

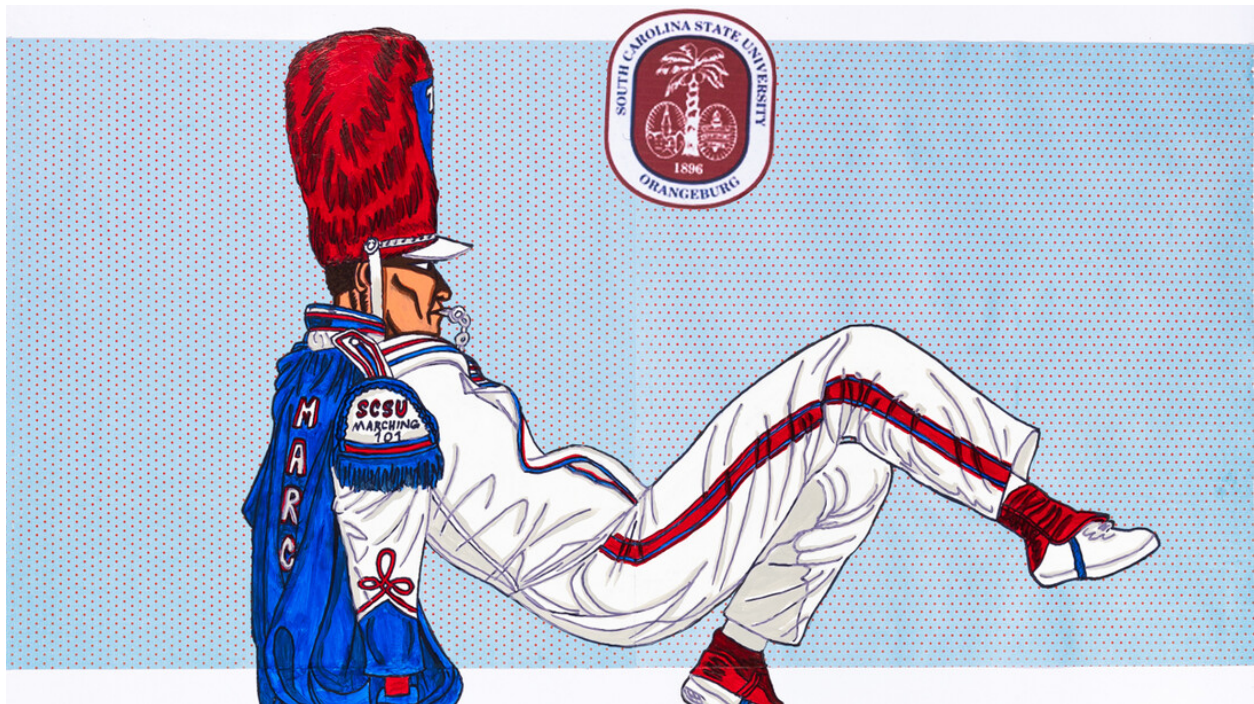
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Battle of the bands

15 Feb — 10 Aug 2025 at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans, United States

February 6, 2025



Keith Duncan, South Carolina State University drum major, 2023 - 2024. Courtesy of Ogden Museum

Ogden Museum of Southern Art announced today that an exhibition highlighting HBCU Marching Bands will open winter of 2025. The exhibition, *Battle of the bands*, features New Orleans artist Keith Duncan's most recent body of work that celebrates the vibrant tradition of Historically Black College and University (HBCU) marching bands. Opening February 15, 2025, the exhibition will include large-scale fabric paintings of fifteen HBCU bands, human-scale fabric paintings, and smaller works on paper depicting each band's drum major.

Growing up in Plaquemines Parish near New Orleans, Duncan was familiar with the cultural importance of marching bands. New Orleans has a strong marching band tradition in public schools, and these bands are the soundtrack and soul of the city's Mardi Gras parades. Members of the high school marching bands often become members of HBCU marching bands,

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as well as the celebrated brass bands that play the streets and clubs of New Orleans and beyond.

While attending Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge, Duncan became familiar with Southern University's Human Jukebox. Duncan explains, "While attending LSU for my undergrad, we would go over to Southern University at times to go check out the Greek shows to watch the step teams and watch the [football] game. But the main event wasn't the game, it was the Battle of the Bands. Everybody wanted to see the bands go at each other, so that was something that was always in the back of my mind that I wanted to create a narrative about".

Although Battle of the bands has its roots in Southern's Human Jukebox Marching Band and Grambling's Tiger Marching Band, Duncan broadened the lens of his focus to include fifteen of the top Southern marching bands in the HBCU tradition. The bands included in the exhibition are: Bethune-Cookman University's Marching Wildcats, Florida, Florida A&M University's Marching 100, Grambling State University's Tiger Marching Band, Louisiana, North Carolina State A&T University's Blue & Gold Marching Machine, Jackson State University's Sonic Boom of the South, Mississippi, Norfolk State University's Spartan Legion, Virginia, South Carolina State University's Marching 101, Tuskegee University's Marching Crimson Pipers, Alabama, Southern University's Human Jukebox, Louisiana, Texas Southern University's Ocean of Soul, Howard University's Showtime Marching Band, Washington, D.C., Morehouse College's House of Funk, Georgia, Alcorn State University's Sounds of Dyn-O-Mite, Mississippi, Alabama State University's Mighty Marching Hornets, Tennessee State University's Aristocrat of Bands.

The full pictorial force of Keith Duncan's work in this series is realized in the 15 large-scale depictions of the bands themselves. His masterful conveyance of the grand pageantry of HBCU marching bands is expressed through rhythmic compositions of each band around the central figure of the drum major. His use of negative space and broad fields of background color around the figures accentuates the feeling of movement conveyed through painterly gesture.

Duncan's layered integration of wallpaper and textiles is deliberately drawn from the influences of ancestral heritage, Southern tradition, and contemporary aesthetics of material exploration. His ancestral heritage is explored through allusion to African textile traditions, while Southern traditions in handcrafts—like the quilting traditions of Black folk artists, especially the quilters of Gee's Bend—provide inspiration for the patchwork upon which he builds his paintings. His formal practice is also informed by the collage work and material exploration of artists including Faith Ringgold and Mickalene Thomas, while his gestural figuration and painterly style can be compared to artists such as Willie Birch and Robert Colescott.

"I saw these drum majors as like these symbols of African Warriors dancing in front of the king or the queen, and a pageantry, a royalty of ceremonious splendor", Duncan explains. "I saw them in that light, and it's part of our heritage beyond New Orleans, and I saw that in these figures". In some way, these singular portraits almost deify the drum major as a spiritual leader

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within the cultural community, illustrating the impact of another early and lasting influence upon Duncan's painting practice: Renaissance religious paintings of Western Europe.

"With Battle of the bands, Keith Duncan displays his full formal acumen and narrative prowess as a painter", shares Bradley Sumrall, Curator of the Collection, Ogden Museum of Southern Art. "Like all of Duncan's work, it is figurative, personal and rooted in the celebration of his community. Through telling this story, he focuses the viewer's attention on the cultural significance of the HBCU marching band tradition. It also opens dialogue around the rich history of the South's Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and the increasingly important role they play at this moment in American history".



Keith Duncan, Norfolk State University marching band, 2023. Courtesy of Ogden Museum



Keith Duncan, Bethune-cookman university drum majors, 2023. Courtesy of Ogden Museum

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Keith Duncan, Southern university marching band, 2023. Courtesy of Ogden Museum