MASSIMODECARLO

McArthur Binion
Circles and Squares
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MASSIMODECARLO is pleased to present *Circles and Squares*, an exhibition of new paintings by McArthur Binion. For more than half a century, Binion has built his abstractions on a hidden layer of his own life. In *Circle/Square*, a series made in 2026, he reduces his language to its two most essential shapes. From 20-inch panels to boards six feet across, every painting holds a circle. The exhibition also includes a new group of *Visual:Ear* works on paper.

Circle and square are the most elementary shapes, and among the most loaded: in 1915 Malevich set a black square and a black circle at the threshold of abstraction, and Binion counts him among his forebears. Yet for Binion they are not a clean slate but a residue, what remains once everything unnecessary has been worn away. "I'm working toward simplicity," he says.

Binion works without a brush, drawing every line by hand in ink and paintstick, with his right hand and his left, building the grid square by square. The circle is the one form that refuses the grid's straight lines, and here the two meet head-on. The disc swells until it nearly touches the edges, sometimes declared in full color – orange on magenta, turquoise on deep violet – sometimes so close in tone to its ground that it surfaces only as the eye adjusts.

The square, by contrast, is where Binion stores his memories. Since the mid-1980s he has built his works on what he calls the "under:conscious": personal documents and photographs, photocopied and collaged into a checkerboard. In these paintings it gathers in the border: the house in Macon, Mississippi, where he was born in 1946, built by his grandfather; pages from the address book he has kept since the 1970s; family photographs beside a score by his friend, the Pulitzer Prize-winning jazz composer Henry Threadgill. The border reads like a patchwork quilt.

Inside this perimeter of memory, the field is dense with small dark marks. The artist explains that they recall the works he made in New York in the 1970s, pressing industrial marking crayons, the kind used in lumberyards and steel mills, slowly onto aluminum. That patient, repeated gesture returns here, now in color, which has opened up only recently: for much of his career Binion worked mostly in one or two hues.

Music runs through all of this. Binion has argued that the Abstract Expressionists learned to improvise from bebop jazz, a debt he says art history has yet to acknowledge. For him, jazz is not an influence but a relative: "Me and jazz come from the same place. We recognize each other." His first work in graduate school, *Drawn Symphony: in: sane minor* (1971), was drawn on music manuscript paper, and the term "visual ear" first appears in his 1973 thesis. The *Visual:Ear* works in the exhibition continue that idea, with grids of colored pencil drawn over the notation of Threadgill's score, a piece Binion commissioned from him.

"There are two things I'm happy about: I was born poor. And I stuttered," Binion has said. He has turned both into strengths. Minimalism set out to remove the artist's feelings from the work; Binion put them back in. From a distance his paintings in *Circles and Squares* look like pure geometry, but up close, they reveal a life.

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McArthur Binion

McArthur Binion (b. 1946, Macon, Mississippi) lives and works in Chicago, Illinois.

Since the 1970s, he has sought an alternative to Minimalist art through his personal philosophy of the pictorial grid, fused with his archival belongings, such as the pages of his phone books, personal family photographs, or found documents from the history of the African American community. Binion's reduced combination of colors and forms encloses not only formal mastery but also layers of meaning, beginning with his search for modernist abstract painting's legacy in relation to a wider context: the need of human society to leave traces of itself and, at the same time, to project itself into the future.

McArthur Binion's work is strongly political, although very subtle. Curator Lowery Stokes Sims once described Binion's DNA series as reflecting "notions of self-awareness and self-discovery, a conscious reflection on himself and to the historical discourse he has contributed to." Binion's career of more than fifty years has been a continual investigation of abstract painting. The artist's distinctive insertion of narrative and personal history, and his emphasis on content, differentiate his work from a more traditional Minimalist practice. Binion's works have been prominently included in the 57th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, VIVA ARTE VIVA, curated by Christine Macel.

Binion's work is featured in several public and private collections including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C.; the Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills; the Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City; the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson; the New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans; the Strauss Family Collection, Santa Fe; and the Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo.