Dexter Davis: A Portrait

By Henry Adams
DEXTER DAVIS: A PORTRAIT
Henry Adams
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CONTENTS

5  Foreword | Anderson Turner
6  A View from the Gallery | William Busta
9  Acknowledgments | Dexter Davis
10  Dexter Davis: A Portrait | Henry Adams
87  Biography
88  Exhibitions and Collections
89  Press

LAWRENCE WALDMAN FINE ARTS
SHAKER HEIGHTS, OHIO
“IN THE WORK OF DEXTER DAVIS I FEEL THE COMPLEX, EMOTIONAL TEXTURES OF CLEVELAND”

WILLIAM BUSTA
FOREWORD

Anderson Turner, Director
Kent State University School of Art Collection and Galleries

The School of Art Collection at Kent State University was started in 1972 when the author James Michener donated the proceeds from his book about May 4th, 1970, to ensure that the then “new” art building would have a collection.

During the forty years plus since that time, the School of Art Collection has grown to house over 4,000 objects and helped to record some of the unique artistic research and history that has taken place on the campus of Kent State University and in the northeast Ohio region.

In spring 2016 the new Center for the Visual Arts was opened adjacent to the old art building, the collection's original home. Inside this new and large complex is everything that is part of the School of Art. Glass, Painting, Ceramics, Sculpture, Textile Arts, Art History, Drawing, Printmaking, Art Education, Jewelry Metals, Foundations and, of course, the School of Art Collection and Galleries— all call this building home.

The School of Art Collection and Galleries has a broader presence throughout northeast Ohio too, with locations in the city of Kent, Blossom Music Center in Cuyahoga Falls, as well as pop-up exhibits all over the northeast Ohio region. We are a large and comprehensive school with long arms that have grown and reached internationally as well as locally.

We are excited to be able to help bring Dexter Davis: A Portrait, to inaugurate our Center for the Visual Arts (CVA) Gallery. Further, we are happy to be able to help bring Dexter Davis' work to what we hope will be a much broader audience throughout the country and the world.

With a new building comes renewed hope and renewed vision for the type of school we want to be and also the type of research we want to have that is central to our mission. The School of Art Collection is now housed in an open, classroom-style room that is fully on display for anyone who walks into our building to see. This teaching collection houses objects for our students and faculty to use and to learn from. While we will continue to accession art that is important for teaching and historically significant to our university, the core part of the mission of the School of Art Collection is now to further collect and promote artwork by women and artists of color.

Through our core mission, we hope to be able to add to the character and quality of the School of Art and Kent State University. As well, we hope to be able in some small way to call more attention to the high quality artistic research happening in our cities and communities around the nation that often is not valued or represented as well as it should be.

Dexter Davis: A Portrait, and this catalog that accompanies the exhibition comprise the exciting first step for the School of Art Collection and Galleries at Kent State University to take in our new home in the Center for the Visual Arts. We hope you will take the time to get to know Dexter's work and find it as powerful and as meaningful as we do.
William Busta

In the work of Dexter Davis I feel the complex, emotional textures of Cleveland. In my home his work brightens my days and inspires me, with a gentle and insistent tug at conscience and with the presence of the artist shyly, slyly and proudly front and center.

I first encountered the work of Dexter Davis in 1993 when I was the organizer as well as one of six curators of an exhibition at SPACES in Cleveland. It was a type of exhibition that SPACES holds from time to time, identifying younger artists in the community who have the potential to become influential and to produce major work in the years to follow. We called the exhibition Cleveland X, and we were looking for artists from what was called Generation X, the generation that followed the Baby Boom of the late 1940s and the 1950s.

The curators originally thought about the show as an exhibition of 12 artists, and then we started to argue for our favorites. Julie Fehrenbach, then associate director of SPACES, championed Dexter Davis. I shrugged, thinking the work looked hurried and unresolved. Julie was an able advocate but I was still not quite convinced. As we concluded our curatorial discussions, my hesitations did not matter since we decided it was more important to be inclusive than to be exclusive — we expanded the show to 20 artists. The show turned out wonderfully, and was a showcase or a debut for a number of artists who have made their mark regionally and nationally, including Kevin Everson, Mark Howard, Derek Hess, and Robert Banks.

Our selections were made from personal knowledge of each artist's work and from looking at slides. During the curatorial process I'd only seen slides of Dexter’s work—projected dully on a painted wall—so when we installed in the gallery I was surprised by its vibrancy and capacity to engage. After seeing Dexter’s work in several other shows in 1994 and 1995, I invited him to show at a gallery that I had on Murray Hill Road in Cleveland.

The gallery showed artists who lived in northeast Ohio, and the core of gallery artists exhibited about once every two years. It always took me a long time to make decisions about who to exhibit—many times I worried over these decisions for years. And then, as with Dexter Davis, I've often found myself committed to those artists over decades. It is a little like dating and scheduling the first show is a little like becoming engaged.
It took me some time to begin to know Dexter's work, and for me it is a process that is ongoing. There is a mysterious tension between playfulness and the solemnity, between casual gesture and incisive jab. Dexter and I talked from time to time as he prepared work for the exhibition, but, as is my usual practice, I avoided being intrusive. Some artists like frequent studio visits. Some don't. Dexter did not. I didn't press. And then, all at once, the work was up in the gallery.

His explosive first show at the William Busta Gallery in January 1997 surprised everyone. There had been a growing audience for his work, but it was more curious than anything else, more about potential than acclaim. But then the work showed itself as grand and glorious, fully realized and mature. One of the larger pieces in the show has been on the wall in my breakfast room ever since.

Dexter was sometimes hard to reach by telephone and so when I needed to be in touch, I occasionally walked through the galleries of the Cleveland Museum of Art until I found him. Many of the conversations that I have had with Dexter about his work happened at the museum - once in a while when I had gone there intending to find him but more often when I encountered him during a regular museum visit. And almost all of the rest of our conversations have happened in other galleries - sometimes directly with Dexter and sometimes with his engaging work. I think of galleries as a sanctuary where an artist and his work find an audience; where an audience has the opportunity for transcendent experience.

Although we have known each other for years, we have not actually talked that much. We know each other mostly through the work that we both do. I have spent years involved with his artwork, approaching as it invited, and, sometimes, turning away when it provoked. I think of all his works of art that I have hung on the wall, in conversation with each other and in conversations with work by all the other artists in the William Busta Gallery. Certainly I have talked to other people about Dexter's work much much more than I have talked to Dexter.

When I opened a new gallery on Prospect Avenue in 2007, we started talking and I started looking at his current work, with the intent to schedule a show. Even though his work was moving slowly, I scheduled a show as a goal, and then we later postponed it for a year, until 2011. I did not encourage Dexter to work faster.

It has been one of my rules to provide opportunity and then to have patience for work to be created on its own schedule. I have faith that the artist knows best. So when Dexter told me that he was ready, I was confident as well. The 2011 exhibition was an astonishing success. Virtually sold out, works from that show were enthusiastically acquired purchases by patrons and public collections.

In the gallery, I sometimes act as a voice for an artist's work. I do not tell what the work is about - that is something that must be experienced rather than told - but talk about how it speaks to me. One of the things I tell people about Dexter Davis' work is how it is made of parts, created, torn, re-shaped and replaced, sometimes borrowing from other artists, sometimes borrowing from found debris. His broad structural composition is striking, so much so that it is easy to miss the complex detailing that build image and activity. His work calls you to come close for intimate experience, then pushes away to present itself as a whole. It could be regarded as standoffish, but it is more like establishing a presence.

I sometimes admit that I was ruined as a curator from spending too much time in a gallery, organizing too many shows, becoming too close to the work of too many artists. As the years have gone on it has become harder to isolate the qualities of particular work from the whole body of work by the artist. I no longer see the art of Dexter Davis piece by piece, but as part of a long narrative, a narrative that embraces and lays bare the breadth of human experience, the song of a singular soul.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dexter Davis

This catalog and exhibition could not have been possible without the dedicated support of many. Special thanks go to William Busta, Henry Adams, Anderson Turner, Larrie King, Joan Brickley, and the Waldmans. Without their dedication and hard work none of this would have been possible. I also want to thank Joan Tomkins and Bill Busta for allowing me to meet in their home during our planning sessions.

I was born in Cleveland, Ohio and have lived in Cleveland all of my life in the Hough neighborhood. My education and career as an artist have been shaped by my early experiences. I want to give special thanks to my teachers and mentors who early on encouraged me during some very hard times. William Martin Jean has been a steadfast supporter and influence, and many others, including H. C. Cassill, Lawrence Kraus, and Ralph Woehrman, have played an instrumental role in my artistic life. I also would like to give a shout out to the many friends who supported me and believed in me: Derrick Quarles, Robert Banks, Cushmere Bell, Steven Warner, Ross Schuller, Michelle Marshel, Frank Cacciacarro, Mike Evans, James McNamara, Dante Rodriguez, Kevin Grays, Jeffrey Chiplis, Tony Serna, Kim Sherwin, Mark Simmons, Barbara Stanford, Michelle Epps, and so many more have played an important role.

Numerous institutions and galleries that I have worked with over these many years have kept my spirit alive. Among them, the Cleveland Institute of Art gave me a critical early start and the Cleveland Museum of Art has been a home away from home. Important support has also come from Jill Snyder of the Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art, the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Cleveland State University, and the Akron Art Museum. Julie Fehrenbach and Marilyn Simmons of SPACES, Kathy Blackman of the Grog Shop, the Artist Archives of the Western Reserve, Tobey Lewis of Progressive Insurance, the staff at Zygote Press, Curlee Raven Holten at Lafayette College, Ron Rumford of Dolan/Maxwell, and especially Bill Busta, my gallerista, have kept me going.

Looking back I am thankful to those places that gave an unknown, struggling young artist a chance to show his work for the first time: the Colonial Arcade, Doubting Thomas Gallery, New Era in New York City, Wildflower Gallery, and Art at the Powerhouse. Over the many years I have worked at the Cleveland Museum of Art, I am greatly blessed by a team of gifted curators and staff. Carol Camloh always believed in me and helped me grow as an employee. William Robinson, Mark Cole, Heather Lemonedes, and Jane Glaubinger all nurtured my artistic growth. Other friends and staff helped support my ideas: Les Vince, Cathy Lewis-Wright, Howard Agriesti, Nan Eisenberg, Cavana Faithwalker, Caroline Guscott, Mel Horvath, Thomasine Clark, Deirdre Vodanoff, Liz Pim, Sharon Reaves, Robin van Lear, Stephen Fliegel, and Mary Suzor.

