

# The Herald-Sun

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## LOOKING SOUTH

Nasher exhibit looks at the region through eyes of many artists

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DURHAM

The South is food traditions, family and church gatherings, storytelling, and the home of some of the greatest music ever created — the blues, jazz, rock 'n' roll, country and other styles.

The South also is haunted by the Civil War, the shame of slavery and a resultant legacy of racism the country is still trying to address.

A new exhibit opening Thursday, Sept. 1, at Duke University's Nasher Museum of Art, "Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art," asks visitors to look at the South from many different viewpoints and to start conversations about what it means to be Southern.

"We know it's a contested terrain," said Trevor Schoonmaker, chief curator at the Nasher. The South often is portrayed as monolithic, a view that does not reflect its great complexity, Schoonmaker said.

"It's just as complex as any other region of the country," he said. "My experience is not 'the Southern experience.' Mine



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Alan Dippy of the Nasher Museum of Art labels works in advance of Thursday's opening of the "Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art" exhibit.

### GO AND DO

**WHAT:** "Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art"

**WHERE:** Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University

**WHEN:** Sept. 1-Jan. 8

**ADMISSION:** For ticket information, call 919-684-5135 or visit [nasher.duke.edu](http://nasher.duke.edu).

is 'a Southern experience,' Schoonmaker said.

Schoonmaker and Miranda Lash of the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, have spent four years putting together this exhibit of 60 artists, focusing on works of the past 30 years. Schoonmaker is originally from Winston-Salem. Lash is not originally from the South



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Exhibition designer Brad Johnson installs headphone hooks for a video display in preparation for the opening of the "Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art" exhibit Thursday at the Nasher Museum of Art.

but has worked in several museums in the South.

"I thought it was different to have someone born in the South and someone who has an

informed perspective but was not born there" to put together the exhibit, Schoonmaker said.

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# EXHIBIT

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“Southern Accent” is “the largest show we’ve ever done and the most complex,” he said. He called Lash “a great co-curator. She has a different knowledge base that has been very helpful.”

“Southern Accent” tries to look at all aspects of the region. One of the first works one sees in this exhibit is Skylar Fein’s wood, plaster and acrylic “Black Flag (For Elizabeth’s),” which transforms the American flag with the names and prices of food from a menu from a restaurant in New Orleans (they include “sausage on a stick” and andouille). “Food is one of the dominant ways people experience Southern culture,” Schoonmaker said, and Fein’s work illustrates “the imprint of the South” on the rest of country.

One gallery focuses on the natural landscapes of the South, and its rural outposts. Schoonmaker points to nine watercolors by Walter Inglis Anderson (who died in 1965),

whose paintings celebrate magnolia trees, cicadas, frogs and other wonders of the region’s natural world. For Schoonmaker, Anderson’s work was a discovery that happened during the process of putting together the exhibit. “He’s a remarkable artist. ... This is what’s exciting to me, bringing these lesser known people” and exposing their work to more viewers, he said.

This portion of the exhibit also includes Benny Andrews’ painting “Down the Road,” and four of Wilmington artist Minnie Jones Evans’ colorful, almost surrealistic, drawings.

Numerous works pay homage to the South’s history of racism. Ebony Patterson’s “Strange Fruit,” a work of mixed media on paper, takes its name from the song “Strange Fruit” that Billie Holiday sang, with a clear reference to the song lyric “Black bodies swingin’ in the Southern breeze.”

The Nasher Museum commissioned Hank Willis Thomas’ “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around” specifically for “Southern Accent.” Thomas has used photos that James

“Spider” Martin took of the civil rights movement and placed them on glass and silver. Martin died in 2003, and Thomas was able to work with his estate to use parts of the images, Schoonmaker said.

One of the most famous images from this time is Martin’s photo of state troopers approaching marchers during the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March for voting rights. By removing the background from this image, Thomas makes this moment of confrontation more powerful, Schoonmaker said. Thomas’ work also has Martin’s images of Martin Luther King – including one where he is sitting on the ground resting – Andrew Young and John Lewis.

The exhibit also pays tribute to the South’s contribution to music. Schoonmaker, Brendan Greaves and Harrison Haynes have created a “Southern Accent Music Library” that will accompany the exhibit. The songs, which museum visitors can hear at listening stations, “speak to questions of what it means to be Southern,” and serve as “a counterpoint to the visual

art,” Schoonmaker said.

An example of that counterpoint are three paintings by Douglas Bourgeois, which place musicians Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Irma Thomas and Elvis Presley in colorful, magical settings. “I love how he is taking these musical icons of his and putting them in these otherworldly landscapes,” Schoonmaker said.

“Southern Accent” also pays tribute to the role of religion and spirituality in the South’s culture, including one of Henry Harrison Mayes’ “Get Right with God” signs, and photographer Tom Rankin’s images of churches and sacred spaces.

One purpose of “Southern Accent” is to help viewers realize that artists from the South, or who work in the South, and the subjects they choose are important in contemporary art. “The South is not looked at as a factor, but the South is a factor,” Schoonmaker said.

But “Southern Accent” makes no attempt to answer questions about what it means to be Southern. “We don’t attempt to provide any answers, but to just open it up,” Schoonmaker said.