-19, the exhibition made its debut at the VMFA in May.

As Cassel Oliver's birthplace, and the first stop on the exhibition's tour, Houston has a special presence. In the early 20th Century, the city was a major site for intra-southern movement during the Great Migration and became one of the epicenters of the region's extraordinary musical legacy. “The power that Houston has presented to the world is so amazing. A lot of growth and cosmopolitanism was happening there and artists were bringing attention to that power and creativity. The music was giving visual artists a license to press forward,” Cassel Oliver says. Visual artists like Jason Moran, Kaneem Smith, Mel Chin, Melvin Edwards, John Biggers, Robert Hodge and Jamal Cyrus represent the best of the city's dexterity.

On the cosmic resonance of the exhibition's Houston debut, Cassel Oliver says, “It is exciting to have the CAMH celebrate my vision in this way. The project really belongs in Houston and I'm both humbled and thrilled to be coming back to present it. I'll always be H-Town strong.”



Valerie Cassel Oliver, VMFA's Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

IMAGE: TRAVIS FULLERTON, © 2019 VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

*The Dirty South* is a history sweeping tribute to the genius and ingenuity embedded within Black Southern culture, from grillz to jazz and slabs. Undoubtedly her most ambitious project to date, Cassel Oliver's latest exhibition is a culmination of her curatorial endeavors, as several of her previous shows have nourished its conception, including a number of first-rate presentations at CAMH. The influence of this particular show is the result of her past work: *Dirty South: Double Consciousness* (2005) focused on conceptual art and *Radical Presence* (2013) had a unique handling of mixed media; *Black Light/White Noise* (2007) placed an emphasis on sound and light, while *Black in the Abstract* (2013-2014) engaged aesthetic traditions, and *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded* (2018) set a precedent for exhibiting multiple moving image works at once. Beyond the exhibit's attention to the histories embedded within visual, sonic and material culture, it testifies to the power of curatorial activism—the practice of organizing exhibitions aimed toward a more equitable future.



El Franco Lee, II, DJ Screw in Heaven 2, 2016. Neon bulb and single-channel audio, 3:04 minutes, 60 x 60 inches.

IMAGE: EL FRANCO LEE, II/IMAGE AND WORK COURTESY THE ARTIST

“There’s no one American visual narrative,” Cassel Oliver concludes. “There are multiple and some of them converge into one another. In our desire to compress and get to one, we ignore all of these other narratives that are so crucial to understanding our true selves. That was the part I wanted to get to with *The Dirty South*. We have to understand that the South is the American story, everything happens here.” *The Dirty South* explores the synergy between visual artists and musicians, and makes it clear that Black, Southern culture is the bedrock of American culture. It’s a journey through history, a tribute and a reminder that the South still “got something to say.”

<https://www.houstoniamag.com/articles/2021/12/camh-dirty-south-houston-exhibit>