



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Demond Melancon (b. 1978) works solely with a needle and thread to sew glass beads onto canvas. He began this practice in 1992 when he first became part of a more than 200-year-old culture known as the Black Masking Culture of New Orleans. Big Chief Demond Melancon is well known for creating massive Suits as a Black Masker. His Suits are sculptural forms based on the size of his body which are composed of intricate, hand-sewn beadwork revealing a collective visual narrative. In 2017, Melancon pioneered an emerging contemporary art practice using the same beading techniques he's been refining over the past 30 years in the Black Masking Culture.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Imani Perry received a BA (1994) from Yale University, a PhD (2000) from Harvard University, a JD (2000) from Harvard Law School, and an LLM (2002) from Georgetown University Law Center. She was professor of law with Rutgers University School of Law from 2002 to 2009 and was the Hughes-Rogers Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University from 2009 to 2023. Currently, Perry is a Carol K. Pforzheimer Professor, Harvard Radcliffe Institute, and the Henry A. Morss, Jr., and Elisabeth W. Morss Professor of Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality and of African and African American Studies and co-founder of the Black Teacher Archive at Harvard University. Her other publications include the audiobook *A Dangerously High Threshold for Pain* (2023), *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons* (2019), and *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (2004), and she is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*.

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RELATED EVENTS

Events are free and open to the public, unless noted. Check halsey.cofc.edu for up-to-date information.

OPENING RECEPTION

Friday, August 23, 6:30 - 8:00 PM
Free for Halsey Institute Members, suggested \$5 donation for not-yet members

ARTIST TALK

Saturday, August 24, 2:00 PM

WGS INTERSECTIONS PANEL

Wednesday, September 4, 4:00 PM

CURATOR COFFEE CLUB

Friday, September 13, 9:00 - 11:00 AM
Open to Halsey Institute Members
Sponsored by blüm in Charleston

BEADING WORKSHOP WITH DIVINE DIVA G DESIGNS

Saturday, September 21, 5:00 - 7:00 PM
\$65 for Members, \$75 for not-yet members. Email HalseyRSVP@cofc.edu to reserve your spot

HALSEY AFTER HOURS

Friday, September 27, 5:00 - 7:00 PM
Free for Halsey Institute Members, suggested \$10 donation for not-yet members

FAMILY DAY!

Sunday, October 6, 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM

ART IN MOTION: HALSEY 40TH ANNIVERSARY FUNDRAISER

Saturday, October 26 1:00 PM Parade open to the public 2:00 - 5:00 PM
Ticketed Party in Cistern Yard

CURATOR COFFEE CLUB

Friday, November 15, 9:00 - 11:00 AM
Open to Halsey Institute Members
Sponsored by blüm in Charleston

FILM SCREENING

Tuesday, November 19, 7:00 PM *All on a Mardi Gras Day (2019)* and *We Won't Bow Down (2014)*

THE HALSEY INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART at the College of Charleston School of the Arts

LOCATION

The Marion and Wayland H. Cato Jr. Center for the Arts
College of Charleston
161 Calhoun Street,
Charleston, SC 29401
halsey.cofc.edu

GALLERY HOURS

During exhibitions
Monday - Saturday,
11:00 AM - 4:00 PM
Open until 7:00 PM on Thursdays
FREE FOR ALL

PARKING

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CONTACT

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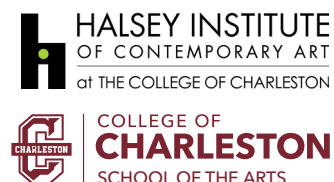
IMAGE CREDITS:

cover: Demond Melancon, *Amen, Amen, Amen!*, 2022, Glass beads and rhinestones on canvas, 35.25 x 17 inches
this side, left: Demond Melancon, *Nefertari Queen of Peace*, 2024, Glass beads and rhinestones on canvas, 14 x 10 inches
reverse side, left: Demond Melancon, *Bras-Coupé*, 2016, Glass beads and rhinestones on canvas, 50 x 55.5 inches
reverse side, right: Demond Melancon, *Ashanti Mmiensa (Three)*, 2023, Glass beads and rhinestones on canvas, 9 x 6 inches

All works © Demond Melancon

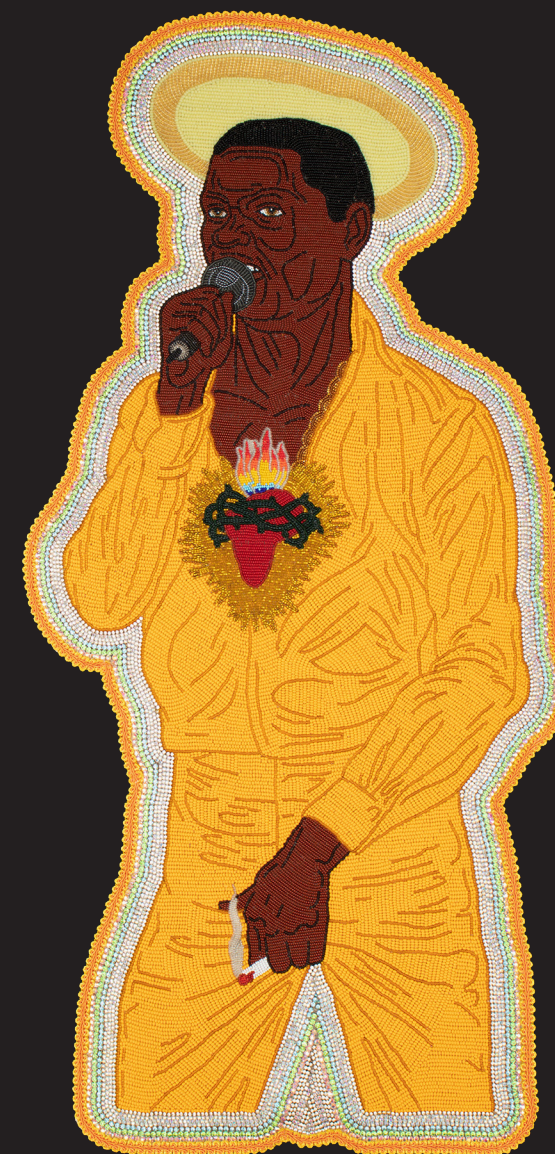
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DEMOND MELANCON AS ANY MEANS ARE NECESSARY