Finally, I want to give special thanks to my family, especially to my sisters Sylvia Davis and Norma Marotta. I dedicate this book to my mother, for all her hard work and belief in me through the good times and the hard times. She never gave up on me. Love you, Mom.
In the months just after I started working at the Cleveland Museum of Art, as I was getting my bearings, the people I met often mentioned a museum employee named Dexter Davis, who was an artist, and who had exhibited his work in regional galleries and art exhibitions, with considerable success. In the same period, while strolling through the museum's galleries, I struck up a friendship with one of the guards who was always impeccably well-groomed and well-dressed and always had something interesting to say. He seemed both gentle and genteel—someone with whom one might comfortably have a drink at a neighborhood coffee house. It took me a while to figure out that these two people were the same.

When I eventually encountered Dexter's work, I found the juxtaposition even more intriguing. How could I reconcile the polite, well-mannered gentleman with the artist who creates such powerfully expressive images of masks and ghosts and trees with spirits and the body outlines of people who have been murdered? Dexter creates images that are often angry; that are sometimes a little frightening; and that deal with themes of anxiety and violence, although there's also something about them that's magical and liberating.

Dexter's art also has an African quality, which feels like it comes out of something deeper than just being exposed to African art through museum visits or books. Not only the imagery but the colors, the visual rhythms, and most of all the deeper purpose of the art, its connection with the world of spirits and healing, exude a spirit that feels African. Sometimes his work feels as though it's not so much the creation of an artist as a shaman.
And let me here say something obvious about Dexter Davis the artist, Dexter Davis is African American. In fact, his art is very autobiographical, and delves into childhood and memory with the intensity of a novelist like Marcel Proust.

It's very much about what it's like to grow up as an African American, in a very tough neighborhood and in utter poverty. It's also very much about a cultural inheritance, which for all the displacements and disruptions of several centuries, still retains some of the aura of Africa, not just as a sort of garment on the surface, but as something intrinsic. Indeed, the African-ness in Dexter's art is a wellspring of healing and consolation. There are some affinities between Dexter's works and Picasso's famous Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, a painting that also carries out an act of exorcism. But Picasso was borrowing the imagery and magic of African art as a game of "Let's pretend." For Dexter it's a genuine part of his being.

Many modern paintings explore concerns that exist only in the realm of art: formal relationships, the picture plane, harmonies of color, and things of that sort. Dexter's paintings come from a different place: from a real-life need. Yet at the same time, like all good art, Dexter's work seems to transcend limitations of time or place, to speak a language that crosses boundaries of culture. And he himself is quite insistent that he's interested in communicating a universal message. As he comments: "I am an African American. But my work is a spiritual thing. It meets everybody. It's an energy. I have to ignite the energy force. I don't do it from the standpoint of being angry. I do it from the standpoint of healing." This then is the seeming paradox of Dexter's art—an art that's very much a product of a specific background, in a specific time and specific place and geographic region. At that same time, it has universal qualities, deals with universal issues of trauma and healing. Though rooted in suffering, it's also without exception hopeful.
DEXTER'S EARLY LIFE

Born in Cleveland, Dexter grew up in Hough, a largely black neighborhood in Cleveland that was the site of major riots in the 1960s. He was the youngest in a family of ten children: he has three sisters and six brothers. His dad worked in the Republic Steel Foundry; his mother was a housewife. Only after their deaths did he learn that his father was an orphan, and that his mother originally came from a farm near Tulsa, Oklahoma, and had relatives who were somewhat wealthy.

His parents were part of a great migration in the early twentieth century of poor African Americans from the rural south to northern cities where they could find well-paying factory work. In Cleveland the Hough neighborhood, located between downtown and University Circle, was particularly affected by this influx. In 1950 its two square miles had a population of 66,000, 95 percent of whom were white. But already it had begun to slip from a middle class to a working-class neighborhood, and was afflicted with ill-run taverns, slum housing, crime, and prostitution. By 1960 it had become 74 per black, and home to a quarter of the welfare cases in the city.

In this period, as well, Cleveland lost some 13,000 factory jobs, creating widespread unemployment and stimulating an exodus of white residents to the suburbs. Racial epithets of a sort unthinkable today were accepted as a natural part of daily discourse.

In 1967 the election of an African American Carl B. Stokes, as mayor, seemed to promise an easing of racial tensions. But only seven months after Stokes took office, a shootout between Cleveland police and black militants left ten dead and dozens wounded, and the National Guard was called in to prevent widespread sniping, looting, and arson. The remainder of Stokes' tenure as mayor was marked by a political logjam, in which his initiatives were effectively blocked by the police and the City Council President James Stanton.

Half a century after the Hough riots, the neighborhood still looks scarred, and is now only slowly starting to make a comeback. Dexter Davis grew up in this setting: one marked by poverty, drugs, crime, and violence, and shrinking opportunities for well-paying factory work, but with also some positive developments, such as an integrated school system.
Dexter Davis (lower left), with his mother and siblings

DEXTER’S PARENTS

Dexter remembers his father as a "complicated person"—he was someone who had a range of different talents and interests. As a young man he had been a golden gloves boxer and when Dexter was little there were photographs of him as a boxer in the house—photographs that were later destroyed in the '79 fire. He was a short story writer and had a typewriter in his room. He loved jazz, and Dexter recalls that "The funny thing was that he would buy musical instruments—he had a whole room full of instruments—even though he couldn't play a lick."

He also had a little art studio, and in this case he did have some creative talent—he was a good draftsman. But while he dabbled in art, "He was more of a mechanic—a grease monkey—always fixing things."

Coming from a blue collar background, he thought that an artist was someone who worked in the applied arts—industrial design, architecture, or something of that nature. As Dexter recalls, he felt that, "If you want to do anything like that, it has to be something where you can make a job out of it." Nonetheless, he encouraged Dexter’s interest in art and bought him instructional books on perspective and things of that sort. Dexter and his friends also loved comic books, so perspective manuals and comic books were two of Dexter’s big early influences. Dexter’s brothers also did good drawings, although he’s the only one who became an artist.

His mother was extremely active in her church and she and Dexter served the church in a variety of roles. “If we weren’t there for the actual worship service we would go there to clean the church. We’d clean the benches, and I ended up becoming an usher, a deacon, a song singer. Everything you can imagine except preacher."
I went through the whole nine yards. It was singing, preaching, prayers. There were Sunday school classes that we were part of. There were all sorts of activities and fund-raisers. As a child he wanted to be out playing with his friends. In retrospect he realizes that she instilled in him the importance of caring for other people. And a sense of dignity. When Dexter was a small child and his father was working at the foundry, the family did well. As he recalls: "At Christmas his father always said that Santa Claus was going to come and give us something; and when the day arrived there would be wonderful presents." His father bought toys, such as Tonka Toys, for him and he would assemble them. They had some of the wagons that Viktor Schreckengost designed.

“When I was small he was one of the best,” Dexter recalls of his father. “But when the other kids got older he was a little harder. He was a tough guy. He always said, ‘These new kids are pampered.’ If you weren’t doing well in school in whatever he would really beat the crap out of you.” Around 1979 they had a house fire and everything was gone.

“The things that you most regret losing are the things that you don’t think about: the puppets, the photo albums; the history. These are the things that you really wish you could bring back. I think that later in my life, I tried to bring these things back in my art—sort of mixing and putting things together to bring back memories, to bring back history.”

Dexter’s current artwork makes extensive use of mixed media, and interestingly he did this as a child. When he was ten years old, or around that age, he would make toys and puppets out of paper bags and socks and vinyl 45 albums. He and his younger brother would do puppet shows in the basement.

Dexter didn’t start off with a particular interest in art: it’s something that happened gradually. In fact, in elementary and pre-school he was a bit of an oddity. He always mixed things in a weird way and the other kids complained that his ceramics were always blowing up inside the kiln, because he did things differently. But some of his teachers appreciated that he was always trying to do something different, and that he had some quality that wanted to keep growing and was interested in discovery.

“For a long time I thought of it as just a hobby,” Dexter recalls. “And I thought if I did go to school for something like art it would be some kind of applied art: illustrations, layouts, industrial design, or something like that. Over the years I kept running away from art but it kept coming back to me. I would go full circle and would come right back to where I started, making art again. It was a release I needed because of my background and the different things I had experienced. When you get into situations and it gets really bad you need to find some place where you can go to clear your mind. You have to find something and I realize that my art was the thing that saved me. It was that room where nothing could get inside but me. It helped me a lot.”
FOOD AND MONEY

Dexter grew up on East Eighty-Ninth Street, a street that went through many changes during his childhood. At the beginning it was a very poor but solid working-class neighborhood. But then, after the Hough riots, things got very bad. Everyone has a different recollection of what happened and why. On the street where he lived, the days were marked by gunshots. "At the apartment next door to our house there was always an ambulance or a police car. People were always killing each other." One very warm summer afternoon in 1973 when Dexter was eight, he was sitting on the porch escaping the heat when a black Cadillac drove up. Two men got out, opened up the trunk, and lifted out a dead body that they threw on the front yard. He ran away screaming.

Things got very bad after his father left in 1977, after some violent confrontations with his older brothers. His mother took a job caring for old people, but still there often wasn't money enough to buy food at the end of the month. "As a kid all I wanted was the necessities," he recalls. "Plus the little prize at the bottom of the Cracker Jack box."

