

Michael Stone-Richards

## Underneathness— Surface— Work in McArthur Binion

### 1. Approaching the work

Seeing the work—the paintings—of McArthur Binion is to be struck in many ways, almost simultaneously, by their muted tones of gray, brown, black, blue, and sometimes tones of green, and by a palette and texture the feel and atmosphere of still life. Like the most accomplished still lifes, the paintings are the very embodiment of austerity and the ideal of an autonomous art in which it is understood that the work stands alone, resists manipulation, and is a thing among things requiring a language of appreciation unaffiliated with commodities. There is a coolness in the sense of restraint and withholding in the works, something all the more emphasized when they are seen in person in the artist’s studio or in a gallery space such as Lehmann Maupin in New York. In other words, the works do not advertise anything, they bear no striking images to pull in even the most casual of viewers; they are neither imposing nor dramatic in scale or materials in the way in which, say, Theaster Gates’s 2012–14 *Tar Paintings* are or Ed Clark’s large, sumptuous abstractions created with the use of a sweeping brush are said to be. A certain scale or type of content can impose reactions on the viewer against the viewer’s will. The surfaces in Binion’s works are mute, and even as one begins to perceive lines, those lines do not at first stand out as lines but rather are grasped as movements embedded in the surface. It is as if from the surface there emerge planes of uneven movement and so, yes, if there are planes there should be implied lines as well, but the planes begin to move because the lines are hand-drawn, often through and across the surface. Each work in the ongoing *DNA* series, begun in 2013, no matter its palette or scale, is marked by a hand-drawn grid, the lines of which are not always aligned as might at first seem to be the case in, for example, works by Agnes Martin, and so can seem syncopated. This approach to the works takes time. As one is held to and held back by the surface of the works, there is a sense of being held in check at the surface, as if one is not initially invited “into” a work where there seems to be no entry, only a gallery of surfaces, marked in every case by the presence of a grid.

This sense of the viewer being held in check is the mark of the autonomy of art, of temporality at work. And yet, the work’s refusal of the viewer points elsewhere, for, as the great French poet and critic of Cubism Pierre Reverdy said of Georges Braque’s still life painting in 1917, “ça tiendrait même contre la famine” (that should hold up even against hunger),<sup>1</sup> such is the case with Binion’s paintings. In terms of the hierarchy and prestige of traditional art history, nothing could be more humble than Binion’s materials: oil stick, crayon, and ink, the culmination of which at no point allows one to forget the scale and intensity of the hand labor involved in the creation of works that rival the scope and achievement of modernism’s Copernican revolution in eliminating narrative and making the humble still life the vehicle par excellence for the concentration of painterly attentiveness. The early modernists still, however, painted—that is, *thought*—in the medium of oil even as collage, for example, developed into a new practice of

*DNA:Black Painting:VI*, 2015 (detail)  
Oil paint stick, graphite, and paper on board  
84 x 84 inches (213.4 x 213.4 cm)



interruption. Where, however, the modernists took possession of the modest still life in the medium of oil painting, Binion’s practice takes the pictorial language of attentiveness out of the medium of oil and raises the humble media of oil stick, crayon, and ink from the genre of drawing—that is, the aesthetic margins, the nursery of thought—into something akin to drawing out an alternative conception of practice in pictorial articulation, a practice that, availaing itself of capacities of the easily overlooked (as with still life), will function as a shadow resource for the renewal of a form of attending that is shaped by the latent powers of the humbly invisible materials of life, leading thus to a new learning to see confronted with the refusal of depth in the work of surface.

2. The hand in the painting of McArthur Binion

In approaching Binion’s paintings—whether for the first or the umpteenth time—as the mind begins to settle, it is their surfaces that attract and seduce: the soft, rich textures, their delicate nature determined by the artist’s process, drawn by hand, often in layered crayon markings so that the grid is not a mere structure imposed on the matter even as it is the organizing construct of every panel. As one becomes used to the surfaces and textures and the emerging glimpses of things underneath—a sense (that is, a direction and nascent perception) of layered underneathness—one can readily imagine the face of the artist bent close to the plane, breathing on the soft, crumbly surface of crayon and ink. One senses also the pressure of the hand, the fingers’ intent/tion—first intention, as it were—not only making, but also being captured; not only depicting, but also being in the latency of the frame. There are moments, as in the works from the *DNA* series, in which the paintings are like jewels of glistening light. As a viewer one simply wants to hold back a little and not hasten the reveal, not allow any perceptual moment to become too quickly resolved into an image—any image—or facile language but simply to allow for the play of surface and textures made by the varied force and lightness of this touch, of this hand, of this artist.

