

Otis Houston Jr.: *My Name is My Word*

From the window of his twenty-ninth-floor Harlem apartment, Otis Houston Jr. viewed a spot on the side of FDR drive where cars slowed down to merge, and traffic was at a bottleneck. Dealing with personal issues, including a struggling marriage, Houston sought a space outside his home to express himself and decided to go down to the highway. Since 1997, he has occupied this same site, producing a series of performances that include his writing, poetry, singing, found objects, and fruit, which are used as both props and materials.

Oftentimes, the artist sets out a chair or a table; other times he exercises or reads a book. Usually, he eats fruit and performs with the remnants (a watermelon rind in his mouth, a pineapple on his head). These iterations have earned him the nickname “Fruit Man,” and his notoriety around New York has spread beyond Harlem. Over the past decades, he has had several newspaper and magazine articles written about him, countless videos of his performances posted on the Internet, and several gallery exhibitions.

From October 4–7, 2022, Houston visited the Arts Center and created new work. While here, Houston engaged in a series of improvisational performances, vibrant art making, and conversations with the community. Traces of these actions take physical form throughout the galleries of this exhibition. Also included in *Otis Houston Jr.: My Name is My Word*, his first museum exhibition, are examples of his past work and documentation of previous performances.

This handout provides a closer look at a selection of the work included in the exhibition, on view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center from October 4, 2022–January 14, 2023.



Artist Otis Houston Jr. creates new work at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022.

Performance Documentation

At the entrance to the exhibition, there is a photograph of a principal site for Otis Houston Jr.'s creative practice on FDR Drive by New York's East River, where he has been working since 1997. The photographer, Ejlal Feuer, documented Houston's performances and assemblages from 1999 to 2004.

This image was taken by Feuer on April 28, 1999, eight days after the Columbine school shooting. In memoriam, Houston lined a bouquet of yellow tulips on a bench. With the accumulation and acceleration of public shootings, particularly in schools, Houston has repeated this gesture of remembrance multiple times in response to dozens of other acts of mass violence.

Cover image: *Otis Houston Jr.: My Name is My Word* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022. Otis Houston Jr., *Acceleration* (detail), 2020; found objects; 63 1/2 x 10 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. Courtesy of Andy Clark.





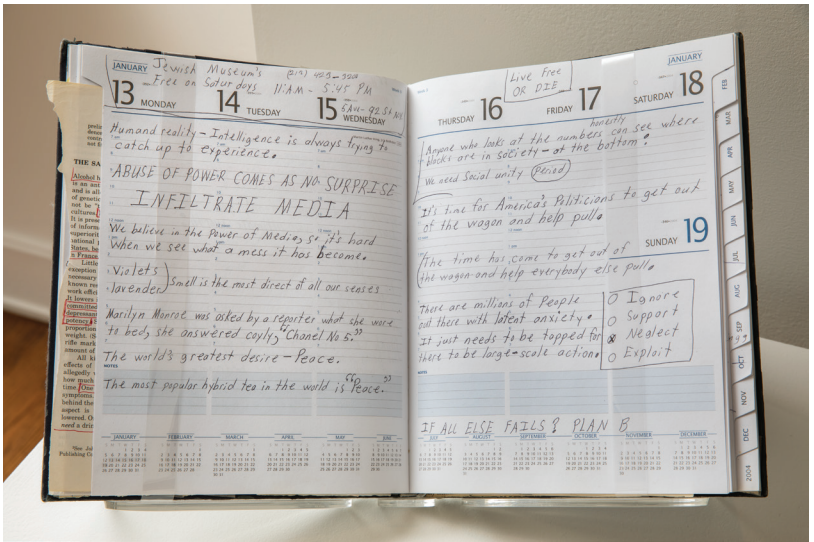
Eilat Feuer, untitled (documentation of Otis Houston Jr. performance), 1999; photograph on adhesive vinyl. Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Robichaux.



