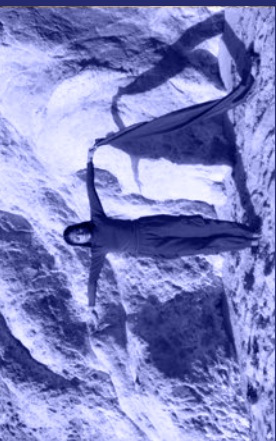


Above, Below,
Within:

Ciara K. Walters

Exhibition opens March 26, 2026



from *Blue Thoughts*
(A Throat Chakra
Exercise), 2020

Black Performance Art as Cultural Preservation & Self Reconnection

by Phoenix S. Brown, Curator, Bronzeville Center for the Arts

Performance art is not a fleeting spectacle. It is a distinct artistic discipline that emerged in the early twentieth century and gained cultural significance for its controversial break from traditional art-object making. Though not widely recognized outside the Great Lakes region, Milwaukee has a history of Black performance practices that braid historical embodiments with community-centered storytelling, in line with the history of African Americans engaging with performance art for more than six decades.¹

One prominent figure within the Milwaukee art historical canon is Gerald Duane Coleman.

In the 1970s, Coleman was a member of The Freewheelers, an inner-city artists' association, working across painting, printmaking, writing, and performance. He developed a live practice rooted in historical personas, most notably Nate Love (June 14, 1854 - February 11, 1921), the famed Black cowboy known as "Deadwood Dick."² Coleman's archival papers, housed at the Milwaukee Public Library, include scripts and photographs from his Nate Love performance pieces, documenting a method that combined costume, monologue, and reenactment to channel an overlooked Black Western legacy into Milwaukee's art spaces. Love's 1907 autobiography provided the primary record of his romanticized adventures and the "Deadwood Dick" moniker that later artists and writers, Coleman included, reanimated through interpretive performance.³

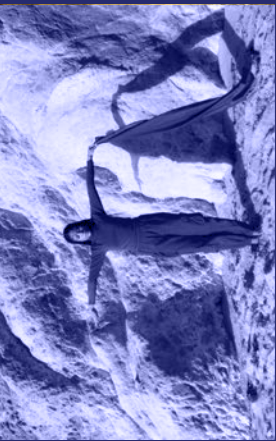
Like Coleman, Shahanna McKinney-Baldon turns to historical figures as a method of cultural restoration and critique. A Milwaukee-born singer, educator, and artist based in Madison, Wisconsin, McKinney-Baldon is both performer and cultural historian, committed to restoring the legacy of Gladys Mae Sellers, professionally known as Madame Goldye Steiner, widely recognized as the first known African American woman to sing khazones (Ashkenazi Jewish liturgical music) publicly in the United States. Through research, writing, and staged reenactments of Steiner's musical oeuvre, McKinney-Baldon has helped bring renewed public attention to Steiner's Milwaukee roots and New York career in the Yiddish theater. She has also stewarded a community effort to mark Steiner's previously unmarked Milwaukee grave, culminating in a 2024 dedication and public program at Bronzeville Center for the Arts during Bronzeville Week.⁴ McKinney-Baldon's work demonstrates how performance can function as cultural stewardship, a mode of scholarship, repair, and re-voicing that links present audiences to histories long excluded from canonical narratives.

Understanding Coleman and McKinney-Baldon's practices also requires situating them within the larger evolution of performance art as a medium. From its origins, performance offers artists direct access to their audience by embodying conceptual thought while reducing degrees of separation created by physical art objects, such as a painting or a sculpture; ideas can be witnessed live or through photography, film, writing, and audio documentation. In Italy, the Futurists announced the new artistic discipline in 1909 with artist F.T. Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism*, advocating speed, noise, confrontation, and the deconstruction of academic traditions in the wake of modern technological innovation; their sharp text, voice, gesture, and public jeering laid groundwork for performance art as we know it today. Art historian RoseLee Goldberg describes the approach of performance as relying on "live gestures... used as a weapon against the conventions of established art," emphasizing how performance has continued to push up against institutional and disciplinary boundaries.⁵ The practice has carved out a unique home within conceptual art and continues to question the materiality of art objects, even as it has been marginalized in mainstream art-historical narratives before the 1980s. The avant-gardes, or boundary-pushing art movements of the twentieth century, including Futurism, Dada, Constructivism, and Surrealism, were foundational to the evolution of the medium and practice, embracing performance as a site of experimentation.

