

BILL WALKER: URBAN GRIOT revives the powerful paintings and drawings by celebrated muralist William “Bill” Walker during the 50th Anniversary of one of his best known public art works in Chicago, the *Wall of Respect*. The artworks, on loan from Chicago State University’s collection, demonstrate the artistic evolution of a true street artist with a profound love of Chicago. Walker’s zeal for the city turned increasingly strident as the fervor of the 1970s and the Black Arts Movement gave way to harsher economic realities of the 1980s. *Urban Griot* presents a focused selection of work enhanced by never before seen works on newsprint, paper and collage from the archives of Chicago Public Art Group and private collections to expand awareness and understanding of Bill Walker’s remarkable body of work beyond the wall.

Walker’s perspective on creating socially-motivated art, particularly in his later years, may have been seen as divergent from the goals of groups like AfriCOBRA, which focused on presenting positive, colorful, images of Black life with messages of uplift. Walker’s work does not shy away from the harsh realities of urban street life; after all, this is Walker’s America, the world in which he lived and worked. If the images are uncomfortable for the viewer, it is because they depict real, *lived* violence and despair, experienced firsthand. Walker often faced the threat of violence while working on his murals, and would negotiate with gang members to protect the work and his tools. In spite of the dangers, Walker believed that presenting truth—the good, the bad, and the raw—was essential to educating people and motivating change. “The artist and his art,” states Walker in his manifesto, “are warning man of the dangers ahead. If man fails to understand this, total destruction may surely come.” His work arises not from anger, but from an enduring concern for the plight of the underserved. Decades later, the state of current affairs—violence (both police- and gang-related), poverty, widespread opioid abuse, the recent resurgence of white supremacists—makes Walker’s work eerily prescient and relevant in this time of mounting protest.

The works consist primarily of three series: *For Blacks Only* (1979–1982), a cautionary tale about the evils of drugs, violence and those who prey upon the community; *Reaganomics* (1980–1982), an assessment the impact of 1980s “supply side” economic policies on the urban poor; and *Red, White and Blue I Love You* (1982–1984), a call to action juxtaposing urban ills with the promise of America as embodied in the red, white and blue palette of these works. It must be noted that the title *For Blacks Only* does not imply discrimination. Rather, it speaks to a message that, while directed to the black community, is open to all.

The exhibition opens with two works on paper. These works show Walker’s agility as a draftsman. A veteran muralist, Walker brings his storytelling and compositional mastery to his easel works. In an untitled ballpoint piece from 1972, loose, graceful lines compress to form a stone-like cutaway of three grimacing faces. One points across the composition, lips parted to speak.

In *For Blacks Only 4*, Walker uses simple, readily available tools—ink, colored pencils and markers—to create a vibrant city scene. The male-dominated shoeshine parlor is juxtaposed with the female-populated church. Heavy black ink lines create an irregular grid across the work, dividing it into multiple facets and scenes. Walker employs this visual device in other works throughout this exhibition. Perhaps the grid reflects the way Walker compartmentalized some of his murals, allowing for revisions as current events unfolded.

His work arises not from anger, but from an enduring concern for the plight of the underserved. Decades later, the state of current affairs—violence (both police- and gang-related), poverty, widespread opioid abuse, the recent resurgence of white supremacists—makes Walker’s work eerily prescient and relevant in this time of mounting protest.

An array of black-and-white ink drawings from *For Blacks Only* transition from tranquil domestic scenes to utter chaos. Acts of extreme violence play out before a seemingly mute audience in the absence of any police. Often, children are present, bearing witness to the carnage. In one, a street painter, presumably Walker himself, paints an anti-drug message while perched precariously above a street fight.

