



C'mon Everybody, Get Up!

Terence Hammonds draws from the Civil Rights era in his latest exhibition

MATT MORRIS // APR 23, 2008

At the risk of sounding naive, I'll say that racism always surprises me. It shocks me

that the images of riots, violence and radical protest that Terence Hammonds incorporates into his work are taken from a few decades ago.

If Hammonds had wanted to, he could have stoked the sense of injustice more by using current images of bigotry, because it is evident that racism still exists today. What he presents in his new exhibition in The Weston Art Gallery is a commemoration of the "clash of gods" during the Civil Rights era, arranging icons of music, politics and social change as a type of Parthenon inside the street-level gallery. That shrine consists of dance floors, a set of prints and artist-created mix tapes.

C'mon Everybody, Get Up! might give the impression of some victory celebration by its title but the beautiful works are solemn and haunting. The objects in the show are all covered in the trappings of a period of social unrest, set against ornamental lines and cool color.

The dance floors are actually *sculptures of dance floors*: six wooden platforms elevated off the ground and decorated with geometric patterns that contrast diamonds of shiny graphite against the polished wood and silk-screened images of Civil Rights action.

"This piece invites you to channel the spirit of the civil rights movement through the act of dance," Hammonds says in his artist's statement. Reportedly at the opening, few if any actually took off their shoes as instructed and danced on the raised stands. Who could, really?

I haven't gone dancing in several years and I didn't feel much like grooving to the music in my socks, alone in the Weston, when I visited the show.

The dance floors are pristine objects and the images patterned across them are alternately grim and terrifying. Were I to stand on them and start to move, I would worry I might lose my balance after looking down to see a man's nose broken open and blood running all over his sleeve, or a woman screaming over a body lying in the middle of a street. Dance halls offer situations where everyone blends into a single energy. While such a harmony might well be suggested in these objects, the atrocities they are covered with, and their positions almost floating across the room, make them appear like scales being balanced.



The vintage cassette player is accompanied by a set of mix tapes. The artist's statement explains that these were created by Hammonds and his friends with only one rule: "Make it funky." I love when artists add layers of explanation and atmosphere to a show by giving the audience background music. In the case of Hammonds' work, the Funk and Soul music is not only the backdrop but also a basis of the entire show. Just as the dance-floor sculptures are like memorials to catalysts for movement, the music from the Toyo player is thin and hollow, lingering like incense in the empty space.

On the afternoon that I visited the gallery, bars of almost physical sunlight poured through the windows, falling across Hammonds' set of prints, *Playing the Wall*. Images of musicians and celebrities, who I doubt I could name on command, were paired with stills similar to the crowded street scenes printed across the floor pieces. They were hung on a large constructed wall painted an enrapturing blue-green.

All in all, those prints and that color called to mind a body of work Andy Warhol produced after John F. Kennedy's assassination. Warhol, like Hammonds, also collected images from that era's newspapers: a set of eight images of Jackie Kennedy from before and after her husband's death. Warhol also set the gritty black-and-white documents against bright but sorrowful blues. I saw a set of the *Jackie* paintings recently and was overwhelmed by their unexpected empathy and complexity.

They embodied the mourning over certain lost ideals, shared by Hammonds' recollections, since Kennedy championed passage of what became a landmark civil rights bill outlawing segregation. Like the Warhol print/paintings, Hammonds has created sensitive, intricate prints that hang almost like a chapel window across this blue monolith. Both artists have repeated images of past events obsessively across their prints in a mixture of poetry and protest.

Hammonds quotes James Brown in his artist statement, saying "Get up off that thing and dance 'til you feel better!" But the power of this exhibition doesn't rest in making you feel good. I felt better before I came into the exhibition. What makes this excellent is Hammonds' and his art's ability to sport bruises along with bangles of pride and victory.

One image that is repeated across different parts of the dance floors is a building being burned down. It reminded me of a disc jockey exclaiming, "Let's set this place on fire!" as an urge to rejoice, while also recalling the terror of hate and the boldness of rebellion.

C'MON EVERYBODY, GET UP! continues at the Weston Art Gallery through June 7.

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13024588/art-review-cmon-everybody-get-up>