AUGUST 23 - DECEMBER 7, 2024





As Any Means Are Necessary: The Art Work of Culture Bearer, Demand Melancon

by Imani Perry

Once upon a time, the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans was home to sugar cane slave plantations and cypress swamps. Over generations, it birthed culture in the thick of history. Filled with Black folks, with skin ranging from ebony to cream and mouths reverberating with rhythmic rounded vowels, it sits below the rest of New Orleans, right up against the Mississippi River, and in recent decades it has been one of the communities hardest hit by deadly storms. This is Demand Melancon's home. The first time I met him, he described weeks of pushing thread through two-millimeter beads without lights or air conditioning in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, in preparation for masking at Mardi Gras. He endured something similar in the aftermath of Hurricane Ida saying, "We went through the same exact thing that happened with Katrina. I had to keep the culture going and try to mask again. Lights went off for weeks, it was steaming hot. I had to go miles for food and water but I didn't stop." The labor is a form of conjure, creating beauty at the site of wound, and making life of art, art of living.

Melancon's journey to being a distinguished fine artist came through culture and community. Born in 1978, at age 13 he joined the Seminole Hunters, a 200-plus-year-old Mardi Gras Black Indian masking tribe. The Seminole Hunters origin story comes from the revolts and marronage of enslaved Black people who were offered refuge in indigenous Seminole communities. The Seminole remained allied with the freedom seekers even when threatened by the federal government. To this day, The Seminole Hunters pay homage to that tradition.

For 15 years, Melancon was the spyboy of the tribe. In that role, when the Seminole Hunters paraded in their elaborate self-made suits, he led the way, dancing, chanting, and challenging other tribes with which they had symbolic battles. It is a role that requires skill as a performer and leadership. In 2012 he rose to the highest rank: chief. He now leads his own tribe, the Young Seminole Hunters.

Making suits for Mardi Gras is an arduous process that takes months and thousands of hours. He is one of the greats in an illustrious tradition, often sewing 16 hours a day. In the cultural fabric of Mardi Gras, the creation of suits always exists alongside the other art forms that are central to New Orleans culture: music, dance, and funerary rituals that blend the cultures of West Africans, Indigenous Americans, and Europeans. It is a heteroglossic tradition and one that appeals to all of the senses in the telling of history and sustaining old ways inherited from their elders. Historically, slavery and then Jim Crow held Black New Orleans on the margins of the society, but Black New Orleanians drew the whole world into their orbit with the charisma of culture. The Mardi Gras Indians, once tucked away in Black neighborhoods in New Orleans and Algiers, are now visible around the world.

Today, Melancon is one of their primary representatives. As he has moved into the world of fine art, now with his first solo exhibition, Melancon has brought that culture into the museum space. He stitches Black history. The musical rhythm is evident in the repetition of rows of beads, their swirling shapes capture the expansiveness of dance and the color tone and pattern provide a visual jazz.

Melancon finds inspiration in the African origins of Black Southern culture. For example, he reinterprets the tradition of Ashanti Masks, of the Akan people of contemporary Ghana. Traditionally, these masks were used in spiritual ceremonies and allowed the wearer to transcend the physical realm and garner messages from the ancestors. I asked Melancon about this new work and he said, "I am always studying Africanisms. Those masks possess different spirits. I live my life on the powers of our African history." In this way, Melancon reminds us that although the Gulf Coast carnival tradition has origins in European Catholicism, it is also deeply rooted in West African practices.



The spirit suit is an homage to the Yoruba Orisha, and is inspired by Nana Sula, a New Orleans based spiritual practitioner who married Melancon and his wife and collaborator, Alicia. A river deity, Yemaya represents maternal energy, and is often adorned in Blue and glistening white and silver shells and pearls. Retentions of Yoruba culture are found throughout the African diaspora, not only as a sign of cultural resilience but connectedness. New Orleans is one of the cities in the United States in which that hemispheric and diasporic connection is most apparent because it was a historic port and a crossroads of the slave trade that received and sent Africans from and to all over the Americas. Melancon's work teaches the routes and roots.

In this exhibition we also see Bras Coupé, whose story Melancon has told on multiple occasions in his art. An enslaved Congo man named Squire, by some accounts a prince, Bras Coupé famously danced in Congo Square and was punished for escaping captivity. His arm was chopped off, thus leading to his nickname "Bras-Coupé" meaning cut-arm in French. In the lore, Bras Coupé kept on running even after being maimed, along with a band of other freedom seekers, inspiring hope for the enslaved and fear among enslavers. Though he was ultimately killed, he remained a heroic figure, whose story has been told in literature and song. Indeed, Melancon's art gives life to the warrior spirit of Bras Coupé and testifies to the resilience of Black culture through the arduous paths of slavery, Jim Crow, colonialism, New Orleans, and the New world. He is a descendant who lives to tell the tell as a culture bearer. Along the way, he is weaving his own story – as a son of the lower ninth ward and a Big Chief of the Young Seminole Hunters – into history.