In a manner characteristic of Binion’s oeuvre, these works take simple elements as a language of form for variations: rough and smooth, light and dark. There are parallel hatchings consistently deployed within the planar form of the panel but executed sometimes loosely and sometimes tightly, or sometimes as a ground over which lighter (but always basic) forms float, such as an oval and triangle (which can also be seen as part of an emerging circle) in *DNA:Black Painting:V* (2015, p. 75); a circle in *DNA:Black Painting:IV* (2015, fig. 1; p. 74); and rectangles in *DNA:Black Painting:VI* (2015, p. 77). Rarely is it such a delight—if the word is not too attenuated—not to know, but simply to allow oneself, one’s looking, one’s seeing to be trained by the surface and its modulations of rhythm and densities, led by the hand through the touch of the work. There is a particular Binion touch, a manner of mark making, a weight, a rhythm to the line, always within the same elementary building blocks of the planar form of the panel and the grid.

At a certain distance, however, a sense of physical relief develops, both with time and through the surface layer as one begins to see other

Fig. 1  
*DNA:Black Painting:IV*, 2015  
Ink, oil paint stick, graphite, and paper on board  
84 x 84 inches (213.4 x 213.4 cm)  
Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson. Museum Purchase with W.K. Kellogg Foundation funds for the Center for Art & Public Exchange, 2018.004

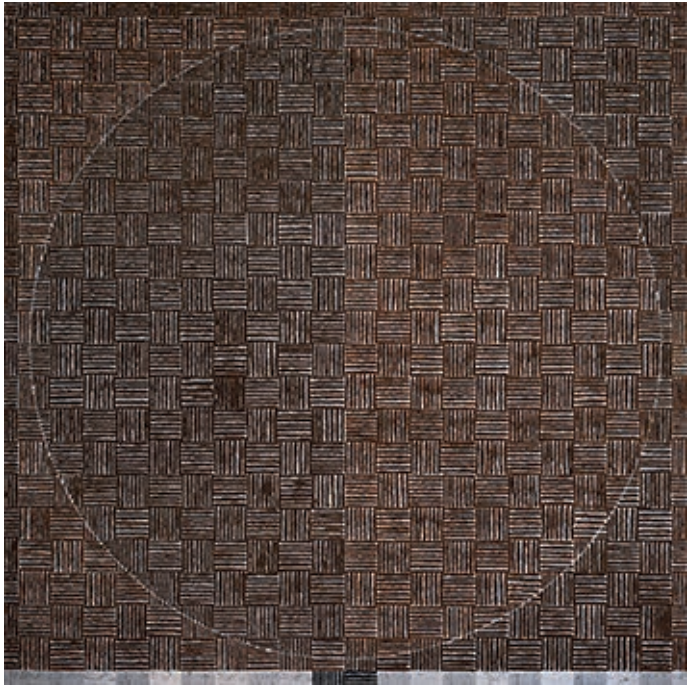


Fig. 2  
*Haints:A*, 2014  
Oil paint stick, graphite, and paper on board  
64 x 46 inches (162.6 x 162.6 cm)

forms emerge in a manner that is sculptural, like modelling in relief. And with this a kind of sculptural work of relief, as forms vaguely hint at their underlying presence through the texture. At first what seem to be markings and under-markings are slowly revealed as letters, but before one can discern or read words, the letters seem to come at the viewer in rhythms. Then, more slowly, glimpses of words and word groups eventually reveal themselves as names, dates, and locations, sometimes in whole, often in parts. This reveal can come about quickly or quite slowly. The medium also reveals more than one support. Paper, maybe. At first one cannot be sure. Then names. Numbers. Addresses. Yes, dates. Or a map. Of Mississippi, in *Haints:A* (2014, fig. 2). Or photographs and fragments of photographs. Fragments of address books. Consistent with the density of the surface and the obscuring of perception imposing a new kind of learning how to look is the aesthetics of delay and perceptual readjustments, structured not only in terms of obscured visibility but also in terms of a structure of the relations between its parts and the whole. Hence the presence of portraits—unknown? Anonymous? Self-portraits? And almost from nowhere, a lynching. All at once the perceptual plane of surface-work dissolves and one becomes aware of the phenomenology of compression at work in the manual labor of using crayon and oil stick—and the work readjusts itself between the seductive and the repulsive, as if one part of the painting (that underneath and between) recoils from another (the grid) in the same temporality as one part of the mind of the viewer recoils in surprise (sometimes shock) from its own recognition as it also delights in the beauty of the construction of the surface-work.