Men in big hats and even bigger cars are prevalent in *For Blacks Only 8* and *14*. Both white and black dealers do business, denoting wide accountability for the influx of heroin and other drugs. Suited gangsters lurk in tenement vestibules, while bodyguards stand watch over drugs and money, warily reaching for their pistols. These deals take place where children, represented by an abandoned hopscotch and jump rope, gather to play. In *For Blacks Only 12*, Walker’s “grid” becomes curtain and camouflage; deftly hiding and exposing the gang beatings and carnal acts. The viewer bears witness with the silhouetted figures in the foreground, including two children.

In the *Red, White and Blue* series, Walker returns to the same drug- and crime-infested tenements we see in *For Blacks Only*. The heavy black grid is replaced by colored pencil lines. Delicate tints of red and blue, punctuated by Walker’s nimble use of negative space, belie the multi-story cutaway tableaux of drugs and violence. In *Red, White and Blue 14* and *Red, White and Blue A*, the viewer is introduced to “punctured” heroin addicts. Hinged like marionettes, they drink, dance and shoot up until they waste away from the addiction or HIV.

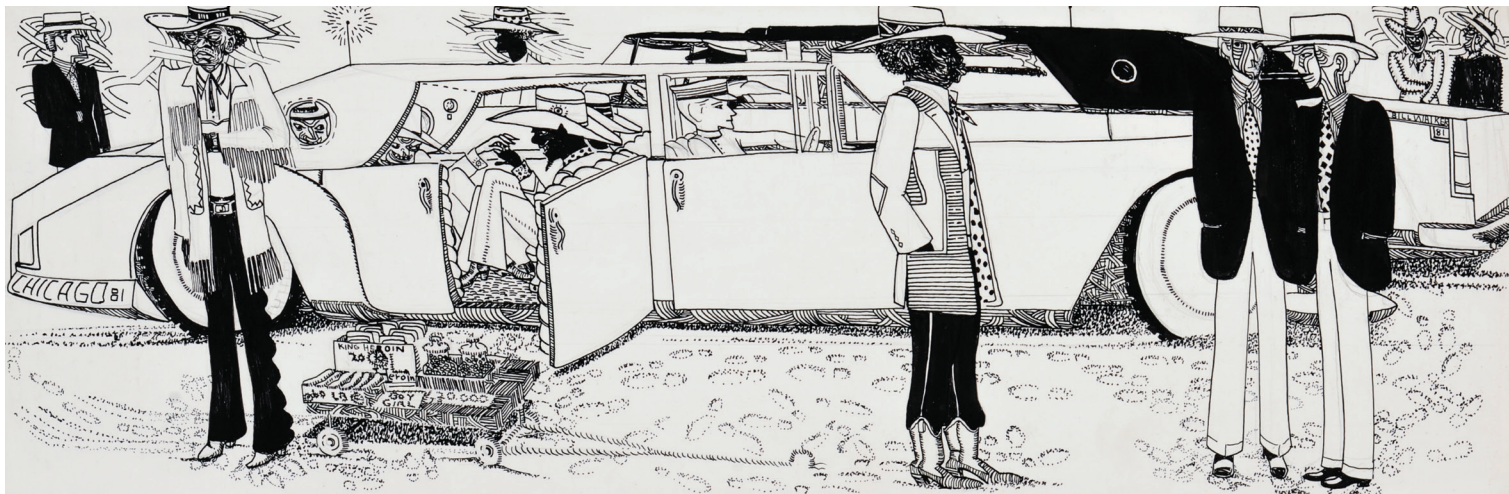
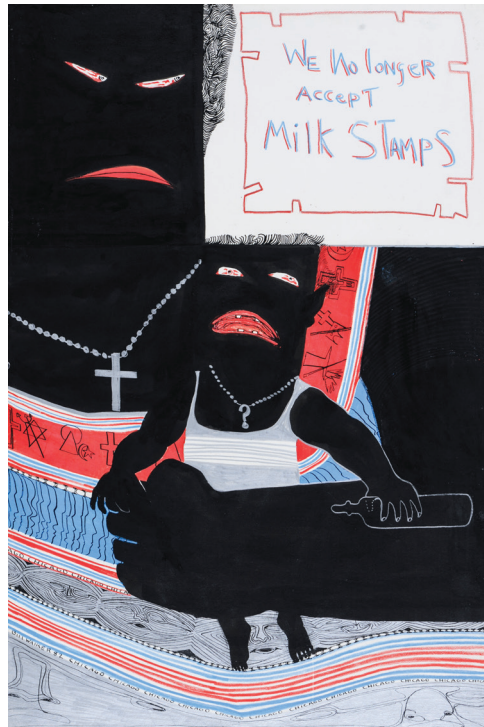
Portraits are a strong component of *Red, White and Blue*. Walker portrays heroes and gangsters, Muslims and mothers with geometric faces rendered in India ink black. *Red, White and Blue 6* depicts Richard Thomas, a beloved math teacher who, like an alchemist, combined multiple disciplines in his teaching practice. Walker also experimented with portraits on Plexiglas repurposed from lighting fixtures. *Gangster Larry*, *War Zone*, and *Church of God* evoke both stained glass and graffiti. Walker uses tape to mask off both his figures and his text. Other details are painted in, like the articles on gang-related violence cited in *Gangster Larry*. It is important to note that *Gangster Larry* neither glamorizes gangsters nor their lifestyle. Though courageous in his willingness to interact with gang members (even utilizing them for labor and security), Walker was a perennial critic of their dangerous and parasitic presence in the black community.