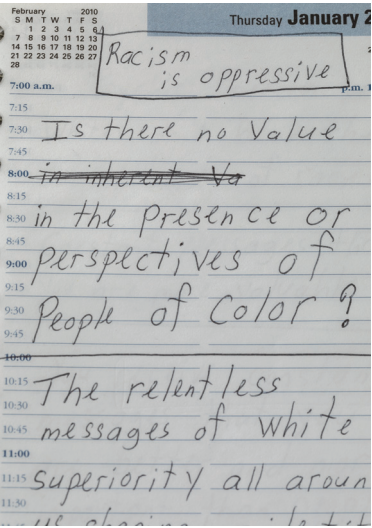
Otis Houston Jr.: *My Name is My Word* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022. Otis Houston Jr., untitled (journals), c. 1999–2004; ink on paper. Center: "Artist uses his fruit to make jams," *New York Post*, October 13, 2009; newspaper. Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Robichaux.

Journals

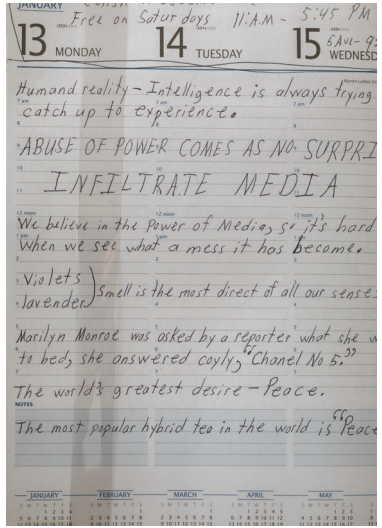
While imprisoned during the 1980s, Houston began collaging images and text from magazines into journals. This act brought to his attention the communicative and healing power of art. Today, he continues his journaling practice as he returns to, reformats, and reorders news reports, quotations, and personal experiences woven in with daily observations. These missives sometimes find their way into his text-based artwork, which include painted towels, canvases, and signs. The journals are a container for source material to be shared, but each page can also be viewed as its own composition of the information Houston felt pressing at a given moment. The selections on view feature Houston's thoughts on art, racism, capitalism, celebrity culture, and love, as well as a note about the Jewish Museum's free visitation days.



Otis Houston Jr., untitled (journal), c. 1999-2004; ink on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Robichaux.



Otis Houston Jr., untitled (journal), c. 1999-2004; ink on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Robichaux.



Otis Houston Jr., untitled (journal), c. 1999-2004; ink on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Robichaux.

Advertisements

Houston proudly identifies as an artist—a job that he prepares for, researches, and strives to be the best at. Like any careerist, Houston seeks to advertise his services. This group of signs, once worn by Houston on the roadside, act as messages of introduction and connection, proclamations of his eagerness and competency. He is genuine about being available, willing to share messages, and make connections with passersby, both now and later. The repeated declarations indicate Houston’s consistency. These signs do not need to change; these beliefs stay constant, the only element in need of refreshing is a phone number.





Otis Houston Jr.: *My Name is My Word* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022. Center and right: Otis Houston Jr., *Advertisements*, 2008–18; marker, rope, tape, and collage on found boards. Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Robichaux, NY.



Otis Houston Jr.: *My Name is My Word* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022. Otis Houston Jr., *Mother Nature*, 2022; mixed media, found and altered objects; 55 x 26 x 28 in. Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Robichaux, NY.

Mother Nature

Throughout his week here, Houston likened his experiences in the Arts Center to his early memories of attending a Catholic school. He made note of similar experiences, such as the prevalence of women and the continual tolling of church bells. (The bells of the Arts Center's neighboring churches can be heard throughout the day in the galleries.) While here, he was given access to restricted areas of the building through the use of a badge, and he kept a disciplined daily schedule.

Houston's childhood experiences and lifelong faith are echoed in artworks featuring spiritual messages and two cruciform assemblages he made on-site.