3. The underconscious/the underneathness

When, from the late 1950s through the late 1970s, Hubert Damisch first developed his conception of the form of *les dessous* (the undersides, the underneath, the underneathness) of painting’s matter and materiality, he used Honoré de Balzac’s great tale *Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu* (The Unknown Masterpiece, 1831), the narrative par excellence of what it is for work to be unfinished and unfinishable, as a model to articulate the sense that a painting (which imparts a certain kind of knowledge and thinking) implicitly has an underneathness, an underside where different parts of a painted canvas touch away from the immediate sight of the viewer. He articulated the sense, that is, that when we look at a painting, above all a painting that eschews perspectival depth, not only is flatness not the principle method of organization of the canvas, but one also has a sense of the layers behind and underneath what one is looking at.<sup>2</sup> (Jean Dubuffet and Paul Klee are among Damisch’s formative models for such an approach to the real and implied layering of the canvas.) Nevertheless, following Balzac’s narrative of Maitre Frenhofer’s painting of a portrait of a woman—a figure lost in layers and textures—Damisch quotes from *Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu*: “Il y a une femme la-dessous” (there is a woman underneath there). Damisch sets out to tell the theoretical fiction of how the real woman of the painter Frenhofer’s affect becomes pure figurality,<sup>3</sup> an emphasis on the nonfigurative and nonsemiotic moments of composition, and the figure of the woman, the pure figurality, becomes a mode of exchange.



Binion’s own term “underconscious” has a logic that is close to what Damisch has in mind. But for Binion it is not a figural woman that emerges in time, but rather a parallel world of latency made of memories and social survivals. In time the surface gives way to glimpses framed and metrically punctuated by the grid, glimpses in which the light—the backlight—comes from another material, comes from the in-between. The painterly, hand-drawn labor of intense repetition dissolves and becomes a moment of passage to the photographically reproduced document: parts of an address book, self-portraits in a collage medium underneath and sometimes coterminous with the grid. The materiality of the grid gives way and allows the materiality of the image to come into being/presence, along with the materiality of the layering of collage and a new kind of light, a new kind of allover light in American painting. The refusal of story (a typical function of the grid) in Binion’s work, that is, the refusal of story on the surface as first glanced, opens to a proliferation of metonymies (the underneath layering and irruption of the image) as the underneath and surface collapse into each other, thereby setting the conditions for a new departure in symbolization. This refusal of story—what is conventionally symbolized by the modernity of the grid<sup>4</sup>—is not, however, so much anti-modernist as an availing of a latent capacity of the grid since Post-Symbolist art, that is, a refusal of the seriality and directionality of time, what Georges Didi-Huberman and Pierre Fédida, in a re-translation of Sigmund Freud’s characterization of the unconscious as *zeitlos* (timeless), called the *passée anachronique* (the anachronic past). Didi-Huberman, drawing on the work of art historian Aby Warburg and anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor, has deployed this conception of the anachronization of time to show how, following Tylor, there is always a negative reality of psychic survivals latent in social reality or, in his terms, “masked realities” (the capacity and latency of Binion’s underconscious).

Didi-Huberman speaks of a movement between specter (*fantôme*) and symptom in terms of which the concept of survivals would be the expression of a trace pointing to or being symptomatic of “a negative reality . . . even that which, in a culture, appears as worthless, something ageless or useless. . . . Secondly, according to Tylor, survivals designate a *masked reality*: something persists and is witness to a disappeared state of society, but its very persistence is accompanied by an essential modification—change of status, change of meaning.”<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the underneathness at work in Binion’s procedures of the underlayering and layering of matter and collage elements (address books, photographs, maps, and so on), along with the resultant refusal of facile seeing into (the manner in which the surface-work holds vision in check at its surface)—in short, his formalism—is an intervention that imposes an active distortion in the reception of modernism. From my first meeting with Binion in 2014, he said to me, “My work doesn’t come from art history,” a statement he repeats almost every time we sit down to talk, a statement that points to the way in which the work finds its place (which is not space), that is, a point where differing temporalities meet, in order that recognition be given for repressed historicities under the form of *masking*. For this is the name of Binion’s formalism: masking, where the language of abstraction (surface and grid) functions as a form of masking of traces/

