

# FORT GANSEVOORT

## THE NEW ORLEANS ADVOCATE

The New Orleans Advocate

May 16, 2017

Behind the postcard view, another New Orleans

by John D'Addario



Keith Duncan poses in front of his work at Myrtle Banks

Everyone knows the postcard-perfect view of New Orleans: a streetcar making its way down the oak-canopied length of St. Charles Avenue at twilight, the steady splash of a paddleboat along the Mississippi River, a piping hot bowl of gumbo.

But artist Keith Duncan said he wants to go beyond those Big Easy stereotypes.

In his first solo show in New Orleans at the [Creative Alliance of New Orleans](#) Creative Space gallery in Central City, Duncan juxtaposes “traditional” views of the city with grittier, more slice-of-life vignettes that many casual visitors never take the time to see.

Duncan "creates social commentary disguised as bright, beautiful paintings that somehow encompass the predictable Mardi Gras, jazz and food images," said alliance

# FORT GANSEVOORT

Executive Director Jeanne Nathan in a statement, “with haunting reminders of the poverty and challenges too many of us face.”

Those juxtapositions figure most prominently in a series of paintings named after a local newspaper. In one, stock images of crawfish and a smiling Louis Armstrong share a pictorial space with a homeless man wrapped in a blanket and a mother comforting her fussing child.

Another features the shining lights and bright colors of the Mercedes-Benz Superdome and an assortment of Carnival figures while a woman pushing a shopping cart overflowing with trash bags makes her way among them like a ghost crashing a party.

Duncan said the “shadow” figures in these paintings are based on actual images he’s collected from local newspapers and magazines over the years.

“People come to New Orleans for the food, the music and the culture,” Duncan said. “I’m adding another dimension to what they perceive: reality.”

Duncan said his strategy is to disrupt the kind of utopian vision many outsiders have of the city. “Katrina really opened people’s eyes and confronted them with truths about New Orleans they didn’t realize before,” he said. “These paintings are how I’m trying to continue that dialogue.”

As startling as the smaller paintings are, it's the larger pieces in the show that really pack a punch.

“Black Saints“ is a tour de force featuring a shimmering phalanx of New Orleans Saints players intermingled with figures from the Zulu parade and Mardi Gras Indians. It’s one of the most succinct and visually striking representations of New Orleans culture as you’re likely to see anywhere.

On the opposite wall, two large paintings depicting a wedding and a funeral consist of dozens of sharply observed figures doing what people everywhere do at big family events: laughing, crying, drinking and fighting. The scenes are painted on patchworks of fabrics that Duncan said is meant to evoke the tradition of Southern quilting as a nod to his heritage.

Duncan compared them to elaborate scenes from Tyler Perry movies. But they also call to mind the quality of masterfully satirical realism characteristic of an artist like Honoré Daumier, whose work both celebrated and skewered social conventions in 19th-century France.

Duncan also said the combination of the universal and the particular in their imagery is central to the works.

# FORT GANSEVOORT

“Weddings and funerals are events that many cultures have in common,” Duncan said. “And even though these paintings are based on events and people I remember from growing up in Plaquemines Parish, they also show that some experiences are universal no matter where you’re from.”

A final series of paintings in the show pays homage to figures from African-American cinema and pop culture, including Mr. Bojangles and Dolemite. And two portraits of Mahalia Jackson and Irma Thomas are among the first in a series Duncan is planning on iconic women in New Orleans music.

For Nathan, Duncan’s work has a particular resonance in the Creative Alliance of New Orleans’ third-floor gallery in the Myrtle Banks Building (formerly McDonough No. 38), which has established itself as a buzzing focal point along the newly re-energized Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard corridor.

“This space is dedicated to showing work by artists who deserve to be seen more in New Orleans and to exposing the community to great art,” Nathan said. “So Keith Duncan’s art is really what this space is all about.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Keith Duncan

WHEN: Open Mondays-Saturdays 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

WHERE: Creative Alliance of New Orleans’ Creative Space

Myrtle Banks Building

1307 Oretha Castle Haley Blvd.

INFO: [cano-la.org](http://cano-la.org)

ADMISSION: Free