In *Mother Nature*, a costume is supported by a cross-like internal structure. Around extended arms, there is a necklace, of sorts, which layers a spray-painted heart pendant above the figure's chest. At the base, three plastic bowls create a patterned foreground for a first-person message signed by the artist, "I Don't care too Much For No Man That Don't Know How To Treat Another Man: Artist Otis Houston Jr. PEACE."



Performance by artist Otis Houston Jr. at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022.



Towels

Houston began using towels as canvases while employed as a custodian at a New York City gym, likely due to their availability. Their use as surfaces for dispatches, both specific and universal, is now ubiquitous in his practice. This arrangement of four towels demonstrates the breadth of Houston's messages, traversing history, economics, personal experience, and statistics.

One features a statement rooted in the artist's own experiences with the judicial system, including his observations of harassment and racially motivated murders of Black people by those in positions of political power. He also addresses the statistical disparity between the sentences Black offenders receive and those meted out to white offenders. One report by the United States Sentencing Commission (conducted from 2012–2016) concluded that Black male offenders receive 19.1 percent longer sentences than similarly situated white male offenders. "He hadn't did Nothing but being a NEGRO," speaks both to this systemic imbalance and to Houston's wife's wrongful conviction and exorbitant prison sentence.

Another work includes a personal declaration and demand regarding needs for health and wellness, "MENTALLY PHYSICALLY I NEED MY PEACE." There is also a message of expansive truth, "If a Thing isn't building it must Be Decaying," and a message of reassurance, "Time Everything Good Take Time."

The sources of Houston's texts are diverse, though quotes are often adapted and repeated. Words and phrases become mixable materials for his compositions. Each towel is laden with history from Houston's personal life and from global events. Phrases appear in the form of first-person accounts and as quotations, instructions, analysis, and information.

1 *Otis Houston Jr.: My Name is My Word* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022. Otis Houston Jr., untitled, 2022; spray paint on towel; 24 x 48 in. each. Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Robichaux, NY.

2 *Otis Houston Jr.: My Name is My Word* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022. Otis Houston Jr., untitled, 2021; spray paint on towel; 16 x 26 3/4 in. Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Robichaux, NY.

Acceleration

Houston sources most of his materials from the building where he works as a custodian and from elsewhere in the city. “I see junk and stuff laying around,” he said, “and I think, ‘What can I do with that?’”

In many of his idiosyncratic assemblages, he uses found objects to embody his values. Reading and learning continue to be a large part of Houston’s artistic and personal practice. His motivation is the constant pursuit of knowledge, to be the best version of himself, and to further understand the world and others.

In *Acceleration*, the included books reference issues close to his heart such as healthy eating and obesity, religion, and knowledge production. The sculpture is crowned by one of the world’s most familiar aliens, E.T., who was in constant pursuit of making connections with others and the planet Earth.

If You can't be The
Cows Head Don't be
His Tail Be The Bell
That Ring Around his Neck