His recent series Food and Money, 2012 (fig. 1) refers to this period when things were terrible in the family and in the neighborhood. When he was about twelve things were so desperate that one of his brothers, who was five or six years older, went out and robbed a 7-Eleven grocery store in order to get food. He later went to jail for it. Dexter was just a kid at the time and didn't fully understand what was going on. He was just happy to get a box of Cracker Jack when they brought everything back. As an adult he can see that robbing stores isn't a good thing to do. On the other hand, surely people shouldn't be pushed down to the point where they need to steal just to get something to eat. One function of his art is to make people more aware of this type of thing, and how situations can get so critical. He recalls: "My brothers had a reputation in our neighborhood. People knew they shouldn't mess with our family."
HIGH SCHOOL & WILLIAM MARTIN JEAN

During the 1970s fine art was not a choice that even occurred to many African Americans from the inner city. But when Dexter attended high school the schools had just been desegregated, and consequently he was able to attend West Tech High School where he studied with Bill Jean—"a very nice mentor for me, a very nice gentleman." At the time Dexter’s life was being thrown in all directions. There were riots and turmoil in the city and his family was coming apart. Bill Jean played a key role in giving direction to his life. "He was actually somebody that cared," Dexter recalls, noting that Jean not only took a very personal interest in him but even took the trouble to get to know Dexter’s mother. "I started working harder and seeing things in a different way," Dexter recalls. "It was not just art for the sake of working on a flat surface. It was a lifestyle."

"He just knew that I had something unique. He even said, ‘Your talent is not about academic art. Your work goes beyond the regular rounds of drawing what you see.’ He could see that in me even then.”

Dexter started doing collage and mixed media during the last year of high school, and he entered his work in the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards competition and received a number of awards (fig. 4). At this time, Bill Jean began to channel him towards the Cleveland Institute of Art. In fact, he arranged a special class during which he gave Dexter guidance in preparing a portfolio to gain admission to the school. It even included an introduction to art history—which proved a big help in his art classes later on. When his portfolio was reviewed by the admissions committee for the Cleveland Institute of Art, he did well and ended up getting a half scholarship, which made it possible for him to attend.
There were not many African Americans teaching at the Cleveland Institute of Art. Moe Brooker was teaching at the time, but Dexter was just a freshman and Brooker was teaching more advanced classes. Nonetheless, the outlook of the school was impressively diverse and international. The students came from around the world and were of all ages. Most of them were very serious about what they were doing. For Dexter, being exposed to the diversity of the student body was a major part of the education there. As he comments: "One of the things I liked the most about the Cleveland Institute of Art was the fact that there were people from everywhere. I met people from all around the world and we collaborated. In art it doesn't matter where you're from. Artists have this weird karma. Artists know artists and you can collaborate. Even if the other person can't speak English we can still collaborate. There's some kind of spiritual connection. Somehow we know."

Nonetheless, being an African American in the University Circle wasn't easy in this period. While the students were friendly, he often experienced other forms of harassment:

"As far as being African American, the worst thing was that I used to get static from the university cops, things like that. I had one cop who was obsessed with me. This guy harassed me from my first year in college in '85. There was a time I remember being in a bar with my college friends and he was staring at me and unbuckled his gun belt. It was incredible. But eventually he went away. Things like that, you have to just ignore it. You keep yourself focused and work for the goals you work for. People like that won't stay with you forever. They'll fade."
Because in high school he had been chiefly exposed to realistic art, when he first came in he was interested in illustration and took classes in the foundation of drawing from Gary Schumer. He also took classes in design from Robert Jergens. As Dexter recalls: “He was good at teaching you how to see things differently. He had a way of stretching your view out, making you change your perspective when you got stuck in one way of thinking.” Later people like Ralph Woehrman and the printmaker Carroll Cassill played a role as mentors. They encouraged him to think of art not just as a matter of mastering a particular technique or method but as a lifetime quest with a spiritual dimension.

In his freshman year Dexter was channeled into a standard curriculum but by the third year you’re supposed to decide on your major, and for Dexter this wasn’t easy. The usual approach was to focus on one field and to stay where you belonged. At the time, back in ‘85, the industrial designers didn’t want to deal with the painters, and the painters didn’t want to deal with the applied arts. Everybody was always fighting with each other. “It was this ideology that you’re on one side or the other side,” Dexter recalls, “and I didn’t believe that.” As he notes:

“I wanted to explore everything. I couldn’t make up my mind. I wanted to do illustration, I wanted to do painting. I wanted to venture into different departments.”

He finally decided to major in drawing because it allowed him to combine different approaches, including drawing, painting, and photography. “I started mixing all these things together,” Dexter recalls. “That quality of mixing things together goes back to my work with Bill Jean. Way back then he saw that I was good at it.”
In 1988, when he was a student at the Cleveland Institute of Art, Dexter received a summer scholarship through the Cleveland Institute of Art to travel to Europe, where he attended the Lacoste School of the Arts in the south of France. He recalls that “That was one of the most memorable things in my life. It changed my life. It really did:” If you grow up in Cleveland, in Hough, you are part of what Dexter describes as “a caste environment” but in Europe he found a world where he could mix with people of all sorts.

“I met so many different people in one area and they were just really good people. They wanted to talk. They weren't afraid of you. I remember some of the guys, we'd go to the chateau, we'd play music, we'd talk. Some of the other college kids were afraid of the gypsies. I was there dancing with the gypsies. When I came back to Cleveland it was a culture shock coming back to my neighborhood. I remember going to the projects and telling the guys how great it would be if they could get out of this little area, but they had no understanding of what I was talking about—completely no understanding.”

Curiously, however, it was during this time in France that he began work on a very dark, scary series of works which he later titled the Dark Series (fig. 5), which was a response to the violence and social turmoil he had experienced in his home neighborhood in Cleveland. Everybody asked him, “Why are you doing all these dark pictures in a beautiful place?” And Dexter replied: “It's not about the place. It's about what's going on inside me.”
DEATH OF HIS MOTHER,
APRIL 5, 1991

Shortly after he graduated from the Cleveland Institute of Art in 1990 he entered what was surely the most difficult time of his life, a period that opened when his mother died of complications from a stroke. As Dexter recalls:

It wasn't sudden but a lingering thing that lasted. I was with her when she had her stroke. I knew that she wasn't in good health. I was trying to get her to go to the doctor, but she was old school like my father, and those old school people feel that, 'You're the son, I'm the mother. You don't tell me what to do.' My parents were old fashioned. I found out after her death that she didn't take her medication. Same with my father. They didn't believe in conventional medicine. They kind of allowed their own demise because they just didn't want to deal with it.

When somebody dies in your life, they never go away. You have them in your heart forever. Some things can bring back the memory. It can be anything. It can be a light reflecting on a wall, or whatever, and then you become stuck in this mental state.

After my mother's death I made "The Dream" (fig. 6), which represents a girlfriend I went out with at the time. I used her image over and over again.

To survive, he needed some form of work so he moved to Columbus where his sister took him in and got a job with her husband, who worked as a landscaper. They would go to homes where people had been evicted and clear them out. Sometimes they had to throw out people who hadn't paid their rent.
"The people would often flee and leave everything behind, including photo albums and things of that sort. So I collected all these photo albums that had belonged to people I didn't know. For me it was symbolic of what I had lost. I kept collecting them. It was amazing what people would leave behind when they were running out."

Then in 1992 there was a recession and he lost his job in Columbus. So he came back to Cleveland and stayed with another sister, who had an apartment here. As Dexter recalls:

She didn't really want me, and she said, 'You're not doing any art here because I want my place clean.' My art had to be undercover. When she would leave I would take paper from underneath the bed and would work on it, and when she came back in I would hide it back underneath the bed.

But there wasn't much space to work so I snuck back into the CIA and worked there. I knew the security, how they did their rounds, and I knew that I could get in there for a certain time, work for a couple of hours, and then get out before they came out. At that time in the '90s the factory building of the CIA was still raw space in certain areas. I would find one of the deserted spaces and I would work there. I had to do art, so I found a space to do it. I worked on a whole body of work there and it was gratifying—not even how it came out but just being able to do it and not be detected. At that time I was just making work. I wasn't showing it to anyone.

Since his sister didn't want him around, he began living with friends here and there. By good fortune, at this difficult time he ran into a friend of his from the art institute, Cushmere Bell, a photographer, and they found a place together to live and staged little art shows there.
In March 1993 he and Cushmere staged an exhibition of their work at the Grog Shop on Coventry Road, run by Kathy Blackman (figs. fliers for Grog Shop and Smart Bar). None of the works he exhibited there can now be traced, and while the Grog Shop still exists, it's no longer in the same building. But the show marked a turning point. It was Dexter's first exhibition. And from this time forward, through hell and high water, he showed his work regularly. "Bless her, Kathy," Dexter comments. "It's now her twentieth anniversary at the Grog Shop. Bless her soul. She helped us."

As Dexter comments: "My mother and father always instilled in me: 'If you want to do it so badly you will find an audience for it.' They figured that if they couldn't find a gallery that would show their work, they would make one on their own. They also went to bars and restaurants, not the usual places to show art, but it worked. "If you look back into art history, a lot of famous artists did the same thing."

A number of the pieces he showed at the Grog Shop were carved woodblocks. In some cases he used the blocks to make prints; in other cases the block itself became the work of art and he painted and cut around them.
"I always wondered who that guard was who was always in the museum library."
THE RITUAL SERIES, 1993

He finally found a place in the attic of a house on Hillcrest, near Coventry, where a girl he knew lived, but was moving out, because the neighborhood was so bad and she was scared to live there. At first he was able to use her furnishings in her apartment, but when she completely cleaned out her things he was in bad shape. "I was by myself, I was alone, I had no money, I was badly, badly depressed. I was basically dying inside."

He had just started working part time at the museum at that time, but had almost no money at all. He would go to work and come back and had no money to do anything. "I was losing it," Dexter recalls, "so I started doing things."

Then I started getting involved with this ritual thing. I really had nothing to work with, I had to find things, so I started finding common things that I had around me. It became a ritual. It was kind of the same thing we all do every morning when we go to work. We get up in the morning, we do these various tasks, we go out the door, get our car keys. I looked at it like that. I made a ritual out of that situation to keep myself afloat.

Most of the pieces were made out of scraps. In them he recycled everything around him and put it into his artwork—newspaper, scrap paper, whatever. At one point he was carrying big buckets of dirt, grass, and leaves. Then he cut his hair off and used it for the work. He started using teeth (fig. 8).

Then I got obsessed. It had gotten to a point where I didn't sleep, and the lady that was living below me kept hearing me walking up the stairs and wondered 'What is he doing?'

The lady that lived below me, whose sister owned the house—they were really fond of me. I was behind rent and everything. She was kind of worried about me. She said, 'Mr. Davis. I notice you're carrying buckets of sand up to our door. What are you doing with that?' I was carrying sand, carrying leaves. It's almost like that movie 'Close Encounters' when the guy was picking up signals from UFOs and was building that model of the Devil's Tower in Wyoming. That's how I was at that time. I was just grabbing all kinds of stuff and putting it together.