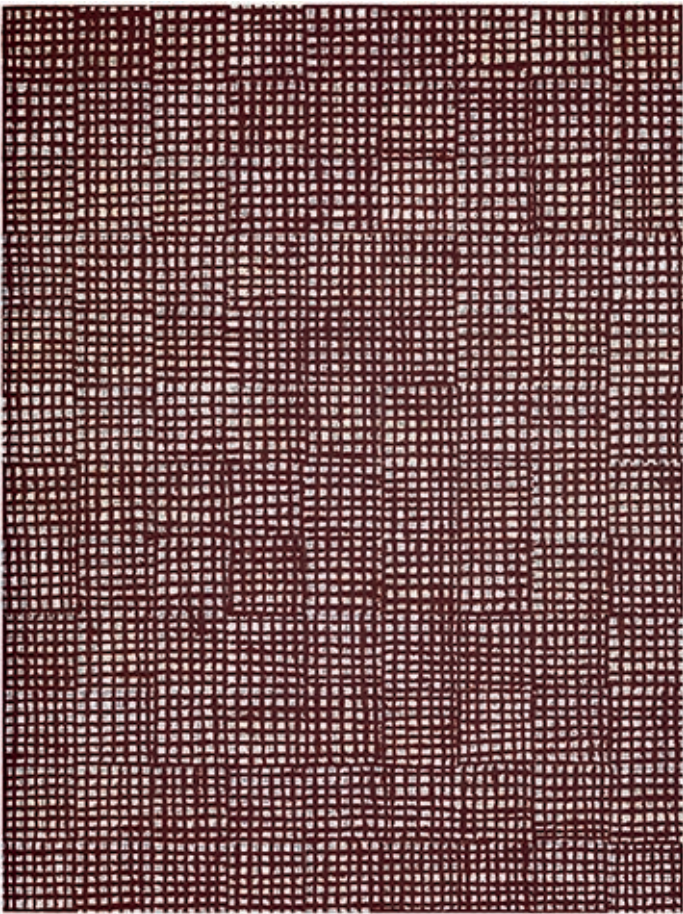
haints/what a certain conception of modernism would exclude. Here we might consider the English etymology of “masking”: “n. 1534, borrowed from Middle French *masque*, covering to hide or protect the face, and perhaps also directly from Medieval Latin *masca* mask, specter [see, here, colloquial US Southern English: *haint*], nightmare.”<sup>6</sup>

The world of the underconscious—the psychic survivals and masked realities of haints, sharecropping/forced labor, Mississippi, lynchings, dishonored existence, and lost futures—is a world *produced by* violence then naturalized and made normative even as its conditions are entering into a produced oblivion, even, that is, as the conditions of such an existence are becoming unintelligible in part as a result of a manufactured forgetfulness. In other words, these conditions become masked, indeed could not work effectively if not masked. As the archeologist and art historian Whitney Davis comments, “*Masking the blow* refers to the ways that . . . images—from hunted animals to human antagonists—represent, elide, or suppress the depiction of a ruler’s violent act of conquering an enemy.”<sup>7</sup> The world of masked realities—of symptoms, traces, and haints—is here a condition of abstraction that in Binion’s practice becomes a new economy of abstraction that introjects and incorporates (as a kind of cannibalism) the (modernist) grid to the image (as vehicle of a new kind of occluded narrative) no less than the referents of historicity, which now become vehicles for pointing to what is held in oblivion, in repression, beyond acknowledgement. At first, as a viewer, one might sense that there is something underneath, buried—stories, histories, documents—awaiting excavation in Binion’s works, but the painting is a seduction in which the *handling* of memory is a *masking of the blow*—without this masking there would be no distance to allow the viewer the time of recognition, of acknowledgement.

4. Hand/work

The acknowledgement of what, though? Work. Everything about Binion’s self-presentation is workmanlike: he readily situates his personal narrative within the larger narratives of African American history, of being born into a large family of eleven children in Macon, Mississippi, a family of farmers and hard labor, whose move from Mississippi to Detroit, Michigan (when he was four), is typical and emblematic of the Great Migration of six million African Americans from the South to the North between 1910 to the early 1970s. Evoking the logics of psychic separation and symbolization, the means, that is, by which the unconscious mind finds objects (an image, idea, or activity) to represent to its experiences of conflict or desire, Binion speaks of how, in such a large family, one has to work to find silence, to find moments of being alone—as a child, he has said, he “needed somewhere to hide.” He has spoken of the losses of intimacy he has experienced, as well as the possibility of love in loss—of which his lost brother, Thomas, “a good writer, fluid and / Concrete simultaneously,” becomes the emblem (if not always acknowledged as such). For, as Binion wrote in the poem “Ghost Rhythms: For Thomecat” (which shares a title with the 2015 painting *ghost rhythms for thomecat:two* (fig. 3), reflecting on his brother’s death:

