

David C. Driskell

Wake Up Everybody

October 2 - December 19, 2026

Opening Reception

Friday, October 2, 2026, 5:30 - 7:30pm

Special Presentation by art historian and curator **Julie McGee**, author of *David C. Driskell: Artist and Scholar*, and curator of *David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History*.
Conversation begins 6:15pm

Jenkins Johnson Gallery is pleased to present *David C. Driskell: Wake Up Everybody*, a new exhibition celebrating the creative legacy of the legendary artist, curator, art historian, and educator David C. Driskell. Featuring works created between 1960 and the early 2000s, the exhibition brings together paintings, works on paper, collage, and printmaking—including linocuts, woodcuts, and serigraphs.

David C. Driskell was a lifelong artist, but he perennially prioritized the support and promotion of other artists ahead of himself. Driskell was an arts educator for nearly 40 years and a pioneering curator, but all the while he maintained a personal artistic practice which defied categorization. This exhibition samples some of his diverse areas of interest and means of expression: figuration and abstraction, Christian devotional art and traditional African craft, landscapes and natural phenomena, jazz musicians and more rendered through painting, collage, assemblage and printmaking. The selected works also reflect the breadth of Driskell's life experiences, drawing inspiration from his upbringing in the American South, his travels throughout Africa, and his deep connection to the landscape of Maine.

The exhibition title is drawn from the 1975 song *Wake Up Everybody*, written and performed by Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, featuring a young Teddy Pendergrass. The song stands as a

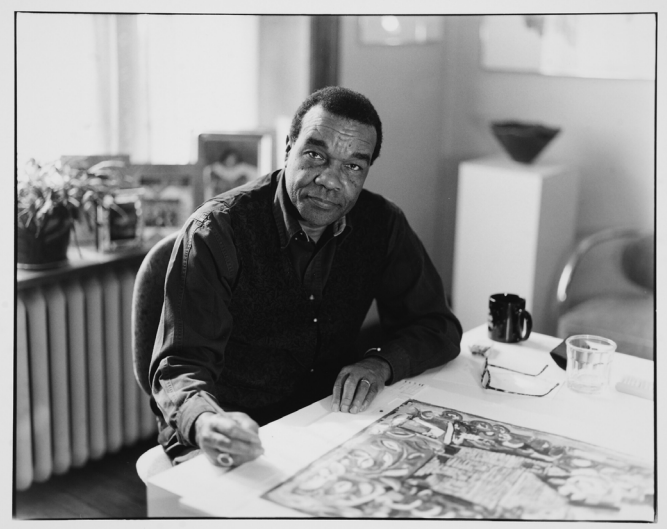


David C. Driskell, *The Ancient Watch*, 1975
acrylic and collage on canvas, 61 x 48 in (154.9 x 121.9 cm)

call to action, speaking to a variety of communities to rise up and be part of the new consciousness of the era. Taking particular note of the lyric “Wake up all the teachers, time to teach a new way,” we wish to honor Driskell’s enduring influence as a teacher and mentor to generations of African American artists.

The exhibition will open on Friday, October 2, as part of Nexus, the Bay Area’s Black Art Week. The exhibition opening will be accompanied by a special presentation by author and art historian Julie McGee, author of *David C. Driskell: Artist and Scholar*, and curator of *David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History*. McGee’s in-depth knowledge of Driskell’s practice and personal connection to Driskell as an individual will bring unique insight into his creative and intellectual breadth and depth. We are honored to have this esteemed expert present for this landmark exhibition.

“Envisioned collaboratively before the artist’s passing, David C. Driskell: *Wake Up Everybody*



David C. Driskell signing the "Echoes" silk screen, 1996. Courtesy of the David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park. © Carol Harrison. Photo: Greg Staley, 2019



David C. Driskell, *Ancient Alphabets*, 1990, encaustics and collage on paper, 17 1/2 x 22 in (44.5 x 55.9 cm)

is a California homecoming for the distinguished artist and scholar," McGee commented of the exhibition, elaborating "Driskell's California network—enduring friendships and institutional connections instrumental to Black arts building—spanned the arc of his career. Showcasing the artist's creative work from the 1960s forward, *Wake Up Everybody* is both a remembrance and a call to action. No more backward thinking, time for thinking ahead. The ancestors are watching."