As he worked further on the series, he began to incorporate the bones, feathers, and fur of dead animals in the pieces. As Dexter recalls:

At the Grog Shop I had befriended a guy who was a rock-and-roller. He was really interested in what I was doing. He helped me to find roadkill. It started with a bird, and then it went to bigger roadkill. Squirrels. One day when I was working at the museum someone called me. They said, 'There's somebody that left a gift for you in a shoe box.' I said 'What?' and I went down and when I checked he had placed a German shepherd's head inside a shoe box. I don't know where he found it. When I picked up the lid I shut it down quickly so that no one would see what was inside. It blew my mind. You know, I knew he was into 'Ritual' but I didn't think he'd bring something like that.
(Top to bottom) 9. Tree of Life, 1994. Collage, charcoal, found paper, recycled art, gesso, and house paint; 51 x 81 in. Destroyed

10. Head Hunter (Search for Love or Companionship), 1993. Collage, charcoal, house paint, varnish, and found paper; 51 x 81 in. Steve Warner
That evening, Dexter broke the dog's head in half, took out the brains, and then broke out the teeth.

"I used the bones, the teeth, maybe some hair. And I used my own hair and my own teeth. Whenever one fell out I would use it. I really wanted to make these things alive."

When I think back on it, it was necessary for me to do. I had to go to this extreme because of the desperate situation in my life at that time. I felt that I had to do something. I was reaching off my life, reaching for life—to get to the source. I was taking these dead things—bones, teeth, whatever they might be—and by creating my artwork giving them life again. When I think back, it was necessary for me to do that. The "Ritual Series" is very serious. Each piece has a different idea behind it.

Many of these pieces explored issues that he was grappling with. Head Hunter, 1993 (fig. 10) was about trying to find a relationship with a woman, because at that point he was so poor that it was hard to find a woman who wanted to deal with him. He was bounding from one crazy relationship to another. Head Hunter was about these relationships—about looking for a companion, a true love. At the bottom of the piece he pasted photographs of women from girlie magazines with their heads cut off. Their heads are cut off because they stand for artificial love, love that's not personal. A few years after he made it the piece was in a show of his work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland. Children from several elementary schools came to it and Dexter would talk to the kids. Dexter felt shy explaining this one and tried to cover it up, but the kids immediately figured out exactly what it was about.

Annunciation, 1993 (fig. 15) was about his anger towards the church at the time his mother died. She had spent her whole life working for the church, but when she and her family were in desperate needs, for example with funeral arrangements, they didn't offer any help. In Annunciation you've got cattle on one side—the symbolism is of cattle being led to slaughter—and on the other an upside down crucifix with a Mary figure inside it.

Most of these pieces contain motifs that are repeated, such as heads and hands, and when Dexter worked on them he rotated them round and round. In fact, Head Hunter originally went the other way, but when he turned it upside down it worked better. There was something about the central figure that didn't work well—the figure became too prominent—whereas when you turn it upside down your eye doesn't rest but goes round and round it. This figure is a Christ figure, but if you look closely you can see that there's a skeleton face that's embedded inside it.
Some of these pieces were essentially acts of exorcism. *Nosebleed*, 1993 (fig. 13) for example, was a response to a terrifying episode. On Mayfield Road in the '90s there were gangs. Dexter knew that there was a way he could get back to his apartment without going into that territory, but one day he was working late and had gone to the Grog Shop and when he left the Grog Shop he was tired, and went down Hillcrest. There was a gang at the time whose territory this was and he got beaten to a pulp.

A friend of mine and some people in the neighborhood found me. When I came to I couldn’t feel my face. It felt like it was gone. I had a white shirt on and it was totally covered with blood. They knew who was responsible, but they talked me out of revenge. They said: ‘You have too much to live for. Don’t seek revenge because these guys, they’ll get you. They have their situation. They know how to deal with the streets and you don’t in the way that they do. They’re organized.’ They were pretty matter of fact, but they talked me out of it because they loved me as an artist.

When you go through an assault type situation it takes a long time to get over it. You’re blaming yourself—you’re blaming all kinds of stuff. You’re angry. My way of getting over it, as I healed, was to create a piece called “Nosebleed.” The actual shirt I was wearing is included in the piece with all the blood. It’s my museum outfit that I was wearing when I was beaten. I collaged the outfit into the work. After a while the blood turns into a completely different color. It’s not red anymore.
In 1993 his work was included in a show of African-American alumni at the Cleveland Institute of Art. Then in February 1994, while in the midst of this series he had a show called *Life from Death at the Colonial Arcade*, along with Mark Howard, Paul Bigger, and John Perch.

The day it opened it was extremely cold. In fact, when he heard the weather report that evening the weatherman was saying “Don’t go out if you don’t have to.” He remembers thinking “Please don’t say that—I have a show tonight!” Just about nobody showed up. The only people there, aside from the four artists, were homeless people, because it was the only thing that was open before the shelter opened—the only place to get warm. But the homeless people loved his work.

“**The best critics I ever had,**” Dexter recalls. “**That was a wonderful experience. The homeless look for food in dumpsters, and they were amazed by the fact that I could take something that was disregarded in a dumpster and use it in my work. They thought that was wonderful.”**

Dexter adds:

**One of the most important things that I have to say, and especially for you artists, is always keep yourself out there. Don't die and become a closet artist. You want people to see you. You have to get involved. One of the things that I've done throughout my career, I got involved with everything. After I came back from Columbus, before I even started doing art on a regular basis, I would go to every art show. I would see everybody. I would be involved in all kind of community things. I taught at places like the Garden Valley Community Center, which was in a tough neighborhood. I even had to bring my own supplies for the kids. I think when you keep your options open like that, anything can happen.**
THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

He began working full time as a guard at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1994. For some people the job might become dull but for Dexter it provided a place of calm apart from his artistic work, and a chance to commune daily with great works of art. Dexter comments:

“I feel I'm in a position where it's stable and then I can venture off and tap into my creativity. My co-workers, my friends from the institute, we kind of encourage each other. We are still together as a family. I think that keeps the juice going.”

He alternates between being drawn to works that are obscure and those by famous masters. "I always look for people who are obscure, but then I find myself going back to people that I started out with. I mean, I go to Picasso. La Vie by Picasso in the museum is one of the things I always go and look at. I like de Kooning, I always like the Abstract Expressionist Philip Guston. Some of the London School people and obviously the Cobra School." In his own work he often has often found inspiration in an impressive variety of sources, including African art, Indian sculpture, and Islamic textiles.

Dexter's dealer, Bill Busta, notes that the most successful of the artists he's worked with are generally those who know a lot about the history of art, and are also very aware of the current scene—whether what they do is very traditional or very contemporary. Dexter is a striking instance of this. When Dexter had his first show at Bill's gallery one of the visitors was a librarian who worked at the Cleveland Museum of Art, and she commented to him: “I always wondered who that guard was who was always in the museum library.”

But he's always been attracted to the notion that works of art aren't just pleasing visual patterns but have a magical aspect. Not long after getting a job at the museum, for example, he arranged to get a tour of the Extensions collection from the curator in charge. Extensions was created to provide exhibitions for schools and libraries in the area. Many of the objects were ethnographic in nature and were created not as works of art but of religion and magic. He likes the idea that they still possess some sort of magical force, and reports that when the curator showed him the trove:

She told me a wonderful story about a Polynesian staff from a King. She said that when one tribe conquered another, they would take the first born and kill him. They would then take material from the brain and mix it with magical substances, then wrap it around the staff. Strange things still happen when you’re in the presence of this staff. She said that when they took it to the lab to inspect it the lights would blink on and off. Then, when one of the engineers went up to fix a light, as soon as he touched the bulb it dropped out of the fixture. He said that out of his thirty years at the museum that had never happened to him.

(Left:) William Busta

(Right:) Kevin Everson, Courtesy of Cleveland State University
THE WILLIAM BUSTA GALLERY

It was around this time that Dexter connected with Bill Busta of the William Busta Gallery, who became his dealer. Busta comments that when he shows art at his gallery he is interested not just in the art but in the degree to which the artist is playing the role of provocateur. “I like to start by showing art that’s being shown in the community. I think art is part of a dialogue, and if artists are participating in that dialogue, people will come to see their work.” Busta first connected with Dexter in 1993 when he was working with Julie Fehrenback, the curator at SPACES, an arts organization devoted to showcasing the work of young and emerging artists. This evolved into Cleveland X: Artists from a Late Industrial City, a show that included twenty artists, several of whom went on to important careers. For example, Derek Hess became known internationally for his rock concert posters, and Kevin Everson has gone on to show his work in the Whitney Biennial, one of the most important exhibitions in America of contemporary art, as well as at the Pompidou Center in Paris.

Dexter was another one of the “discoveries” of this exhibition (fig. 15). Busta recalls that at first he wasn’t sure what to think of his work: he wasn’t sure that he liked it.

Julie, who was the Associate Director at SPACES had just purchased a wonderful piece by Dexter—but I didn’t think it was so wonderful at the time. In fact, I described it as ‘grotesque.’ However, as I grew to know Dexter’s work, I began thinking of writer Flannery O’Conner’s seminal essay “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” (1960). She writes about ‘in these grotesque works, we (Ind that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe . . . that there are strange skips and gaps . . . Their fictional qualities lean . . . toward mystery and the unexpected.’ But it is more than that—it is a disturbing and freakish quality that is actually common and universal in what O’Conner describes as ‘fallen man;’ it is a way that reveals essential truths in all of us. That’s when I first encountered Dexter’s work.

It grew on me, and Dexter and I started talking, and pretty soon I knew he was an artist whose work I’d like to exhibit. On and off ever since we’ve been doing shows, whether it’s been at my commercial gallery or at the Mather Gallery at Case Western Reserve, where I included Dexter’s work in a show.
DEATH OF HIS FATHER, NOVEMBER 1998

It's interesting that Dexter remembers the death of his mother and father as “a double-whammy” that occurred at about the same time. In fact, Dexter’s father died (from an aneurysm) seven years after his mother did. But he became ill years before that, around the time that Dexter moved back from living with his sister in Columbus—an extremely difficult, chaotic time in Dexter’s life. As Dexter recalls:

“The problem was that he had left my mother a long time before that, and when he took sick no one knew anything about it. He was put in a home and we finally got notified. I don’t know who visited him because I never really did. I had been left with my mother and everybody had left and gone in different directions. I was focusing on taking care of myself.”