Fig. 3  
*ghost rhythms for thomecat:two*, 2015  
Oil paint stick and paper on board  
48 x 36 inches (121.9 x 91.4 cm)  
Detroit Institute of Art, Gift of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York;  
Hassam, Speichor, Betts and Symons Funds, 2016





I am angry!  
You left us  
So long ago.

Brilliance is an unusual thing  
You left us long ago.<sup>8</sup>

The memories that are handled in Binion’s oeuvre are as phylogenetic memories, memories that an individual carries for a group, a species, a people: the child of a large family of farmers in Mississippi. The life of labor for an entire family and people becomes the psychic work of masking, of glimpses, of a complex of disturbance. Once more we recall Reverdy on Braque, who observes that “the purpose or aim [*le but*] of art is to trouble—to disturb—not to move.”<sup>9</sup> The geographic displacement of the family, along with thousands, eventually millions of others from Mississippi and the South northward, was done in search of employment and of a different state of mind, that is, of honor. These are twelve million voices, says Richard Wright, seeking work and “to escape these marked-off areas of life,” these zones of nonrecognition.<sup>10</sup>

Art, though, was a marked-off area of life for the young Binion, a zone of engagement that allowed for autonomy from the family. It also offered Binion a means to reflect—to work—on the labor of the family and the nature of labor to which the family—the species—is condemned, or, too, to consider labor as means of escape, of liberation. For the viewer there is a moment of suddenness when the many beautiful, troubling textures of Binion’s oeuvre seem to assume a figuration—the hand—and a subject: what the hand, “the instrument of instruments,” as Aristotle put it, does, the work in the construction of a world.

I think of recent works—for example, the paintings in dialogue with architect Eliel Saarinen in the 2018–19 exhibition *Binion/Saarinen: A McArthur Binion Project* at the Cranbrook Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan (fig. 4), and the related work, *Route One:Box Two:IV* (2017, fig. 5),



Fig. 4  
Installation view: *Binion/Saarinen: A McArthur Binion Project*,  
Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, 2018–19



Fig. 5  
*Route One:Box Two:IV*, 2017  
Oil paint stick and paper on board  
84 x 84 inches (213.4 x 213.4 cm)

both of which feature the same underlying image and the grid within the grid. *Route One:Box Two:IV* has become something of a talisman for me due to how the minimal gray surface of grids yields to grids nested within smaller grids—from the frame to the clear sense of the division of the picture in two halves, then into larger boxes, each diminishing into a smaller-scaled version of itself nested within, to reveal the movement of language as a form of light within the smallest hand-drawn and thus not quite rigid grid. It is almost as though the grids—that is, the units of measurement—are made up of bodies, not abstract (modernist) forms, but bodies delivered by hands. There is a troubling and fascinating possibility here if we grasp the grid within grids metonymically, not only as a part standing in for the whole (synecdoche), but also where the container stands for the thing contained, so that the unit of measurement—the grid as meter—becomes bodies as units of labor and commodity, and so, by implication, that is metonymy, the bodies in turn assume the appearance of the hold of a ship, suggesting, then, something like the Middle Passage. This giving of content to modernist forms is Binion’s work, his formalism, as I called it above, and can be comprehended as emblematic of his method of masking. Binion’s own Standard Certificate of Live Birth in Mississippi can be seen in several works, including *Route One:Box Two:IV*.<sup>11</sup> The standard—the metric—is the abstract norm, but the part, that is, the metonymy of bodies/labor, refers to what has been delivered by hand, the result of labor, the living body of the child. The hand, in Binion’s work, is a stand-in for labor, fragility, and death—no less than life.