In *Red, White and Blue 3*, an urban Madonna and child show their mutual displeasure over cuts in social services. This sentiment is reflected across the *Reaganomics* series. Cracked, truncated figures in pointed hats rail in anger and fear in *Reaganomics 5*. Hungry children, dead and alive, clutch empty plates throughout the series. Walker questions the role of God, and Christianity in particular, in easing his people’s suffering. A Christ figure in *Reaganomics 1* is taped over with a picture of a smiling Ronald Reagan. Beneath it, a black woman with blond hair kneels in supplication atop a stack of material goods. A crucifix lies broken and bloody over a black hole in *Reaganomics 6*, while a grinning Nazi and Ku Klux Klansman salute each other. Behind them stand four people of different races, arms interlocked. Echoing the joined figures from Walker’s earlier murals, these men and women reflect his ongoing hope that unity will prevail over hatred.



Bill Walker, *Wall of Respect* (1967–1971) at 43rd Street and Langley Avenue, Chicago, IL. Photography by Robert A. Sengstacke : Image courtesy of LUNA, University of Chicago

With social justice and social practice both important components of contemporary art, and the issues of violence, poverty and racial harmony central to Bill Walker’s work just as relevant in the world today as they were during his career, *Urban Griot* provides an historical context for contemporary issues in art and society. The exhibition and its companion catalog unify Walker’s mature body of work and bring it to a broader audience in a new context that expands understanding of his practice as a political thinker, social activist, and skilled artist.



Top Left: *Reaganomics 1*, 1981, Mixed media, 28 1/4 x 20 inches
 Top Right: *Red, White, and Blue 3*, 1982, Mixed media, 30 x 20 inches
 Bottom: *For Blacks Only 8*, 1982, Mixed media, 9 1/2 x 29 1/2 inches
 Cover: *For Blacks Only 12 (detail)*, 1982, Mixed media, 20 1/6 x 30 inches



William “Bill” Walker (1927 – 2011), was a prolific muralist best known for creating the iconic *Wall of Respect* on Chicago’s South Side in collaboration with the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC). This mural inspired community-based public artworks all over the country, and is a cornerstone of socially engaged art practice. He acted as co-founder of the Chicago Mural Group, now the Chicago Public Art Group, and his murals remain an essential part of the fabric of the city. Walker’s perspective on creating socially-motivated art, particularly in his later years, may have been seen as divergent from the goals of groups like AfriCOBRA, which focused on presenting positive, uplifting imagery. Walker, however, believed that presenting truth—the good, the bad, and the raw—was essential to educating people and motivating change.