After his father’s death in November 1998 it was a free-for-all when Dexter and his siblings converged on his house and began grabbing thing to take home.

My sisters were collecting furniture, my brothers were collecting guns. My brothers couldn’t find the bullets. That’s because I took the bullets—I didn’t want them to have them. I collected a ton of photographs. One of the things I regretted was that after the fire in 1979 I lost most of the photos of my early life. I kept these things for years and then the right mood came on, and that’s when I grabbed them and used the image. The pleasure of doing this work is that you don’t do it all at once. It takes weeks or even months. You keep coming back to some of these images.


(Above:) Dexter Davis with his father, photo booth print
On the whole this began a very positive period in Dexter's life—a period of an upturn in his fortune which was reflected in his art. Bill Busta held his first show of Dexter’s work at his gallery in 1997 and purchased a major collage from Dexter at that time, *New Birth* (fig. 16). As he recalls: “I have a rule that I don’t buy any art from my gallery that hasn’t been there for sixty days, but I think I broke it with this one. It’s now in my breakfast room. I like Dexter’s sense of mystery and magic: the body parts, the collage element that is up at the top.” To me it has a quality of mystery that’s fascinating.”

The title and the concept of the series came from an encounter one day at the museum. Dexter recalls: “Leaving the museum on my lunch break, there was one of those religious people, the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The lady said, ‘Would you like to be born again?’ and I said ‘Sure.’ So she gave me a pamphlet and it said, ‘New Birth.’ I thought about the phrase and it seemed to me that it could indicate a spiritual thing that was happening inside you. So that became the basis of the piece.”

While still threaded with elements of darkness, it was the most optimistic work he had created so far. As Dexter has commented: “The Ritual Series was about the horrors of the life I was living. I had to do all this crazy stuff with animal bones to recreate my life taking things that were dead. *New Birth* was an extension of that. But it was a better situation. Sometimes it takes a while for one series to end and another to begin. At first they merge together.”

*New Birth*, the work that inaugurated the series, shows a woman’s head emerging from a tree or bush, which also takes the shape of her body. The roundness of the woman’s head resembles a sunflower. Dexter comments:

“It was based off the idea of my mother. She was a gardener and used to have sunflowers and other flowers in her garden. We could get by with the vegetables that we grew when we didn’t have money to buy groceries. The figure in the middle is like a parent, or mother, or a God-like figure. I have hands in most things. They can be reaching out to help or maybe pushing back. At the top are pictures of little kids’ toys that I cut and put in there. The red stripes came from a paper bag that I used. I was still recycling whatever was in the studio. I used every little bit of everything I had. Latex paint, tempera paint. The hand is newspaper. The circles come from a bucket that I used when I mix paint. I put the bucket down and it was covered with latex paint and started making circles on the surface.”

“It’s definitely about an idea of spirituality; it’s definitely connected with religion. But it’s a spontaneous thing that you feel. I’ve been educated as an artist—I went to the Cleveland Institute of Art—but there are no rules to it. It’s an instinct, you just know when it’s right—when you activate an energy force and make something alive. Sometimes it’s a very simple thing to do, sometimes it can take forever to get there, you do whatever it takes. I’m like a shaman. It’s taking my energy and transferring it into the work.”
At the beginning I do lots of drawings and studies. There's a period when you're gathering information. Then things start to click together. You get this idea and it's explosive. I worked on several things at once. I had all the paper laid out on the floor and I walked around them, working on all of them. I was going to break away from trying to control it. I wanted it to be what the idea of new birth is: I wanted the energy just to explode instead of trying to contain it. I just mixed my paints and started going. The first one was "New Birth One," but as I was working on it I worked on "Sunflower Seed One" and "Sunflower Seed Two" (fig. 19).

I liked the idea of these things interrelating and exploding. It's all about energy. I had come across a photograph of my father and me as a child. I wanted somehow to incorporate that in a piece so I used it in "Sunflower Seed." The other faces and arms were an extension of my consciousness. It's almost like this Hindu or spiritual enlightenment thing. I don't want them to be very descriptive. I want them to look like a face, but not necessarily a particular face. It's almost like a dream. It's like waking up from a dream. It's like you're walking in the neighborhood and you're nodding at somebody walking by and they're nodding back. You see the person but you don't really know who they are.

Rather than draw the whole body, Dexter often works with fragments, such as the hands in this piece, which float in the air, disconnected from a physical context. As Dexter comments: "When I was doing this series I was trying to simplify and asking myself, 'How much information do you really need for what I'm trying to do?' These hands go in a circle. The way, I look at it, the hands could be a body—they could be part of a bigger body or piece."
THE GARDEN SERIES, 1998

*New Birth* was followed by the closely related *Garden Series* (figs. 20, 21, 22, 23), which again presents heads and hands emerging from vegetal forms. Dexter always loved animals. He sometimes went on camping trips and his mother learned when he came back to have his brothers shake him down, since he would hide animals that he picked up in his pocket. His mother and brothers would often start screaming when they jumped out.

The family burned their garbage in the back yard, underneath a large tree, and when Dexter had a pet that died he would bury it beneath the tree. Once Dexter’s dog ate some food that had been thrown out of the refrigerator, and died. Dexter wrapped the dog in an old blanket and buried it under the tree in the backyard, near the spot in which his mother used to burn the trash. Experiences such as this are reborn in paintings, in which a tree is nourished by the animals buried beneath it. In it, the animals come back as spirits, lurking in the branches. His collage *Tree (B), 2012* (fig. 56) refers to this.

"The idea behind it was that when a dead thing was buried under the tree, it would grow into the tree and become part of its spirit. I felt that the spirit of these things would still exist in nature. I look on this piece as a positive statement. It’s about taking a situation that normally would be negative and turning it around."

"Point," 1998 (fig. 24) was one of the pieces that was in the “Garden Series.” It was a reflection on the aftermath of my mother’s death, and it was hard to do because I had to reflect on things I didn’t like. My brothers were fighting over stuff and everybody was blaming everybody else. I was so upset with my family. In the days before my mother’s death there were some horrible things. One of my brothers was a Vietnam vet. He was older and she was keeping him around, and he was very needy and always asking for help even though she was very sick at the time. I was trying to tell her to take her meds, but she never did. I wanted to make it a bit humorous by putting in Mickey Mouse-type hands which are pointing around. It’s supposed to be some kind of unknown cartoon character, but it’s also a man with an ax. It’s almost like the executions and the person being executed is the same.

Dexter usually works simultaneously on several works at a time. In other words, he works in a series. When he comes up with a concept, it’s a concept for a group, and he works on several pieces at a time. He puts himself into a sort of shamanistic state.
“It’s almost like Jackson Pollock. I go crazy; I move everywhere. I usually play loud music, have the TV on, I have lots of white noise in the background; and these things put me in a trance, and yet also make me focus on what I’m trying to do. Somehow creativity is bigger than I am. You can feel it happening to you. There’s no word for it. It’s just an experience you go through.”

“Bush Baby,” 2012 (fig. 57) is about the Bush, the jungle, and the city is like that. I met a lot of people who wanted to live, but they were so in the Bush, which means the ghetto, that you look in their eyes and there was nothing there. They just got completely consumed by everything that happened in their life. Most people would not even notice them because they’re so ingrained in this environment that they’re almost invisible. It breaks my heart because there’s something still there, still alive in some of these people, but it gets to a point where you have to save yourself, because if you get too close they will pull you in. I try to do the best I can. This is my way of communicating how I feel. Most people don’t understand them. They’re beautiful but they’re so apart from reality that they can’t come back. Kind of like homeless people. They’re part of another world—the world of the Bush. The only people that see them are people who know the Bush.

He often breaks up pieces he did in the past and reuses parts of them in his present work:

If I have works that I did in the past sitting around and I feel that they could empower another work, I would recycle and reuse them. When a work was strong it only led to more ideas for doing another one. This one “Garden IV” is one of the last of these series. I wanted an explosion of color and energy. At the museum when I was doing these things I was looking at Hindu art and Asian art. At the top I used some wallpaper that was in the apartment where I was living. I also used some kiddie drawings from my nephew. Some of the pieces of collage were from the “Ritual Series,” which I reintroduced, in a lighter and more positive way. The arms, the different arms, are moving, like the life force in a Hindu statue.

This was a positive time in his life. He had a full-time job at the museum and things became a little more comfortable financially. Bill Busta at the William Busta Gallery took up his work and from ’97 to ’99 he had shows at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Mather Gallery, and in a warehouse in Cleveland’s Midtown, and was reviewed in the Plain Dealer. He started to move away from family turmoil and loss. He was in a better place and his art reflected that.

Curiously, however, the critics were ganging up on him at this time. The Ritual Series is very edgy and difficult, but people gravitated to it. Then he moved to the Garden Series and the Happy Series, that are seemingly more accessible and more joyful, but the people who liked the early paintings got upset. They felt his work was being watered down. Nonetheless, the work sold very well. The words in a review may be negative but if they give you a big color picture most people don’t even read the words. They think “This is great.” Dexter comments: “The people that buy, the people that talk—I think I’ll go with the people that buy.”
(Clockwise from top left:) 20. Garden I, 1998. Collage, found paper, watercolor, and gesso; 50 x 38 in. Gregory Simonson


Dexter Davis 1992-1997

Dexter Davis: 1992-1997 is made possible by a grant from American Greetings.

In 1998 he had a big show at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, which is now the Museum of Contemporary Art or MOCA. Jill Snyder, the director, played a major role in deciding to do the show, and Kristen Chambers (now deceased) was the curator. The area within a wall of curtain glass at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art was originally a sales and rental gallery. When they decided to get away from that they did periodic shows of artists from northeast Ohio. The show came just after Dexter's show at the Busta Gallery was featured on the cover of the Sunday Magazine of the Plain Dealer, and was surely in good part a response to that publicity. Jeannette Dempsey, sister of the noted modern architect Philip Johnson, bought a piece, and had a party for Dexter in Bratenahl. After her death the piece came back to the Busta Gallery and the Cleveland painter and writer Doug Utter now owns it.

