



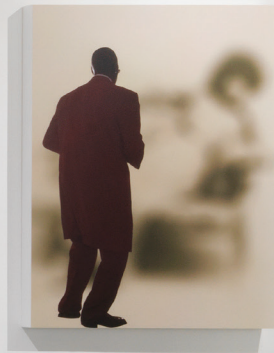
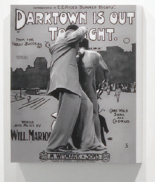
Cecil McDonald, Jr.
Cuts & Beats



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Kanter McCormick Gallery
February 22–June 12, 2021

Hyde Park **ARTCENTER**



From left to right: *Dance Children Dance Electric*, 2017, pigment print, montage, 40 x 30 in; *BodyDown to LoveTown*, 2017, pigment print, 20 x 16 in; *Natural Born Hustler*, 2017, pigment print, 20 x 16 in; *God's step children eat they cake while walkin...*, 2020, pigment print, montage, 20 x 16 in; *The Fantasy Island on Stony*, 2017, pigment print, montage, 60 x 40 in.; *My Dear Margret*, 2020, pigment print, 40 x 30 in; *East of The Ryan*, 2018, pigment print, 40 x 30 in

“Cuts and Beats” is the title of a body of work in which I subvert historical images, like publicity stills from Black artists in the Vaudeville and Minstrel era, by transforming them using techniques of photo collage, installation, and performance combined with my photographs. I think of this process of cutting, altering, reassembling, and bringing images into different contexts as a metaphor for the complex histories of Black Americans. The newly built images, look back to often racist representations, and much like memory, recede to a current, self-possessed, and subversive imagery, each influencing and dictating to the other, serving as a remix of past and present culture.

—Cecil McDonald, Jr. (2020)

Reclaiming Time In Step

Chicago is the birthplace of genuine rhythmic styles, from blues, jazz, and house music to steppin’ and footwork in dance. Photographer Cecil McDonald, Jr. grew up in the West Pullman neighborhood, rooted in these art forms that deeply influence his creative practice. Famed night clubs across the city—such as 50 Yard Line, East of the Ryan, and The Other Place—provided a natural set for the artist to generate hundreds of unposed and uninhibited photographs during the 2000s, which document what he describes as the “transformative power of dance.” Some of the images were organized by McDonald into a series of photographs of everyday people dancing, called *The Heat of the Cool*. The title refers to the traditional West African concept of calm or coolness in which one hides frustration, stress, or pleasure with a mask of serenity, calmness, or spirituality. He returned to the unresolved images from the *Heat* series to generate collage elements for the series featured in this publication: *Cuts and Beats*. Combining contemporary dance club images with historical material from the Black music industry after the Reconstruction, McDonald fuses the distant past with the present to forge a self-determined and powerfully independent space for the Black body.

The playful title *Cuts and Beats* combines music industry vernacular for a song track and rhythm with the physical act of making collage. It’s a metaphor for the healing and perseverance necessary to the Black American experience over time. Using an X-Acto knife, McDonald manually cuts into his black and white photographs and overlaps them to create an alternate composite image pressure-mounted onto panel. Fragmented visceral forms and contrasting shapes kick, snap, and spin through McDonald’s twenty-two panels. By superimposing the gestures and rhythms of millennial dancers on top of historical representations of Black entertainers of the Vaudeville/Minstrel era, the artist unites their energy and motion. He not only dissects and reassembles the images into a new reality but also grafts time together to reclaim the derogatory representations of the Black figure by engulfing them with the love he sees in the community through dance and music today.

Black music history anchors McDonald’s photocollages both in concept and in source imagery. The artist spent time processing the Minstrel-era archives at the Center for Black Music Research (CBMR) at Columbia College prior to his 2019 artist residency at Hyde Park Art Center. The collection features important material from one of the earliest Black-owned businesses, the Gotham-Attucks Music Publishing Company (New York, 1905–11). McDonald preserved the company logo in many of the artworks as a gesture of respect and to honor their legacy. Names of musicians—including Gussie Davis, Will Marion Cook, and Bert A. Williams—are also prominent in McDonald’s compositions for the same reason; it is hoped that viewers google these names and learn this Black performance history for themselves. McDonald is fascinated by the brief period of civil rights achievement for Black people in America following the Reconstruction, when the Black music industry grew and Black artists gained notoriety. But why did promotional material for their work, like broadsheets and posters, still feature negative stereotypes of Black people? McDonald created these artworks that cause the viewer to consider who controls the image, while returning authority of the image back to the Black performer, musician, or artist.

