

## Artist David McGee having whale of a moment

Molly Glentzer Oct. 13, 2017

Houston artist David McGee, at midcareer, is feeling introspective in the way that only a well-read person can.

Literature and language have always guided his creative path. Growing up in Detroit, he read World Book encyclopedias cover to cover. Clarence Majors' 1994 book "Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang" inspired some of his earliest work, and it has stayed with the artist, like many other seminal books.

Through several decades now, McGee's paintings have tested juxtapositions between image and language - the cultural issues bound up in the ways human beings use labels to define things they don't understand, especially as they relate to being a black man in 21st-century America.

McGee's current solo show at Texas Gallery, which ends Saturday, springs partly from his love for watery-themed literature and his questions about how he's arrived at where he is today: Herman Melville's "Moby Dick," Homer's "Odyssey," Derek Wolcott's "Omeros," Rimbaud's poem "The Drunken Boat."

He rented a studio on Bolivar for two years to create the 15 large paintings of "The Complications of Water" series, which also grew from his thoughts about "the middle passage" - the shipping of slaves over the Atlantic Ocean from Africa to the Americas.

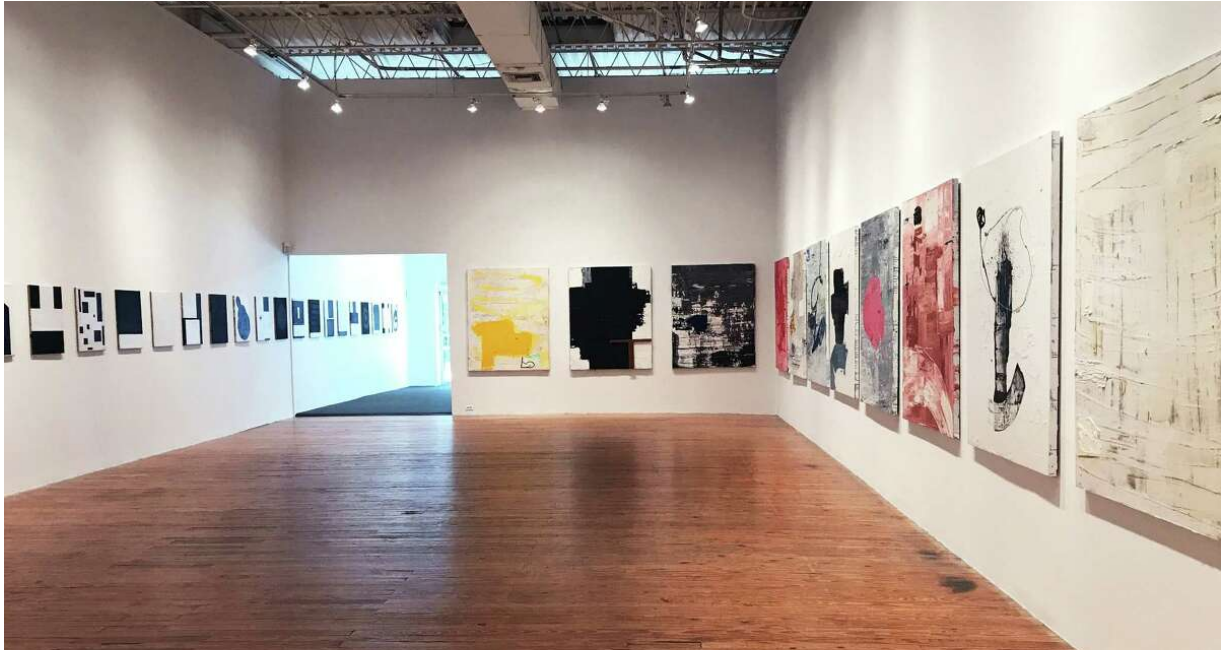
These canvases - bordering on abstract and layered with heavy, emotional, gestural brushwork - are surprisingly related to the 30 stark, black-and-white paintings of the show's other series, "Urban Dread."



*The artist David McGee, who is featured in two solo exhibitions this fall in Houston. Image: Sherri McGee-Roland*

"So, I've been at sea for 15 water paintings; it's time for me to come to land. But my land is going to be this urban-ness of this African-American experience of city life, where we're dealing with segregation, cops, the push-and-pull of the shifting neighborhoods; churches and crosses and cuffs," McGee said last week. "I was going to up the ante of Barnett Newman's 'Stations of the Cross' and make it real."

Along the way, he visited men on the street in a section of the rapidly gentrifying Third Ward still called the Bottoms. They introduced themselves to him as "vikings" - a term for rough guys that circles back to "Juba to Jive."



*David McGee's "Urban Dread" and "The Complications of Water" series paintings are on view through Oct. 21 at Texas Gallery*

"So, the show goes into water pieces, viking culture, a revenge culture - meditations on the whale and cells and some sort of figurative elements and my feelings about water and the middle passage - and then, it's all about arriving to a place, for black people."

McGee has never produced a show that felt so right to him.