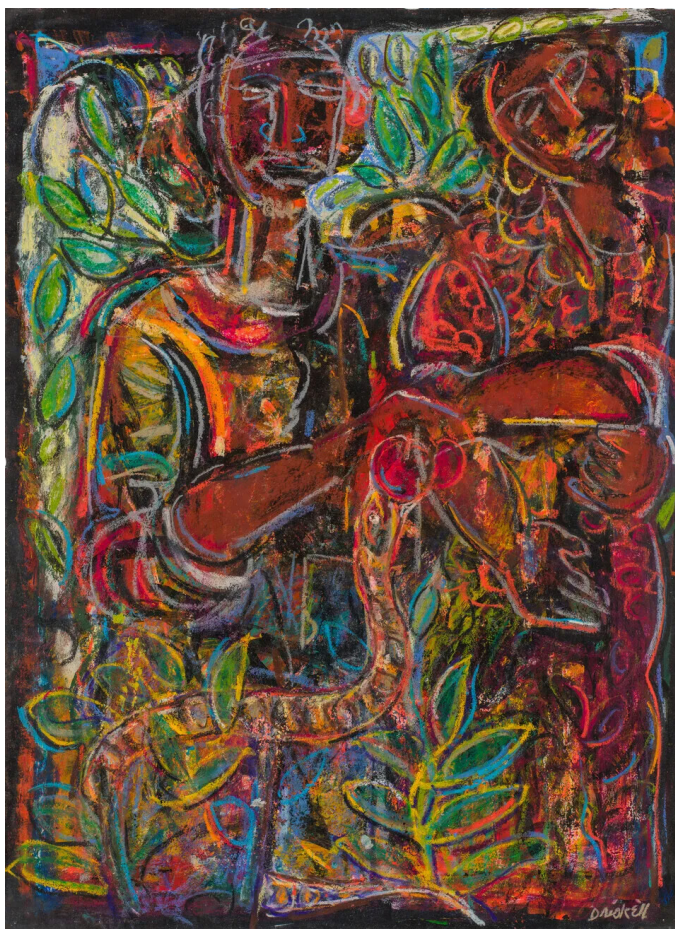
Driskell's ambitious practice brought together a lifetime of influences.

David C. Driskell was born in 1931 in Eatonton, Georgia. Art and faith were crucial to Driskell's upbringing, with his father and grandfather both being ministers and artists in their own respective ways—his father a painter and Baptist minister, his grandfather a sculptor and Methodist minister, and his mother a quilter.

Driskell attended Howard University and received a Bachelor's degree in art in 1955, particularly valuing the mentorship of his professor James A. Porter. His experiences at Howard motivated him to pursue teaching as a discipline, first at Talladega College and later returning to teach at Howard in the early 1960s. While at Howard, he met a young Mary Lovelace (O'Neal), who would remain a

friend for the rest of their lives. By 1966 he had taken a position at Fisk University in Nashville, and in 1976, one at the University of Maryland, where he would work until retirement in 1998. These posts and a variety of positions as guest lecturer, visiting professor, and other such roles, underscore a recurrent commitment by Driskell to aid and champion young artists. Among his numerous notable students are artists including Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Sylvia Snowden, Terry Adkins, Shaun Leonardo, and Jefferson Pinder.

Aside from teaching, curation was a critical way that Driskell supported and uplifted his fellow artists. His lengthy curatorial career included more than 35 shows, many of which pioneered serious scholarship about the history of African American art. His 1976 exhibition *Two Centuries of Black American Art* was the high watermark of his curatorial career, and remains one of the most important and influential shows of the late 20th century. Debuting at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), *Two Centuries of Black American Art* subsequently traveled to the High Museum of Art, Atlanta; the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas; and the Brooklyn Museum, New York. While many of the show's 67 artists may now seem canonical, it should not be understated that their place in the canon is much owed to the exhibition, which for much of America was a



David C. Driskell, *Adam and Eve in the Garden (Study)*, 2005, mixed media and cray-pas on paper, 26 x 19 in (66.0 x 48.3 cm)

first opportunity to engage with works by artists including Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, and Alma Thomas.

Through teaching, curating, and his art practice alike, Driskell was widely traveled and these experiences consistently informed his practice. Driskell made several trips to Africa for both professional and personal purposes throughout his adult life, finding his time in Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria in the early 1970s particularly transformative to his creative practices, and deepening his commitment to integrating African culture into his practice. Inspiring though his experiences were, they were also fraught with both the history and living practice of colonialism: In one particularly disturbing experience, Driskell recalled being a visiting lecturer in South Africa in the 1970s under Apartheid. As a foreign guest to the country, he was granted legal status of being an "honorary white" for the purposes of moving through the country unrestricted.