Derogatory stereotypes represented through performers in blackface or caricature of the Black child as picaninny, appropriated in McDonald's work, may offend contemporary audiences. However, the artist brings them to our attention precisely to reclaim Black representation. He follows a long line of artists, including Archibald Motley Jr., Romare Bearden, and Kara Walker, who use the grotesque to jar viewers out of complacency with the status quo. Art Historian Richard J. Powell argues for the power of satire, where Black artists, "through their fictive settings and expressionistic configurations, opened floodgates of racial memories, phobias, and fantasies, so visceral and inescapable that, upon experiencing them, more authentic concepts of the race could emerge." Over the past decade, McDonald has continually explored photography as a means to ask the important question: What is an authentic Black experience? The *Cuts and Beats* series demonstrates a breakthrough in the artist's practice; by combining satire with surrealism, he is able to invent a new visual language in his work that challenges a fixed notion of Black representation.



Consolation Prize for Master Juba
2017, assemblage

Three works, which bookend the exhibition, break from the photocollage medium and accentuate the themes of dance, music, and transcending time. *single shuffle double shuffle* (2021) features a large charcoal rubbing stenciled directly on the wall and contains twelve lines of text that describe the act of dancing. Charles Dickens wrote this text in *American Notes* (1842), which documented his impressions of the budding culture during his tour of the United States. The sentences narrate the tap dance of international sensation, William Henry Lane (1825–52), the Black minstrel performer with the stage name Master Juba. Although written more than 175 years ago, McDonald finds the language similar to describe the same energy in nightclubs today and reclaims the language for both past and present Black dancing bodies. McDonald renders Dickens's text in various shades of ghostly grey, which simulates the varying degrees of truth to history, while preserving the inescapable reality that the pleasure of performance is haunted by the ugly existence of Jim Crow. A small rust-colored gramophone sculpture titled *Consolation Prize for Master Juba* (2021), resembles the iconic Grammy Award, a trophy given to musical performers in recognition for their outstanding achievements. The sculpture is the companion piece to the wall text installation in recognition of Lane's struggle to break racial barriers while constrained to stereotype.

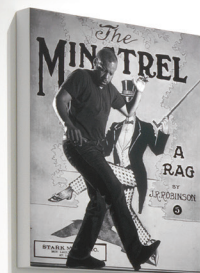
At the opposite end of the gallery, McDonald combined a past-and-present work of his own to make a new immersive installation. The sound work, *He Will See an African Dance* (2020, 3 minutes, courtesy of the Experimental Sound Studio archive) plays on a loop from a directional speaker hung over the large gray-scale photograph, *All Star Cast of Coloured Artists Painting Pictures in the Dark* (1997), centered on an ebony-colored wall. The image presents an aerial view of a standing crowd filled with young black men and women all looking fixedly to the left, out of the frame. McDonald made the image at an N.W.A. concert at Metro, a club in Chicago. Spotlit in the dark room, the image maintains a spiritual tone as if we are experiencing a sacred moment. The crackling audio features a male voice describing a performance with African drums. McDonald points out that the voice "sounds white," in the stereotypical 1950s educational school-film style. The male voice explains:

But as the beating of all the drums and the chanting voices mix with the heat of the sun, the stranger is a stranger no longer. A pounding rhythm strikes the outside of his body and the beating tempo with his own heart within him matches the musical accents of the drums. And this is what happens to everyone. When the heart beats in time with everyone else's heart, and all match the beat of the music, all men feel that they are no longer small beings in a world that is strange. They are all in rhythm with each other. They sense that this has made them larger in size and importance. And the mysteries of the earth seem to be less frightening.

The narrator's response originates from the colonial impulse to identify the other as primitive and therefore inferior in order to assert cultural dominance; McDonald's somber installation invites a more empathetic read. His deliberate combination of contemporary image and Cold War-era narration signifies a break in time and space. This temporary void interrupts the racist assumptions in the narration and allows us to hear McDonald's aspirational message: we must all get "in rhythm" with one another and work together to create the civically minded America we want to be.

An experienced DJ and community-taught dancer, McDonald's reverence for the Black body's ability to generate new forms of expression is witnessed in his affectionate images in *Cuts and Beats*. Hands holding hands and bodies in full embrace recall a time before the COVID-19 pandemic, when human interaction was a necessary tool of communication and community, not a disease-spreading event. These images were made before we, as a nation, were confronted by the murder of George Floyd, and America began openly struggling with its racism, yet again. Although these photographs could not be made at the moment of this exhibition, while concert theaters and dance clubs are closed to minimize exposure to the virus, the experience of serenity and human connection present through McDonald's photographs gives hope for a more compassionate society.