In 1998 he was invited to do a residency at the Experimental Printmaking Workshop (EPI) at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania. The director of the workshop was Curlee Raven Holton, a friend from the Cleveland Institute of Art. Dexter explains:

SPIRIT SERIES, 1998

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(Above:) Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art exhibition, February, 1998

I first met Curlee when he was at the Cleveland Institute of Art, in my third year. Not to be negative, but he liked my studio better than the one he had and he kicked me out. Later he got interested in what I was doing. I would come into my student space and things would be moved around, and I knew that people had been looking at what I'd done. He was one of them.

Curlee was in the 1994 invitational at the Cleveland Museum of Art, and then he got a job at Lafayette. They had no printmaking department but they had a house where they put some presses. One of the ways he built up the program is that he developed something called the Experimental Printmaking Institute, and once a year would invite an artist to come in and do a print.

When I came, Curlee sent a letter to the police telling them who I was and not to harass me. So when I arrived the police knew who I was, and took me to the station and were really nice to me and helped me.

Curlee gave me lots of time to develop the piece. He knew the woodblock thing was my forte so I did a woodblock and then also did a copper plate and we printed one on top of another. It came out a little differently every time. When I was there I sold a copy of the print to a guy named Tanner, who was a grandson of Henry Ossawa Tanner, the famous African-American painter. Spirit was basically a self-portrait. It was influenced by tattoo and scarification. Back in the "Ritual Series" I was looking at the tattoos of different tribes. The woodblock was of a face like a skull. Then I had another plate with all these lines going across like scarification (fig. 25)
CLUB ILLUSION, 1999

The William Busta Gallery, which had been located in Little Italy, closed in 1999, leaving Dexter without an art dealer. But Busta continued to present exhibitions. In May 1999 William Busta Gallery and Julie Fedevich organized Club Illusion, a pop-up show in a vast warehouse space. The show featured Dexter Davis and three other young artists who were good friends: Yong Han, Kam Lee, and Clay Parker. The title of the show was taken from Club Illusion, a bar that was just across the street from the Cleveland Institute of Art during their student days. They were friends that he often hung out with at the bar. Dexter comments: "When you look back at Picasso, there was always a bar where all the artists would hang out. Club Illusion was just the same."

The show included two of his best works, The Devil and Mr. Hyde (fig. 27) and Hide and Seek (fig. 28).

As Dexter recalls:

I did that work in a Case Western Reserve-owned apartment on 115th and Euclid. I kept seeing people that reminded me of my own past—vets that were having trouble and homeless people. At one point I was letting homeless people live in my apartment because I felt so sorry for them. I thought, 'What can I do to help them change their lives?' It was a big mistake because one led to two, and two led to three. Before you knew it there was a party going on at my place. I had to get those people out.

During the time that was happening I was working on this series. I had the idea that "The Devil and Mr. Hyde" are the same thing, the same force. They're both the same preacher. In some ways it's a self-portrait. "Hide and Seek" is another variation on this idea. It's the idea of not actually wanting to find what the problem is. You're hiding it from yourself, it's hide and seeking. I remember working on that piece when the homeless were sleeping, lying around the place. The apartment was filled with debris. I had torn paper. I sent it to a lady on Murray Hill to get it framed. But when I got it back she had framed it upside down. It turned out that people liked it better that way, so you're actually looking at it upside down. I remember using caulk that you use for a bathtub, because there was such dense cardboard and paper on the piece that I layered it.

There are probably faces behind what you see. I worked on it for an extended time. The flowers can stand for two things. They can be a life force from nature, or it can be a funeral—or it can be both. When I look back on "Hide and Seek" and "The Devil and Mr. Hyde" I feel proud. I was really fighting with issues.
At this time he also completed a large mural for the Cleveland School of the Arts (fig. 29). The school commissioned two works at this time: one was a painting by Mark Howard; the other was a large mural on the back of the school on fabric which was Dexter’s piece. It was produced by creating a design with painting and collage in his apartment and then doing a giant copy from it by digital transfer. He was particularly happy that the piece honored his mother. “My Garden Series was important to me because of my mother. If she was alive to see it, she would be so proud.” Not long after he had completed it he gave a talk about it to a group that assembled in the school yard. As Dexter recalls:

“One of the kids was hiding behind his mother’s leg. I said ‘Don’t you like it?’ and he said, ‘No, it’s alive.’ That was one of the best compliments I received.”

When I was at the Cleveland Museum of Art I was living over on Carnegie. When I walked home I could see my mural that was on the arts high school. I’d have a cup of coffee and go by and look at my mural. It was wonderful to be reminded of what I’d done. When the old high school was demolished, the murals were put in storage, they hope to reinstall them in the new building. I would have stayed on Carnegie since the area wasn’t that dangerous but we had these slums lords who weren’t keeping up the building. Then there were a couple of break-ins and I decided I had to get out.
The Happy Series was held at the Mather Gallery, a small art space at Case Western Reserve University, in 2000. Dexter comments:

"Happy was done when everyone was worried about computers crashing in the year 2000. Everybody was worried about it.

I thought, let's not worry; let's just let everybody be happy. So I did a whole series of masks with mixed people, like a carnival. Once again, you can see these things look like a mask. People were excited about the show and almost all the work sold (figs. 30, 31, 59)."
In the year 2000, Zygote Press in Cleveland invited Dexter to serve as artist-in-residence to do a print. Most of the time the studio was quiet and empty and he would work in peace. At the time he was looking at French artists of the Cobra school such as Christian Dotremont, Corneille, and Karel Appel. He had always enjoyed mixing images together. At Zygote he got particularly interested in the chine collé technique in which two sheets of paper—often already imprinted with designs—are run through the press together and fused to each other. This made it possible to combine different printmaking techniques—for example, to combine a woodblock with a monotype, or a woodblock with an etching. He also enjoyed applying color by hand to create unusual effects, and loved letting the image grow extremely dark, so that the image is barely visible, and reads as a sort of ghost-like shadow (figs. 32, 33).
(Above:) Dexter at opening of War Babies exhibition, the Grog Shop, 2002

War Babies came out of the Ritual Series, but years later when he was working at Tower Press. The first image is a silhouette of one image with another image inside: the silhouette of a baby with a gun inside. Dexter was thinking about the social climate of the city. The press was on Nineteenth Street and there were a lot of homeless shelters in that area.

I saw that there was a new generation of the homeless who I would pass when I was catching the RTA to go back and forth from work. They would come out early and walk down the street. I was amazed by how a lot of these people were young. I was seeing these forgotten people and thinking about how the psyche is warped when people are born into this sort of situation. I did the prints manually, without a press. If I had had a printing press I probably would have done etchings. Since I didn’t, I stayed with the woodblocks. I like that you get a hand-made feeling that doesn’t seem mechanical (fig. 35).

I was thinking about stop signs and all the signs that we see in the city that are very basic. I’d made an image like “War Babies” with the infant, which is pure and welcoming and it’s about life. Then I drew a pistol that means just the opposite. When I put these two images together, it became dynamic (figs. 36, 37, 38).

I remember I exhibited in this place called the Buzz Gallery which was on the near West Side. I went across the street to get something to eat at a restaurant and someone ran over to get me. People on the street had started looking through the widow and they noticed “War Baby”, and they just had to come in there to take a look. They were crowded around the image and the lady that was inside the gallery was scared. So they ran to get me.
On Christmas Day of 2007 Dexter suffered a major setback: a fire that destroyed his studio and most of his possession. His studio at Tower Press had an electric stove. He walked out but had apparently left the stove on. When he came back alarms were going off, and when he went to his unit the door wouldn't open. Apparently the sprinkler system went off after the fire started. It sealed the door and he couldn't get back in. When the firemen came they wouldn't let him in, so he was standing there arguing with the firemen. The next thing he knew they called Red Cross and he had to spend the night, Christmas Day, in a hotel. He lost pretty much everything.

“I had spent years collecting information. I used to have little field books. I always kept a little book with me when I walked around; I would make notations, and if something affected me I would pick it up and tape it into the book. I would try to always keep some kind of record that later I could go back and refer to. I had all these books tacked up in my studio. After the fire I had to start over again. It was kind of tough.

The funny thing, when I think back on it, is that I remember watching TV, it's Christmas Day, and you see the horrible stories of fires and things. You never think it can happen to you; but then there I was in a hotel watching everything unfold. I was one of those people. It took a while to find another place to live. The Red Cross helped a lot. Luckily I found a place.”

It took years to recover. For several years he had been exhibiting regularly. Now it took two years before he staged another exhibition. But by the time he did, his work had matured. Monsters and Ghosts proved one of his most interesting series, and one of the best-received (fig. 39).
MONSTERS & GHOSTS, 2011

By this time, the William Busta Gallery had returned to business in a new location. Dexter held his second show at the Busta Gallery, Monsters and Ghosts, in January 2011, after it had been postponed two times. As Bill Busta comments: "We had it scheduled and the work wasn’t ready yet. The work had to find its own time." Dexter’s childhood world of scary violence was also a world of spirits and of ghosts.

There’s a strange story my brothers tell of the time before I was born. We lived at Eighty-Ninth and Hough. Once a Victorian family had lived there and we were told that someone died in the house. At a certain hour every day we would see a family standing across the street looking at the house. They had come back to visit. They were like a Victorian-type family that actually came into the house once. My brothers said they were so horrified that they tried to hide from them. But once they were discovered they would go away—in fact, they would vanish.

When I was a child there was always something strange going on at the house—weird things that kept occurring. My brother had told me about this. My brother was sleeping. Something fell on the bed. It was a head. And then he saw a foot that walked up the wall and went into the ceiling. There’s got to be some truth to it. I’ve asked him about it many times and he doesn’t change his story. Just these weird things.

I remember seeing that somebody had tied this thing to our door. It was a chicken foot, a duck head, and a pheasant tail feather. I don’t know what it meant, but it evidently meant something. Clearly there was some sort of African magic in the air—and dark forces which were not in contradiction with, but very much in tune with, the Christian vision of Heaven and Hell, or angels and devils.