Conversely, he also recurrently revisited the Bay Area where he exhibited with Bomani Gallery, and forged deep connections with luminaries of the community including Keith Morrison and Allan M. Gordon. The Bay Area's long history of Black creatives and academics was fruitful ground for Driskell's own passions as artist and scholar.

Driskell's personal practice united many of these diverse influences, bringing together Christian icon paintings and African mask forms, for example. Likewise urban life around the country, but also research trips to Africa, and the idyllic landscape of Maine, where he kept a summer home and regularly engaged with the Skowhegan Artists Residency, both as a student and as an instructor.

Unbound by expectations of genre, Driskell freely moved between abstraction and representation, blurring the boundaries between them with his signature interest in layering color and calligraphic gestures. References to art history readily blended with references to his personal life and history. Unbothered by market expectations for an artist to develop a signature style, Driskell's intellectual and creative spirit was free to explore his passions. He freely exchanged ideas with his peers both for his own artistic practice and in the development of curatorial projects. This relentless and empathetic engagement with his fellow artists made him both an insightful academic and a mercurial creator. Like many Black artists of his generation, his flexibility also came as an essential response to the rapidly changing social conditions for African Americans throughout the 20th century.

Alongside paintings and drawings, Driskell also frequently collaborated with a variety of master printmakers during his career, including James Lesesne Wells, Curlee Raven Holton, Randy Hemminghaus, and Lou Stovall, as well as legendary print studios like Brandywine Workshop.

"Art for me is a way of life. It is as much a vital part of my lifestyle as all of the other experiences that have helped to make me a particular individual... My art allows me to be a free soul no longer bound by the physical toils of the natural order," Driskell wrote in 1997, continuing, "This freedom

of expression I seek through art is no illusion. It is a deeply spiritual experience, one which elevate the mind beyond seeing only that which exists in the natural order.”

Dr. David C. Driskell (June 7, 1931 – April 1, 2020) received numerous honors throughout his lifetime, including the National Humanities Medal in 2000. His legacy continues through the annual David C. Driskell Prize, established by the High Museum of Art in 2005, as well as through the generations of artists, scholars, curators, and educators whose work has been shaped by his enduring influence. He has been the recipient of a dozen honorary degrees including Doctor of Fine Arts from Howard University, 2010, and Doctor of Humane Letters from University of Delaware, 2011. Driskell received numerous honors throughout his career, including election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; the Skowhegan Lifetime Legacy Award, 2016; the National Humanities Medal, presented at the White House, 2000; recognition by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1993–94; and the Harmon Foundation Special Award, 1964.

Driskell has been celebrated in museum solo shows including *David Driskell* at the Phillips Collection, Washington DC, 2021; *David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History* which originated at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, 2020, and traveled to the Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME; *David Driskell: Renewal and Form*, the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, ME, 2017; and *A Decade of David Driskell*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, 2014.

Notable museum group exhibitions include *Edges of Ailey*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2024–2025; *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, which originated at the Tate Modern, London, UK, and traveled to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AK, the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, the Broad, Los Angeles, CA, the deYoung Muesum, San Francisco, CA, and the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Houston, TX.

Driskell’s work is held in prominent public collections



David C. Driskell, *Dan Mask*, 1988, mixed media
9 x 6 inches (22.86 x 15.24 cm)

including the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, DC; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY; Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME; and Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

David C. Driskell: Wake Up Everybody will be on view at Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco, from Friday, October 2 through Saturday, December 19, 2026. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 10am–6pm.

Please send any inquiries or requests to info@jenkinsjohnsongallery.com and follow us @jenkinsjohnsongallery on Instagram.

About the presentation

On Friday, October 2, we are pleased to host a special presentation by Julie McGee as part of the opening of *David C. Driskell: Wake Up Everybody*.

Julie L. McGee is an art historian and independent curator. She developed *David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History* (2021), a critical survey of the artist's practice, in collaboration with the High Museum of Art and the Portland Museum of Art. McGee's current research projects include the American Dutch artist Sam Middleton and *Curatorial Care: Critical Art Histories & David C. Driskell*. Among her past fellowships are the Dorothy Kayser Hohenberg Chair of Excellence in Art History at the University of Memphis, a Paul Mellon Visiting Senior Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and a Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellowship at the Smithsonian. Most recently she was Tyson Scholar of American Art at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Formerly Associate Professor of Africana Studies and Art History, McGee now serves as Associate University Librarian for Special Collections and Director of University Museums with the Library, Museums and Press at the University of Delaware.



Julie McGee. Image courtesy Julie McGee.