

Mullin, Diane
"Jason Moran: Walker Art Center, Minneapolis"
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Jason Moran

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
26th April–26th August

by DIANE MULLIN

The Walker Art Center bills its survey exhibition of the visual art of the luminary jazz pianist Jason Moran as at once a solo artist survey and a group exhibition. Installed in a single gallery, the exhibition includes both museum commissions and collaborations. Interspersed among three installations from Moran's STAGED series – fragmentary recreations of such famed New York jazz halls as Harlem's Savoy Ballroom (Fig.39), Midtown's Three Deuces (Fig.40) and Alphabet City's Slug's – are three monumental screens presenting video works by Joan Jonas, Theaster Gates, Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, Julie Mehretu and Adam Pendleton that were co-produced with or scored by Moran. The videos shown on these screens also include works featuring Moran with his jazz trio, The Bandwagon. Examples of Moran's technical tools and working materials, such as small recorders, vintage compact discs and examples of the artist's collection of used and unused player piano paper, are laid out with explanatory notes in a vitrine. A selection of Moran's charcoal and ink drawings made by powdered and inked fingers in action on piano keyboards grace another wall. Films made by Stan Douglas and

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tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055
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Glenn Ligon made in collaboration with Moran continuously play in two viewing rooms just off the main gallery space. Seen together this way the eclectic works powerfully demonstrate Moran's dynamic imagination and political and cultural concerns, which are revealed slowly, over time spent with each work on its own and then again (and many times again) in the context of the other works in the space.

The individual works and their expert, poetic arrangement in the space clearly evidence Moran's creative process as informed by the central tenet of jazz known as the 'set'. In the jazz set, musicians come together to improvise, creating music that emerges in real time. The STAGED works stand at once as monuments to a lost physical past and as a comment on society's tendency to undervalue the culture they represent. Like the collaborative and generative jazz set, the STAGED works are layered with meaningful details – such as to the Savoy's famous curved ceiling or to the long narrow space of Slug's Saloon, recreated by Moran through his ingenious use of mirrors – and sonic elements including African American work songs, whistling and other recorded samplings that speak to a rich and complex cultural past. Further asserting the continued impulse and relevance of that culture, Moran's STAGED sculptures will act as actual stages for three separate live performances by a variety of musical artists – including Bandwagon – over the course of the exhibition.

For Moran the stage set acts as a physical memorial, but also facilitates the staging of a jazz set. Little photographic evidence of the Savoy Ballroom survives and so Moran's aim was to 'reconstruct it in a way and pull it up from the ground, and then also embed sound into the piece itself and see what it charges'. Using a wellspring of historical references and tools, Moran succeeds in making a meaningful approximation of not just the buildings but also the experience of the places. In so doing, the works reassert their presence, vitality and value.

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 p.2

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39. *STAGED: Savoy Ballroom 1*, by Jason Moran. 2015. Mixed media, sound, 304.8 by 548.6 by 304.8 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York; photograph Farzad Owrang; exh. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis).

40. *STAGED: Three Deuces*, by Jason Moran. 2015. Mixed media, sound, 243.8 by 304.8 by 396.2 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York; photograph Farzad Owrang; exh. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis).



In Robert G. O’Meally’s 1998 anthology, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, jazz is examined through multi-disciplinary lenses to assert that much of American life is, as Ralph Ellison once remarked,

‘jazz-shaped’.² Moran’s exuberant embrace of artistic jazz-set-style art making and collaboration across disciplines and media has produced a body of visual work that offers new, visceral viewpoints on some of

the most important cultural issues around representation and identity in the United States. Shown together as they are in this exhibition, it becomes apparent that, in addition to the riffing that characterises the jazz set, there is another jazz practice that further illuminates Moran’s overall project: the concept and technique of syncopation. Simply defined, syncopation is the temporary displacement of the regular metrical accent in music caused typically by stressing the weak beat. In a sense, all Moran’s art does just that. By temporarily displacing what is expected and stressing the ‘weaker’ beat, Moran conjures up what has gone missing or unsaid in our histories. By doing so, he offers a richly significant kind of revaluation that not only memorialises but opens itself up to new questions and ideas that push his art and social discourse forward.



1 A. Edwards: ‘Milestones and memorials: Jason Moran on his first museum exhibition’, *Sightlines*, available online: www.walkerart.org/magazine/interview-jason-moran-adrienne-edwards-exhibition.
 2 R.G. O’Meally: *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, New York 1998.