## 5. Beyond labor

Labor is not work. Here I do not wish to enter into Hannah Arendt’s famous (or infamous) distinction between labor in the sphere of the social and the work of free citizens in the public, that is, the political, domain of equals. Labor is the visible transformation of nature by human intervention. Suffice that what Karl Marx characterized as the social substance called human labor produces commodities whereas art—for Marx no less than the Early Romantics—is precisely the kind of work that does not produce commodities. If labor is understood as the energy and effort that humans exercise upon the transformation of nature, we might usefully make a distinction with *work* that points to the psychic negative (the work of the negative in Hegelian and Lacanian language), the suffering of the negative that operates on and through symbolic media, that is, representation. Labor is how the human creature adapts nature into a social world, a history; it remains, however, that some can escape labor, the burden of labor, if they can socially and politically conceive of a method for imposing labor upon others. Psychic work, on the other hand, the work of the negative, is that from which no one, no mind can be exempt. The great Mesopotamian creation narrative, the *Enuma Elish* from circa 1200 BCE (or arguably circa 1750 BCE), may be taken as the *locus classicus* in the formulation of labor—rather than work—when, after the battle among the primeval gods, the victorious gods, led by Marduk, conceive of a plan to “create humankind, / [Who] shall bear the gods’





ghost rhythms for thomecat:one, 2015 (detail)  
Oil paint stick and paper on board  
48 x 36 inches (121.9 x 91.4 cm)

burden that [they] may rest." To this end, the victorious gods destroy one of the defeated gods, Quingu, and

From his blood [Ea] he made mankind,  
He imposed the burden of the gods and exempted the gods.  
After Ea the wise had made mankind,  
They imposed the burden of the gods on them!  
That deed is beyond incomprehension.<sup>12</sup>

It is indeed beyond comprehension—unimaginable how it might be—that labor could be successfully imposed by one group upon a caste, a class, a race, so that they, the gods, our social gods, may be at leisure, released from burden. But work, the work of representation, symbolic and psychic work, is the experience of the negative as condition for the exposure of the masked realities that would suspend existence in labor, oblivion, or invisibility. In this it might be said that the broad preoccupation with black labor on the part of an African diaspora avant-garde—for example, in the practices of Thornton Dial, Theaster Gates, Allison Janae Hamilton,<sup>13</sup> and succinctly encapsulated in David Hammons's iconic *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983) and Kevin Beasley's 2018–19 exhibition *A View of Landscape* at the Whitney Museum of American Art<sup>14</sup>—allows one to grasp that, for Binion, the pre-occupation is with the framing of psychic work and not the celebration or depiction of labor. "To produce something," observes Martin Heidegger, speaking of a poetic (productive) episteme, "is in itself to forge something into its boundaries, so much so that this being-enclosed is already in view in advance along with all that it includes and excludes."<sup>15</sup> Such is the work and the condition of McArthur Binion's oeuvre in continuous realization.

Notes

1. Pierre Reverdy, "Une aventure méthodique," *Note éternelle du présent: Écrits sur l'art, 1923–1960* (Paris: Flammarion, 1973), 78.
2. Hubert Damisch, *Fenêtre jaune cadmium, ou, les dessous de la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 11–27.
3. By *figurality* I refer to the nondiscursive and nonsemiotic aspects of depiction, which also means such aspects as cannot in any strict sense be read as either abstract or figurative.
4. See Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (Summer 1979 ): 50–64.
5. Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Minuit, 2002), 59.
6. *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology*, ed. Robert K. Barnhart (New York: H. H. Wilson, 1988), s.v. "masking."
7. Whitney Davis, *Masking the Blow: The Scene of Representation in Late Prehistoric Egyptian Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
8. McArthur Binion, "Ghost Rhythms: For Thomecat," in *Color Exploration: Simplicity in the Art of McArthur Binion*, exh. cat. (College Park: University of Maryland University College, 2010), 21.
9. Reverdy, "Une aventure méthodique," 78 (author's translation).
10. Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (1941; New York: Basic Books, 2008), 115.
11. I must confess, *après-coup*, that I had not realized until very recently that the artist's Standard Certificate of Live Birth is deployed much earlier in his oeuvre, in *House:Work: No. 1* (ca. 2009).
12. *Enuma Elish*, trans. Benjamin R. Foster, in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, ed. Martin Puchner et al. (New York: Norton, 2013), 1:24.
13. See, for example, Thornton Dial's *Hard Labor* (1998); Theaster Gates's *Tar Paintings*; and Allison Janae Hamilton's *Pitch* (2019).
14. See Michael Stone-Richards, "Black Labor: Notes on Work in the Black Avant-Garde," *Detroit Research* 3 (Spring–Fall 2019).
15. Martin Heidegger, *Aristotle's Metaphysics ̸ 1–3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, trans. Walter Brogan and Peter Warnek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 118.