BILL WALKER: URBAN GRIOT PUBLIC PROGRAMS

All events take place at Hyde Park Art Center and are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted.

“Children of the Wall” Artist Talk & Concert: Bill Walker Suite

Sunday, November 5, 3–5 pm

Lead artists Rahmaan Statik and Lazdins will talk the influence Walker’s work has on their practice. Afterwards, Aki Antonia will present an original jazz composition honoring Bill Walker and his work.

Exhibition Reception

Sunday, November 12, 3–5 pm

Martin Luther King Day of Reflection: Film Program and Discussion

Monday, January 15, 12–4 pm

Filmmaker Floyd Webb curates a selection of short films highlighting the Black Arts/Black Power movements. Webb is the founder of the Blacklight Festival of International Black Cinema.

The Artist’s Artist: Bill Walker

Wednesday, January 31, 6–8 pm

Friends of Walker discuss his impact and influence on a new generation of socially-conscious artists. Artist and educator, Turtel Onli, photographer and author John Pitman Weber, and exhibiting artist Dorian Sylvain join artist and activist Arlene Turner-Crawford in discussion.

David Boykin In Concert

Chicago State University, Breakey Auditorium
 Friday, February 2, 6–8 pm

Chicago jazz musician David Boykin premieres a love story of two young activists. Titled *The Lynching of [insert name]*, the story is inspired by the current phenomena of the many social protests and demonstrations across the United States in response to the large number of unarmed blacks being killed by civilians and police officers whose actions go unpunished.

Family Art Making Day

Sunday, February 11, 1–4 pm

Artist, educator, and curator Juarez Hawkins leads a free hands-on art-making activity for all ages. The project will address design elements explored in Walker’s work.

Family Art Making Day

Sunday, March 11, 1–4 pm

Dorian Sylvain, educator and artist exhibiting her work in Gallery 5 leads a free hands-on art-making activity for all ages. The project will address social justice themes that connect Sylvain’s and Bill Walker’s work.

Jazz & Poetry

Chicago State University, Breakey Auditorium
 Friday, March 16, 2017, 6–8 pm

Oscar Brown, Jr., was a central hero figure in the *Wall of Respect* mural co-organized by Bill Walker. Daughter and jazz vocalist Maggie Brown presents *Tribute to Oscar Brown, Jr.*

Loud and Clear: Speaking the Language of Bill Walker

Sunday, April 8, 2–4 pm

Bill Walker employed song lyrics, poetry, and personal texts in his paintings and collages to critique cultural signifiers of contemporary urban life. Moderated by Romi Crawford, Victor Sorell and Jeff Huebner will discuss the various modes of expression found in Walker’s work.

Bill Walker: Urban Griot is part of Art Design Chicago, an exploration of Chicago’s art and design legacy, an initiative of the Terra Foundation for American Art with presenting partner The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation. *Bill Walker: Urban Griot* is funded by the Terra Foundation for American Art and The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation.