Allison Peters Quinn
Curator of *Cuts and Beats*



From left to right: *A Model of Coloured, High Art*, 2017, pigment print, montage, 20 x 16 in; *Man the Minstrel*, c. 2020, pigment print, montage, 20 x 16 in; *Swing Ma Jet Black Queen*, c. 2020, pigment print, montage, 20 x 16 in; *High Brown Babies Ball*, 2017, pigment print, montage, 20 x 16 in; *Kinky*, 2020, pigment print, montage, 20 x 16 in; *The House that Chicago Built*, c. 2017, pigment print, 40 x 60 in



From left to right: *Bandana Land*, 2020, pigment print, montage, 40 x 30 in; *Consolation Prize for Master Juba*, 2017, assemblage;
single shuffle double shuffle, 2017, vinyl, charcoal rubbing



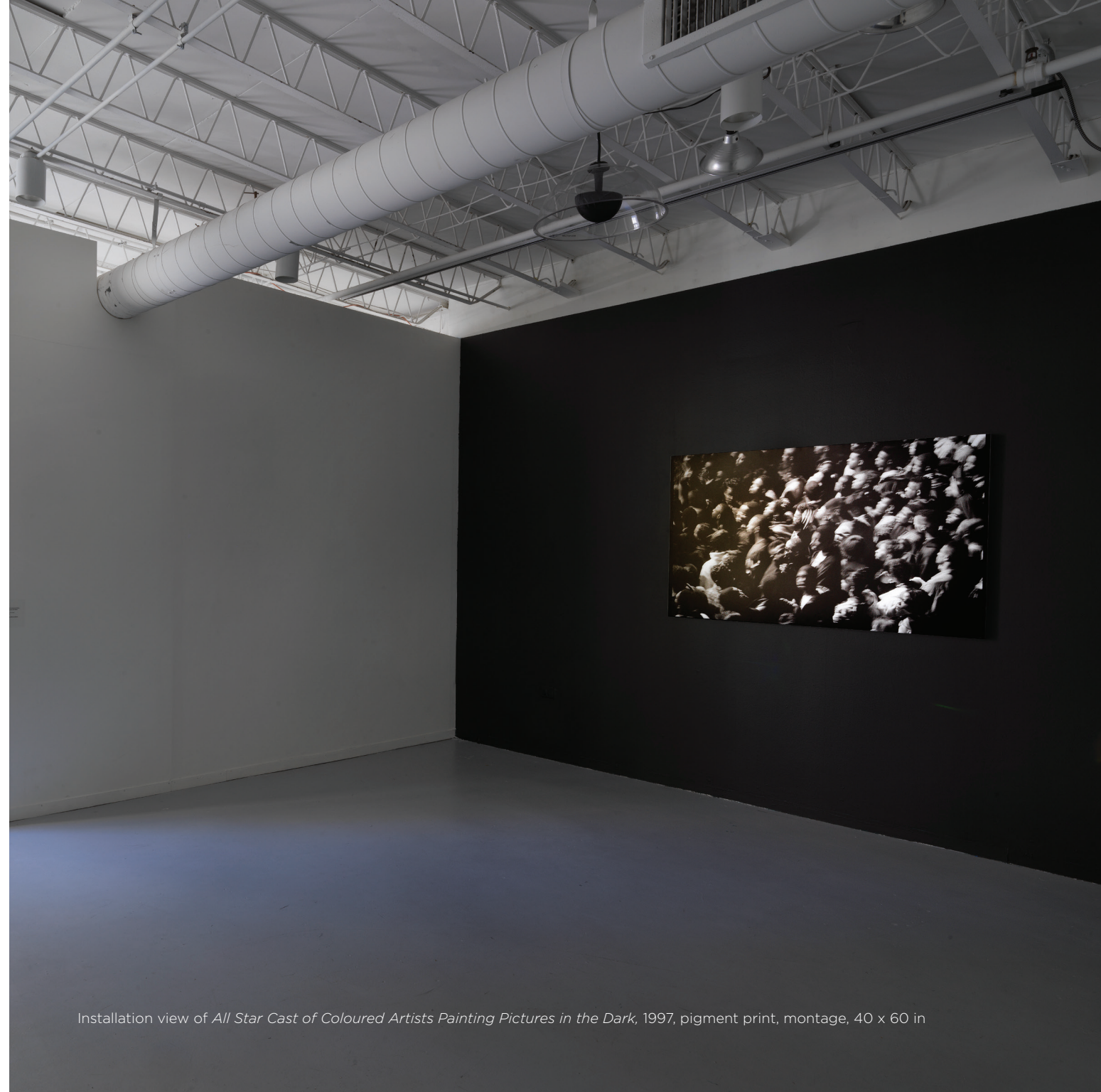
The Other Place
 2019, pigment print, montage, 40 x 30 in



It was the season of light, It was the season of darkness
1997, pigment print, 40 x 30 in



Sweet Georgia Brown
1997, pigment print, 40 x 40 in



Installation view of *All Star Cast of Coloured Artists Painting Pictures in the Dark*, 1997, pigment print, montage, 40 x 60 in



Walker Stepper Boppers
2020, pigment print, montage, 40 x 30 in



Swing Along Joyeux Ne'gres
2020, pigment print, 20 x 16 in



Swing Along Ma Jet Black Queen
2020, pigment print, montage, 20 x 16 in

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All works by Cecil
McDonald, Jr.