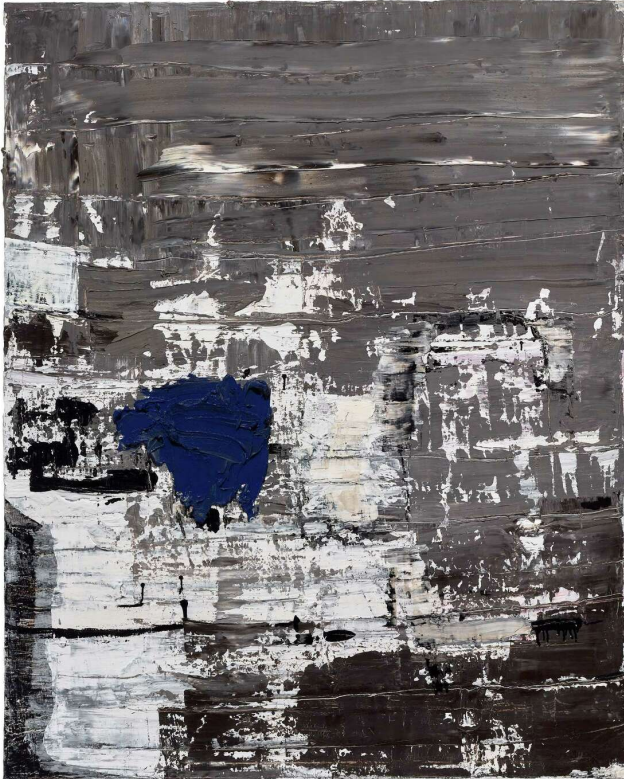
"It was one of those moments when I said, either I am in tune with the universe - and it's been a long time since that happened - or this is luck," he said. "I felt everything was coming to me. I've been painting a while, and it's never come to me before like this."

Then the universe delivered Hurricane Harvey, and the show's previously decided title suddenly carried another layer of meaning.

McGee has made waves in recent years with powerful watercolors that feature clean, figurative portraits of African-American pop-culture stars above incongruous text, labeling funkadelic innovator George Clinton "Dali," say, or rap star Biggie Smalls "Rothko."

But his earliest professional paintings had an abstract sensibility more akin to those of the current show.

"I'm very cautious about the term 'abstraction,' which is Latin and means 'to take from,'" McGee said. "You're always taking from something."



*"Blanket and Sea," one of the paintings in David McGee's "The Complications of Water" series, is inspired partly by a passage from "Moby Dick."*



*A detail of McGee's 2016 painting "Blanket and Sea" shows his strong brushwork and suggests the skin of an old whale.*

The current themes were too expansive to express figuratively. McGee wanted to unblock his memories and create emotional paintings with "the lyricism of symbol" and the "airiness of landscape."

"In all paintings, you've got to work out problems with composition and color and environment, but it gave me a different musicality and freedom so I could move quicker through the subject matter," he said. "I'm interested in Ahab's obsession with something he thought was purposely against him; how he labeled consciousness on the whale. It was man versus himself; the whale was just a reflection of him not dealing with his own isms."

Speaking of "Moby Dick," McGee also loves Melville's "The Whiteness of the Whale" chapter, loaded with information about the history of white and what it means in culture. Ironically, the whale is gray.

That's what inspired one of his favorite paintings in the show, "Blanket and Sea," a work he thinks some will find "unattractive." It's his way of breaking down the whale's skin, with its viking associations - a warrior who's been whipped, cut and scraped.

He has also embedded rough hieroglyphics. "It's almost like I've taken a magnifying glass and focused on the whale. But some of those markings are drawings about how they used to cargo Africans, in those little grids."

Next month, McGee gets the spotlight again with a solo show at the Houston Museum of African-American Culture, with a 20-year

survey of works on paper, curated by artist Benito Huerta. He hasn't yet decided if he'll include 10 new canvases that were set against the wall of his studio on Leeland.

McGee's never been so prolific. But after listening to music on Bolivar for two years, he wanted to create "Ten Jazz Letters" about 10 musicians he loves.

"I pray that whatever happened to me in Bolivar to make this work happens again," he said. "I opened it up to feel this stuff, and I got results. I didn't try to outwit anything, try to put blame on anyone; I forgave myself on a lot of things. I recognized the problems in most things, and I didn't try to maneuver out the back door. This is the result. I learned I have the power to do it."

That's a great place to be, at any point in life.

—MOLLY GLENTZER



"Cell" is one of the paintings of David McGee's "Urban Dread" series.



"Up Drives Black and the Fall of Babel" is among the paintings of David McGee's series "The Complications of Water."

## More Information

David McGee: 'Urban Dread' and 'The Complications of Water'  
When: 10 a.m.–5 p.m. Monday–Saturday  
Where: Texas Gallery, 2012 Peden  
Info: Free; 713-524-1593, [texgal.com](http://texgal.com)

'The Telling and the Told: The Art of David McGee'  
When: Nov. 4–Jan. 12  
Where: Houston Museum of African-American Culture, 4807 Caroline  
Info: Free; 713-526-1015, [hmaac.org](http://hmaac.org)

<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/culture/main/article/Artist-David-McGee-having-whale-of-a-moment-12276854.php#photo-14344623>