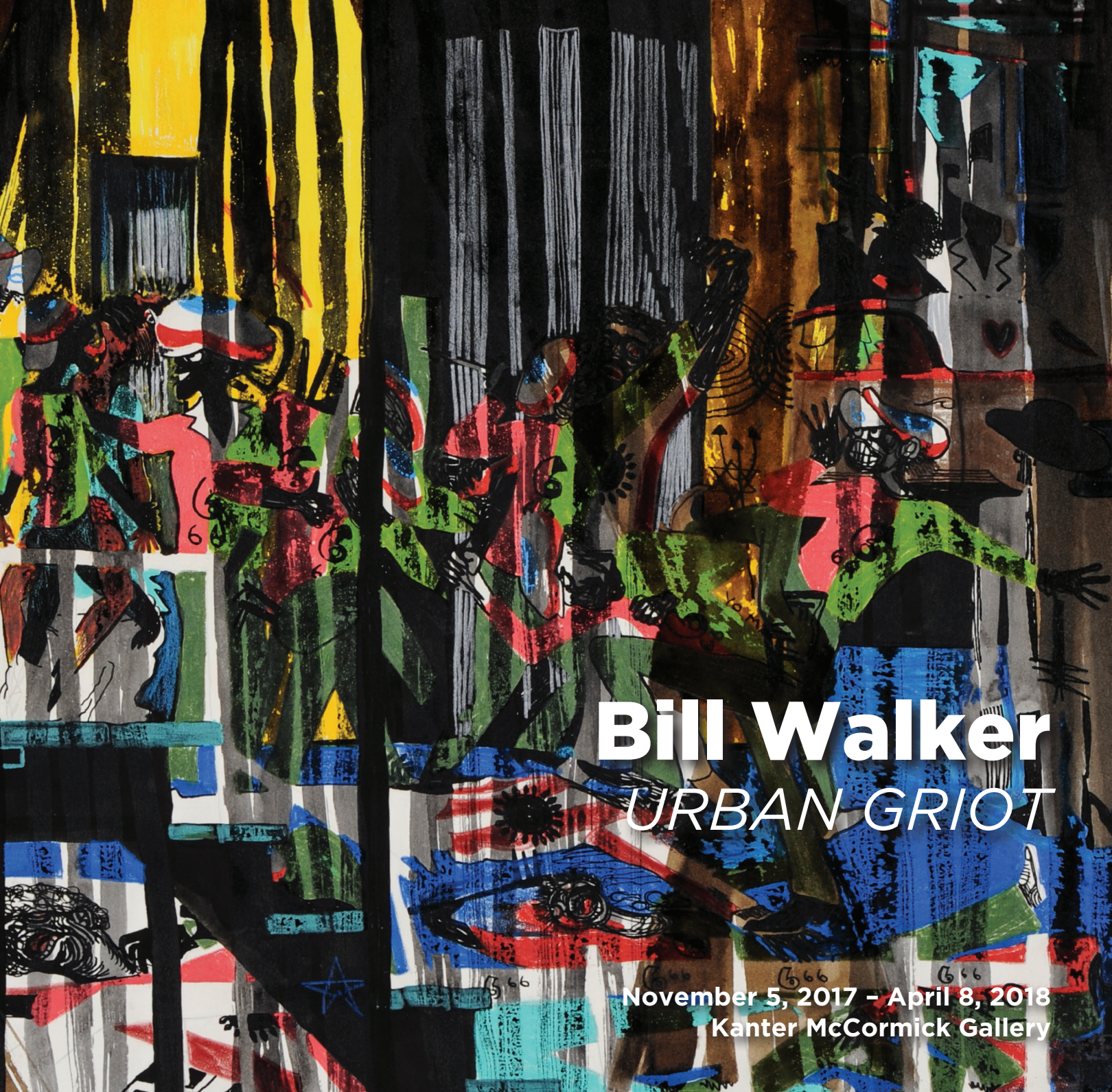


Hyde Park Art Center is a unique resource that advances contemporary visual art in Chicago by connecting artists and communities in unexpected ways. As an open forum for exploring the artistic process, the Art Center fosters creativity through making, learning about, seeing, and discussing art—all under one roof. The Art Center is funded in part by: Alphawood Foundation; Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts; a City Arts III grant from the City of Chicago’s Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events; Field Foundation of Illinois; Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts; Harper Court Arts Council; Harpo Foundation; Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; Illinois Humanities Council; Irving Harris Foundation; Joyce Foundation; Lloyd A. Fry Foundation; MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; National Endowment for the Arts; National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Illinois General Assembly; Polk Bros. Foundation; David C and Sarajeon Ruttenberg Arts Foundation; Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust; and the generosity of its members and people like you.

Design by JNL Design

Hyde ParkARTCENTER

5020 S. Cornell Ave. Chicago, IL 60615 773.324.5520
 www.hydeparkart.org



Bill Walker *URBAN GRIOT*

November 5, 2017 – April 8, 2018
Kanter McCormick Gallery