*A Model of Coloured,
High Art*
2017
pigment print, montage
20 x 16 inches

*All Star Cast of Coloured
Artists Painting Pictures in
the Dark*
1997
pigment print, montage
40 x 60 inches

Bandana Land
2020
pigment print, montage
40 x 30 inches

BodyDown to LoveTown
2017
pigment print
20 x 16 inches

*Burning Spear Guys
and Gals*
2020
pigment print, montage
40 x 30 inches

*Consolation Prize for
Master Juba*
2017
assemblage
12 x 10 x 10 inches

*Dance Children
Dance Electric*
2017
pigment print, montage
40 x 30 inches

East of The Ryan
2018
pigment print, montage
40 x 30 inches

*God's step children eat
they cake while walkin...*
2020
pigment print, montage
20 x 16 inches

*He Will See An
African Dance*
2020
sound
3:00 minutes

High Brown Babies Ball
2017
pigment print, montage
20 x 16 inches

*It was the season of light,
It was the season of
darkness*
1997
pigment print
40 x 57 inches

Kinky
2020
pigment print, montage
20 x 16 inches

Let It Alone Watch It Work
2017
pigment print, montage
20 x 16 inches

Man the Minstrel
2020
pigment print, montage
20 x 16 inches

My Dear Margret
2020
pigment print, montage
40 x 30 inches

Natural Born Hustler
2017
pigment print, montage
20 x 16 inches

*single shuffle
double shuffle*
2017
vinyl and charcoal rubbing
dimensions variable

Sweet Georgia Brown
1997
pigment print, montage
40 x 40 inches

Swing Solo
2020
pigment print, montage
20 x 16 inches

*Swing Ma Jet Black
Queen*
2020
pigment print, montage
20 x 16 inches

*The Fantasy Island
on Stony*
2017
pigment print, montage
60 x 40 inches

*The House that
Chicago Built*
2017
pigment print
40 x 60 inches

The Other Place
2019
pigment print, montage
40 x 30 inches

Walker Stepper Boppers
2020
pigment print, montage
40 x 30 inches

Cover: *East of The Ryan*
2018, pigment print, montage, 40 x 30 in

Design: Ashley Ryann, the JNL design

Hyde ParkARTCENTER

Hyde Park Art Center is a hub for contemporary arts in Chicago, serving as a gathering and production space for artists and the broader community to cultivate ideas, impact social change, and connect through expanded networks. The Art Center functions as an amplifier for today and tomorrow's creative voices, providing the space to make, see, learn about, and engage art with freedom. The Art Center is funded in part by: Allstate Insurance Company; Asian Cultural Council; Bank of America; City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events; Crown Family Philanthropies; DEW Foundation; Epstein Family Foundation; Illinois Arts Council Agency; John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; The Joyce Foundation; Lloyd A. Fry Foundation; The National Endowment for the Arts; Polk Bros. Foundation; PPM America & Jackson National Life Insurance Company; Reva & David Logan Foundation; Smart Family Foundation, Inc.; The Terra Foundation for American Art; and the generosity of its members and people like you.

This exhibition is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency, and contributions from Kim & James Elbaor and Jill & Michael Lowe.



Cecil McDonald, Jr. studied fashion, house music, and dance club culture before receiving a MFA in Photography from Columbia College Chicago, where he currently works as an adjunct professor. He was a teaching artist at Nicholas Senn High School through the School Partnership for Art and Civic Engagement (SPACE) program at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and a teaching artist at the Hyde Park Art Center in 2018. McDonald's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, with works in

the permanent collection of The Cleveland Museum of Art, Northwestern Pritzker School of Law, Chicago Bank of America LaSalle Collection, and the Harris Bank Collection. McDonald was awarded the Joyce Foundation Midwest Voices & Visions Award, the Artadia Award, The Swiss Benevolent Society Residency, and a 3Arts Teaching Artist Award. In 2016, the first edition of his monograph *In The Company of Black* published by Candor Arts and shortlisted by the Aperture Foundation for the 2017 First Photo Book Award. McDonald's work was the subject of a major solo exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center in 2019. Most recently McDonald was chosen as the inaugural Artist Catalyst for the South Side Community Art Center, leading a social and civic art project on the South Side. Additionally, McDonald was chosen as one of twenty Chicago artists as part of the Terminal 5 expansion project at O'Hare International Airport, a permanent public art work scheduled to launch Spring 2022.

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