Whenever we would move there would always be this recurrence of some kind of strange force, which I can’t really describe. My mother knew it. You can call it voodoo or whatever, but that was something that always plagued the family. The thing that happened to me—it’s hard to say if it was real or not, when I saw this thing, this ghost in my bedroom. I was a little kid at the time. I was sharing a bedroom with my sister at the time who was about twelve. I wanted my sister to look so that I would know if it was real. She said she was awake but she wouldn’t open her eyes. She was afraid. I think of these things now and

I ask, ‘What was this? Was it a psychological thing that happened because all these horrible things had happened and your mind has to find a way of dealing with it? Could it be that? Could it be these little echoes that keep occurring and you have to find some way of figuring it out?’

Once again, his work was an allegory of what was happening in Dexter’s life:

We can all be monsters and there are monsters out there. Obviously the idea of Ghosts, which is sometimes used as a street term, is death—the dead. "Monsters and Ghosts" has different levels to it. The Monster is the tormenter. The Ghost is the person that’s trapped or the person that is dead. One was about something that’s in limbo, being tormented, and he could be in a state of consciousness where he’s stuck in a situation and can’t find a way out of it.

One of the major works in the show, Flesh and Bone, 2010 (fig. 40) was a sort of aftermath of that experience of seeing ghosts. It’s about becoming a ghost. Something happens and you’re gone—you went into the void.

"Flesh and Bone" was very complicated because there was so much stuff in it. I thought at one point I would not even be able to complete it because it was just so many different strange things that I was trying to do. I use pushpins when I’m putting my work together so I can move images around and figure out how I want the pieces to come together. Working on some of these things, you go blind after a while. You see so many images.

It has to have some kind of dynamic. Once I see something that I don’t recognize I think I’m onto something. I try to surprise myself. In good art I feel there’s always going to be a mystery. As much as you, as you try to dissect it, there’s always going to be something that you can discover as you go back and back to it. I try to surprise myself. I love it when I can break the borders. I would love to be able to do it more often, but there’s the technical problem of having to frame it. I feel that if it moves outside the border it gives it the power I’m looking for.
BLACK HEADS, 2010

A major breakthrough in Dexter’s career occurred at this time when the Cleveland Museum of Art purchased a work from the show, Black Heads, 2010 (fig. 41), at the insistence of the Curator of Drawings Heather Lemonedes. Dexter would concur that it’s one of the best things he’s ever made:

Everything came together in that particular piece. I actually put my handprint in one of the images of hands. I remember when I was in the south of France we went to a cave site and I saw a cave with hand prints on the walls. When I started my work I used the entire human form in my work and then I thought, ‘What is it I’m trying to say?’ I felt it was more powerful to take away certain things and make people have to search for what is there.

The images at the bottom are almost a merry-go-round, with the images going up and down. I started thinking about “Dante’s Inferno” and how you can go into the level of Hell. I was playing with the idea that sometimes you can be placed in Hell but you can also become your own Hell. The hands can be something that reaches out and pulls you out or you could be pushing yourself back inside. I thought of having a face but I didn’t want to put in too much. I thought that an eye would convey the psychological things inside your mind—eyes which sees things even further than what we can see.

He had started Black Heads in the studio on Superior that caught fire, and the piece was almost completely destroyed. In the studio before the fire it was a completely different looking image. After the fire, he salvaged what he could; and he then combined it with something else that had been badly damaged in the fire and that he really loved—a print by his old professor, Carroll Cassill, which had cost him a lot of money, Icarus. He collaged a fragment of Icarus into the top part of Black Heads and other fragments into Who Goes There. And Dexter recalls:

After the fire, Carroll’s widow, Jean Kubota Cassill found out about it and she came here to talk to me and took me back to Carroll’s studio. She gave me papers from the studio and working tools to finish the piece. That was an incredible push.

Most of my classmates from the art institute only dream to have a work they’ve made on display at the museum. But I’ve had one in the Cleveland gallery. Once in a while my department would put me somewhere near the piece so that I could enjoy it. And it was wonderful. You don’t really have to brag about it, you can just stand there and watch people, and if they ask a question you can get in a conversation. I enjoy seeing people enjoying themselves. I’ve met people from Japan, people from Chile. I’ve had families that took pictures of them with me and the painting. They were so excited to see a living artist in a museum with his own work.

(Above:) “Icarus,” by H. C. Cassill

“Mental Circus I and II, 2010 are about people who can just stand there and look like they’re perfectly normal but inside them horrible things are happening. Not necessarily a physical outburst, but a mental breakdown. It was about how it feels to be empty. People are looking at you, but they have no idea what’s going on.” (figs. 42 and 43).
There was an older white gentleman who came into the gallery when it was up in the museum's contemporary collection. He wouldn't leave the piece: he stood there and stared. It made me wonder what happened in his life. What is his story? Why did we cross paths?

One of the most exciting things about having his work purchased was discovering that it seemed to energize the gallery in which it hung—and even to add energy to the works around it.

It's one thing to buy a work and it's another thing to see how well it hangs inside the institution. I think it's noteworthy that when the museum bought "Black Heads" they said they were going to have it up for thirty or sixty days and then about four months later they took it down. Then it was up for about four months, then it was up for another year; then it was in another show and they made notecard and magnets of it. There was something about the piece that held up to anything that it was around. It had its own voice.

At the time they purchased the piece they were trying to figure out if the label should say it was African American or American. I said "American." I wanted to be a part of the whole and not separate myself from the whole.
TWELVE DEAD, 2010

The series Twelve Dead was inspired in good part by his childhood memory of seeing a dead body dropped off in front of his home. Who was the man who was killed? How should we relate to the constant flood of news stories about murders of this sort, and about the victims who we never knew as people—just as a statistic?

When the guy’s body was thrown out in front of my house, I never saw the guy’s face—I ran away when it was happening. But there was some psychological thing that happened to me and lately I’ve been having these dreams when I would see the faces of these dead people—but then they’re not faces. “Twelve Dead” is these faces that didn’t have any face anymore. It’s like you don’t even know if they’re people anymore.

The “Twelve Dead” (figs. 44-54,) comes from this repetitive thing you always seeing in the news: you see these stories over and over again. And I live in a neighborhood where these things are actually happening. It’s taken from an actual headline. It becomes numbing. But in this case, the people aren’t dead. Or maybe they are dead. They’re people that I see all the time on the street and no one knows who they are. They’re sort of John Does, Jane Does, whatever. They’re people who could be alive or could be dead and no one would never know or care.

When I started doing “Twelve Dead” the images were easier to recognize as a person, but as I went through the progression they became more and more abstract. It’s almost like the idea of repetition in the media; you get so jaded that you don’t even see what there anymore. “Twelve Dead” is about the forgotten, and how the headlines can become more important than the person. One piece is called “Midnight,” 2010 (fig. 36) and it’s based on something that I’ve read about and also experienced—that most crimes happen around midnight.

Bill Busta: When I was putting these up on the wall and the titles were “Twelve Dead: One,” and “Twelve Dead: Two,” and “Twelve Dead: Three,” and so forth up to Twelve... Did you ever thing about how salable they would be? Do you think in terms of an audience? Do you think about how people respond to your work?

Dexter Davis: I don’t know. I don’t know. I think it’s more an inner dialogue. I’m pretty selfish. When I do what I do, I do it mainly for myself. I don’t know how to really explain it. It’s a personal thing. It’s just something that’s spiritual. It’s a ground that no one can cross. It’s your own space. But it’s great that people do love what I do. I feel blessed when people can actually identify with that kind of experience once it’s done. But when I’m actually doing these things, I’m just selfish as can be. I’m not thinking of nobody but me.
(Left to right) 45. 12 Dead 2, 2010. Collage and relief print; 15 x 11.5 in. Collection of the artist.

46. 12 Dead 3, 2010. Collage and relief print; 15 x 11.5 in. Robert and Margo Roth

47. 12 Dead 4, 2010. Collage and relief print; 15 x 11.5 in. Collection of the artist.
(Clockwise from top left:) 48. 12 Dead 5, 2010. Collage and relief print; 15 x 11.5 in. Kim Bissett


50. 12 Dead 7, 2010. Collage and relief print; 15 x 11.5 in. Tom Miller

51. 12 Dead 8, 2010. Collage and relief print; 15 x 11.5 in. Andrew and Joan Kohn

(Right:) 52. 12 Dead 9, 2010. Collage and relief print; 15 x 11.5 in. Henry Adams
(Left:) 53. 12 Dead 10, 2010. Collage and relief print; 15 x 11.5 in. Robert and Margo Roth

(Right:) 54. 12 Dead 11, 2010. Collage and relief print; 15 x 11.5 in. Joshua Sims
PERSONAL MATTERS, 2012

*Personal Matters* opened at the William Busta Gallery in September 2012. Dexter felt the need to become more personal in this particular show after so many years of living in the city and seeing how things were constantly changing. He felt the need to do something more, or say something more after seeing so many people die. He had tried to reach out, to speak with them. He felt their total hopelessness.

“They looked at me and said, ‘I wish I have what you have.’ That’s heartbreaking. It’s very heartbreaking that people feel so desperate that there’s no hope.”

1a. *(See also Fig. 1 on page 10)*
Food and Money, 2010. Collage, prints, found paper, fabric, and charcoal; 50 x 40 in. Charles and Fran Debordeau

Food and Money (fig. 1a) was one of the first images in this series. It's about the episode in his life, which has already been described, when his brother committed a robbery to feed the family.

Many of these paintings are about things that actually happened to Dexter. Others he is not so sure if they actually happened or if it was some fear that was so strong that it kept recurring in his mind. Only In My Dream (A), 2012 (fig. 58), for example, is what happened when Dexter thought he saw a ghost. Or it could have been a reaction to seeing a dead body being thrown out in front of his house since he never saw the man's face:

In "Only in My Dream" I made shapes that look like faces, but they're not faces. They don't have any features. When I am making the piece, it has to have some kind of visual dynamic. Once I see something that I don't recognize I think I'm onto something. I try to surprise myself. In good art I feel there's always going to be a mystery.

As much as you try to dissect it, there's always going to be something that you can discover as you go back and back to it. I love it when I can break the borders. I would love to be able to do it more often, but there's the technical problem of having to frame it. I feel that if it moves outside the border it gives it the power I'm looking for.