Around this Hearth let no evil Word be spoken

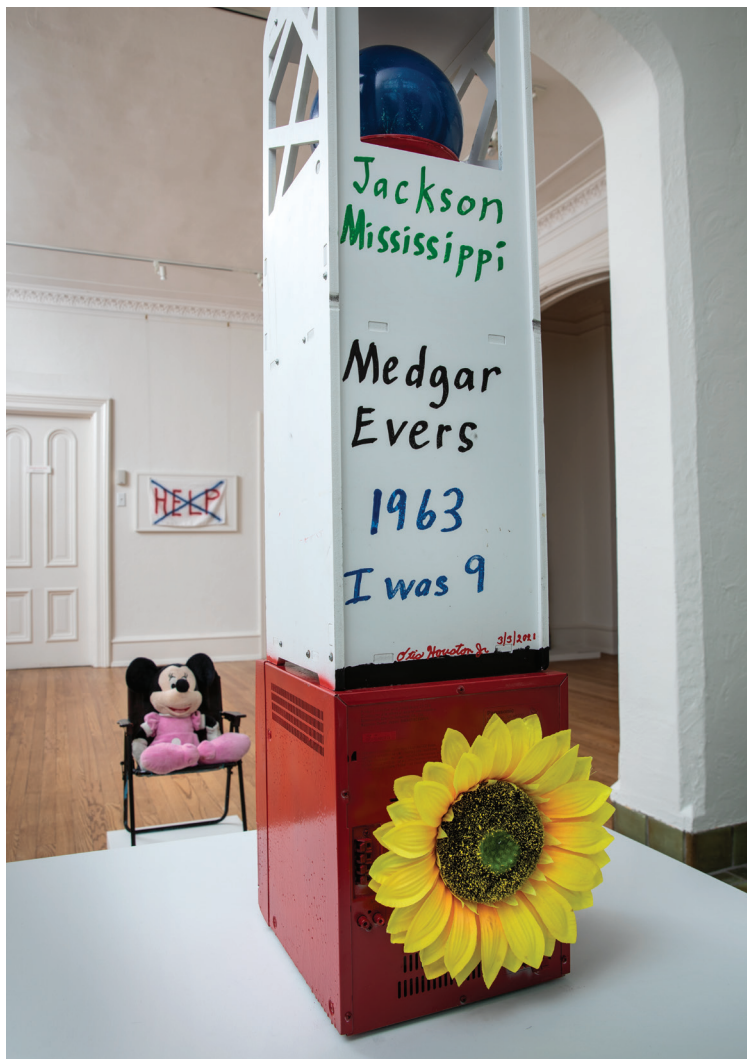


I Remember (Evers)

Civil rights activist Medgar Evers was murdered at his home in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963 by a white supremacist. Evers organized protests and opportunities for individuals to learn about voting rights and legal systems.

Houston was nine at the time of Evers's murder. This shrine-like totem, with its flower and vessel, suggests a memorial, not unlike the ad hoc examples that appear along roadways near the sites of automobile crashes. The Minnie Mouse stuffed doll assumes the position of a child, staring up at the tower. The sculpture reminds visitors of Evers's influence on thousands of lives, his contribution to social justice, and his unjust murder.





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- 1 Otis Houston Jr.: *My Name is My Word* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022. Otis Houston Jr., *I Remember (Evers)*, 2021; mixed media, found and altered objects. Courtesy of Diane Solomon.
- 2 Otis Houston Jr.: *My Name is My Word* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022. Foreground: Otis Houston Jr., *I Remember (Evers)* (detail), 2021; mixed media, found and altered objects. Courtesy of Diane Solomon.



Otis Houston Jr.: *My Name is My Word* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022.

Mirrors

In 1975, the boxer Muhammad Ali was speaking to a group of Harvard students when someone in the crowd requested a poem. Ali recited, “Me. We,” which is now considered the shortest poem in the English language. Houston invokes this poem often, and with the accompanying phrase, “Can I Live,” he speaks to his commitment for a more unified and peaceful populace.

Houston’s mirror works, each of which were made at the Arts Center from materials found at local thrift stores, provide moments of intimacy with a message. Viewers are hard-pressed not to see their reflections when they look in the mirrored works, and Houston’s declarations of presence and personhood unavoidably links his fate to the audience’s.

- 1 Otis Houston Jr.: *My Name is My Word* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022. Otis Houston Jr., untitled, 2022; spray paint on mirror; 31 x 36 in. Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Robichaux, NY.
- 2 Otis Houston Jr.: *My Name is My Word* installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2022. Otis Houston Jr., untitled, 2022; spray paint on mirror; 30 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Robichaux, NY.



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Otis Houston Jr.: My Name is My Word is part of the Arts Center's Ways of Being theme. The featured visual and performing artists recontextualize our past, reorient our present, and project new, viable futures. Collectively, they ask, "What if?"



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