Above, Below, Within:

Exhibition opens March 26, 2026

Ciara K. Walters



from *Blue Thoughts*
(A Throat Chakra
Exercise), 2020

(Continued from previous.)

Fluxus artists extended many of these avant-garde experiments into the mid-20th century, focusing on the bridge between music and visual art. One of the earliest examples of African American performance art emerged in Germany in 1960 during the Fluxus movement. Artist and double-bassist Benjamin Patterson, one of the founders of Fluxus, wrote his first performance composition, *Paper Piece*, which instructed five musicians to “shake, break, tear, crumple, rumple, bumble, rub, scrub, twist, poof, and pop” sheets of paper.⁶ Patterson sought a way to write music that was accessible to anyone who wanted to perform a musical composition, resisting the exclusiveness of traditional musical notation; all they needed was a piece of paper.

Contemporary artists continue to expand this lineage, including Ciarra K. Walters. Intuitive and improvisational, her works featured in her solo exhibition, *Above, Below, Within: Ciarra K. Walters* at Bronzeville Center for the Arts, often rise directly from the environments she inhabits. She treats the body as both medium and sensor, responding to weather, memory, interruption, and terrain. Walters frequently uses color-coded uniforms associated with the seven-Chakra framework. While the study of Chakras originates in South Asian traditions, the now-standard seven-color vocabulary is understood as a modern, Western synthesis shaped by Theosophy and New Age scholarship in the 1970s, a context Walters acknowledges and responds to within her work.⁷ The Artist’s performances operate as living sculptures, exploring grief, resilience, and transformation; they dissolve boundaries between inner experience and external landscape. Though geographically based near Baltimore, the artist speaks to the same values that define Milwaukee’s history of Black performance: a commitment to ritual, honoring ancestors, and weaving personal memory with cultural history. She participates in a broader Black performance vocabulary that Milwaukee is inherently woven within.

Together, Walters, Coleman, Patterson, and McKinney-Baldon utilize performance as a dynamic and resistive form, one that refuses fixed definition. Whether through spiritual attunement, historical embodiment, or community reconnection, each artist uses performance to challenge tradition, layer disciplines, and expand the ways stories are told. In their hands, performance becomes not just a medium, but a living conduit for memory, identity, and imagination, a reminder that art does not need to remain static to endure.

Annotated Bibliography

[1] *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*. Exhibition catalogue (2013). Broader scholarship contextualizing Black performance/conceptual practices and their art-historical reception.

[2] Milwaukee Public Library. Milwaukee Black Arts Movement Collection. “Gerald Duane Coleman” materials, including scripts and photographs. - “Gerald Duane Coleman – Nate Love Script.” <https://content.mpl.org/digital/collection/MkeBAM/id/62> - “Gerald Duane Coleman – Photographs.” <https://content.mpl.org/digital/collection/MkeBAM/id/45/rec/1> - “Gerald Duane Coleman – Freewheelers Material.” <https://content.mpl.org/digital/collection/MkeBAM/id/109/rec/2>

[3] Find A Grave. “Nathan Love.” Biographical entry for Nate (Nat) Love (1854-1921), associated with “Deadwood Dick.” <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/86810172/nathan-love>.

[4] OnMilwaukee. “Milwaukee woman was first Black khazones in the U.S.” Profile of Gladys Mae Sellers (Madame Goldye Steiner), including Milwaukee roots, public performances, and 2024 grave-marking initiative. <https://onmilwaukee.com/articles/goldye-steiner-gladys-sellers>.

[5] Goldberg, RoseLee. “Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present.” New, expanded edition. London: Thames & Hudson, 2001.

[6] MoMA. “Benjamin Patterson.” Biography and works, including *Paper Piece* (1960). <https://www.moma.org/artists/4520-benjamin-patterson>.

[7] Leland, Kurt. “The Rainbow Body: How the Western Chakra System Came to Be.” *Quest Magazine* 105, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 25-29.