Head and Foot, 2012 (fig. 55) was about a reoccurring situation when, as the children went to sleep, something would drop off the wall. Thus, it continued the theme of Monsters and Ghosts, but with a new interest in how ghosts reflect some inner turmoil of the psyche. As Dexter has commented:

"We can all be monsters, and there are monsters out there."

(Right:) 58. *Only in My Dream (A)*, 2012. Collage, prints, and acrylic on paper; 30 x 22 in. Private collection
AFRICAN TRADITIONS

The question of the African qualities of Dexter's work raises fascinating questions. Surely in part this comes from his rich exposure to world art in the Cleveland Museum of Art, where he can view superb African carvings as well as works by western artists, such as Picasso, who have been influenced by African sculpture. He clearly has a sophisticated knowledge of sources of this sort. But in a significant way it's also clear that the African qualities of Dexter's work go deeper, that they're not simply a borrowed language, but a natural idiom of expression. The sense of rhythm, ritual, and magic that permeates his work, the sense of a world permeated by spirits, surely has an affinity with African tradition.

If we consider how Dexter works, it's clear there are many parallels with what we find in African tradition. For one thing, his process of creation is essentially rhythmic. Often he plays music, turns on the television, creates forms of background noise to push himself into a creative state of mind—indeed, a sort of trance-like shape like that of a shaman. He enters a zone. What fuels his art, he confesses, is "Anxiety." In other words, his art strives to push into a zone beyond that of normal reality—into the world of spirits and trance. He invariably works on several pieces of art at once, creating a sort of contrapuntal relationship between them; and in each individual work what he seeks is a sort of rhythmic connection between images (or patterns) that are repeated (though with variation) throughout the composition in a pattern with syncopated rhythms. In representing things, such as the human body he often focuses on particular sites of power—such as hands, eyes, faces—and eliminates the rest of the figure. He loves to make use of objects that have magical associations, whether things such as bones that naturally make one think about issues of life and death, or particular forms of paper ephemera such as discount coupons or paper bags that have associations with the narrative he's exploring. While his art has generally been "realistic" in its visual language, he has never concerned himself much with the challenge of creating images that are super-realistic. Instead, the images of his work function religiously and symbolically and often present moral dilemmas or moral questions.

This sense of images that speak to each other, that are engaged in dialogue, is particularly strong in Dexter's recent work. While his early work tended to present "a message," more and more his recent work seems to portray "a conversation"—a conversation with his past, a conversation with himself.
By all indications, Dexter's career is not over by any means, but his recent work conveys a sense of circling back to his artistic beginnings. These days Dexter feels he's in a good place. While not rich, he has enough money to buy food and pay the rent and acquire the art supplies he needs. He's in a better neighborhood and less worried about getting beaten up or about people breaking in. The people he works with are supportive and welcoming. He feels more comfortable with himself and with the fact that he can make art. While he'd love to have a bigger place, since his studio apartment is packed with the materials he needs for his art, he's been able to produce work at a steady pace, without worrying about how to survive. Much of his recent work is backwards-looking, a retrospective look at some of the darkest moments of his life. He looks unflinchingly at their dark aspects, but also sees them as a part of the road on a larger journey.

"I kind of like the idea of knowing that at one point things were so difficult. Now I can see it and understand it and talk about it more freely. It's about this horrible situation that I had to deal with at one time, but now I can see it more completely. I can see the beginning; I can also see the end of it."

Pearl, 2014 (fig. 62) honors and celebrates a lady he knew in East Cleveland in the 1990s whom he would go down to visit, who was a good friend of his in the neighborhood. After his mother died, she became a sort of motherly figure for him. He recalls that she gave him tips about the dangers to avoid, how to get around without getting beaten up, because at that time "East Cleveland was really rough. She was a wonderful human being." Dexter recalls, and she seemed to connect with what he was doing as an artist, which most people couldn't relate to. But she also had a lot of health problems, and unfortunately, she also had a problem with drugs, which is what eventually killed her. "After my mother died, I used an image similar to what I used for Pearl. I had the same sort of Biblical type. She's in the center as the Mary figure, and I'm on the right as the son figure. And there's this thing lurking behind her which is death."
Mr. Gospel II, 2014 (fig. 64) reflects on an episode in the story after this mother’s death, when the family didn’t even have the money to bury her. It expresses his disillusionment with religion.

"My sister was begging the church that she spent so much time working for to help us bury her because we didn’t have any money. I thought that after all this talk about love that they would help, but we could barely get them to do anything for us. It took a lot of effort on my sister’s behalf to convince these people to help us. It didn’t make any sense to me. From that point on, the Gospel from that church was just words."

One of his most recent works, Conversation, 2014 (fig. 63), looks back to the period when he was isolated in the attic up on Hillcrest Avenue in Cleveland Heights thinking about death, feeling almost suicidal. In some ways it goes back to the issues he dealt with in his Ritual Series, but in a more reflective way.
There was a time when I was so isolated and I was very poor. I had to find a way to pull myself out of my depression. You sit there by yourself and you ask what could be done to make things better and you beat yourself up a bit. I was using whatever materials were around in my studio and my place and converting the energy, turning the materials into something that would be, for me, a surviving mechanism.

At that time I thought that the devil and death were there with me. That's me on the left, the devil in the middle, and death on the other side. It's a conversation that I had to do to get myself centered because I felt at that time I was so close to nothing that I could easily just let everything go. The devil is a direct reflection of me. It sort of looks like me. The devil tries to trick you into believing that it's you when it's not. It's almost like a reflection of those dark things you feel yourself slipping into. I think the devil wanted me to stay alive, and death wanted me to die, and I was the creator and wanted to live. It was about how to keep myself alive and not to fall into a situation where everything goes dark.

There's a rich quality to the piece, both in the figures, which feel like African statues, and in its qualities of syncopated visual rhythm. At the same time, it's a very contemporary piece, the product of an American who lives in the early twenty-first century, who's been around the block, who's aware of psychoanalysis, who knows about art history, who's aware of contemporary social issues. In visual guise it poses questions that are more often posed in words. It's about having a deep conversation with yourself and it approaches this issue with depth and an awareness of the complexity of issues of right and wrong. If we want to be healed, it seems to propose, if we want to heal the world, we need to start by engaging in a conversation with the devil.
"I LIKED THE IDEA OF THESE THINGS INTERRELATING AND EXPLODING. IT'S ALL ABOUT ENERGY."

DEXTER DAVIS
DEXTER DAVIS

Born April 19, 1965 Cleveland, Ohio

EDUCATION
1990 B.F.A. Cleveland Institute of Art
1987 Lacoste School of Arts, Lacoste, France
1981-84 West Technical High School, Cleveland, Ohio

RESIDENCIES
2000 Zygote Press, Cleveland, OH
1998 Experimental Printmaking Institute, Lafayette College, Easton, PA

HONORS
1983-88 Henry G. Keller Memorial Award, Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland OH
1987 Lacoste School of Arts Scholarship
1985 Cleveland Institute of Art Scholarship, Cleveland, OH
1984 National Awards for Advancement in Arts, Cleveland, OH
EXHIBITIONS AND COLLECTIONS

SOLO & TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2014    Dexter Davis and Jason Milburn: Home, William Busta Gallery, Cleveland, OH
2012    Personal Matters, William Busta Gallery, Cleveland, OH
2011    Monsters and Ghosts, William Busta Gallery, Cleveland, OH
2002    Recent Works Dexter Davis, CACP Gallery, Cleveland, OH
1999    New Works on Paper, Mather Gallery, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH
1998    Dexter Davis 1992-1997, Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Cleveland, OH
1997    New Birth, William Busta Gallery, Cleveland, OH
1994    Life From Death, Colonial Arcade, Cleveland, OH
1993    Dexter Davis and Cushmere Bell, The Grog Shop, Cleveland, OH

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2015    Watershed: Teachers and their Pupils, Artist Archives of the Western Reserve, Cleveland, OH
2014    Our Stories: African-American Prints and Drawings, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH
2013    Monster Drawing Rally, SPACES, Cleveland, OH
2011    Looking Inward: An Invitational Exhibition, Artist Archives of the Western Reserve, Cleveland, OH
2010    From Then to Now: Masterworks of Contemporary African American Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, OH
2009    Each In Their Own Voice: African-American Artists in Cleveland 1970-2005, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH
2008    Prints, Drawings and Selections from the Experimental Printmaking Institute, Hammonds House Museum, Atlanta, GA.
2004    Lasting Impressions: Master Artists and Master Printmakers at the Experimental Printmaking Institute, Woodruff Arts Center, Atlanta, GA
1999    Club Illusion: Four Young Cleveland Painters, presented by William Busta Gallery and Julie Fedevich, Cleveland, OH
1995    Recoil, Fourth World/Art Without Walls, New Era Building, New York, NY
1995    The Measure of All Things: The Body and the Human Condition, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH
1993    Cleveland X: Artists from a Post-Industrial City, SPACES, Cleveland, OH
PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

• ARTneq
• CARTA (Cleveland Art Association)
• Cleveland Clinic Foundation
• Cleveland Institute of Art
• The Cleveland Museum of Art
• Experimental Printmaking Institute, Easton, PA
• Progressive Corporation
• Zygote Press, Cleveland, OH

PRESS

• Swenson, Kyle. "Art with Character, Dexter Davis." In Cleveland Scene, October 10, 2012.


• Litt, Steven. "Fragmented images of violence making absorbing whole." In the Plain Dealer, January 14, 2011.


• Tranberg, Dan. "Larger, old works stronger than new by Davis." In the Plain Dealer, February 2, 2000.


• Litt, Steven. "Terrific show puts four local artists' work on display." In the Plain Dealer, May 15, 1999.


• Sandstrom, Karen. "Local artists' collages create a powerful exhibition." In the Plain Dealer, April 8, 1998.


• Litt, Steven. "Dexter Davis first solo show show a strong display." In the Plain Dealer, January 12, 1997.
Henry Adams is a graduate of Harvard College, and received his M.A. and Ph.D. from Yale, where he received the Frances Blanchard Prize for the best doctoral dissertation in art history. The author of over 375 publications on American art, his major books include *Tom and Jack: The Intertwined Lives of Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollack*; and *Eakins Revealed*, which the painter Andrew Wyeth described as "without question the most extraordinary biography I have ever read on an artist." He currently serves as Ruth Coulter Heede Professor of Art History at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.