

DREAMSONG

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AWAKENING TA-COUMBA T. AIKEN

May 13 – June 25, 2022

*Where human eyes have never seen,
where human beings have never been,
I build a world of abstract dreams,
and I wait for you.*

- Sun Ra

Dreamsong is pleased to present *Awakening*, a solo exhibition of recent paintings and works on paper by Ta-coumba T. Aiken. Named a 2022 Guggenheim Fellow, Aiken's oeuvre encompasses hundreds of public murals and sculptures in the Twin Cities alongside a dedicated studio practice long overdue for serious critical attention. Born in 1952, Aiken is fond of reminding interlocutors that his first art exhibition was held at six-years-old in the basement of his family's home in Evanston, Illinois.

Through a studio practice rooted in abstraction, with particular affinities to the work of Norman Lewis and Romare Bearden, and alongside a renowned public art practice ignited through John T. Biggers' mentorship, Aiken has

spent decades channeling the spirits of his ancestors through form and color. In *Awakening*, a symphonic complexity emerges across paintings built through layers of loose, swirling gestures and tondos blasted with explosive shards of color.

While Aiken does not rely on direct references or specific source material, his imagery comes through a deep engagement with Black history and culture. The spirits of his ancestors bleed through feverish marks, rhyming and twisting in chromatic choreographies. "I don't sample anything unless I'm doing illustration. But I'm sampling what I've seen throughout the years and maybe what I've seen in a 1940 photograph of Black people standing at church or a slave photograph. I might see

other people that might have been on the field that were in that photograph." A vessel for the collective memory of his community, Aiken begins each painting with intuitive freeform underpaintings that the artist terms Spirit Writing. Upon these serpentine gestures, the artist builds energy with rhythmic motifs. Artist Seitu Jones writes that "watching him work is like watching a monk inscribe sacred text as a form of meditation and prayer."

In the 1970s, inspired by the Black Arts Movement, Aiken learned African drumming, and he is also a dancer and violinist. Drawing on this musical training, he roots his work in a compositional form of call and response, where figures, lines, shapes, and colors vibrate across abstract fields, embodying multiplicity as they echo through infinite permutations. Motifs are drawn from a visual lexicon that Aiken has developed over decades of practice. The painting *Ripple Effect* is titled after one such motif, described by the artist as "the ripple effect of the human spirit, not the drop of a rock in the water." In it, a sinuous form repeats and expands, weaving in and out of the work's swirling ground.

At times, figures pierce through Aiken's rhizomatic compositions. *Awakening*, the eponymous painting from which the exhibition takes its title, is one such portrait. In this monumental work, a shimmering visage emerges from an abstract field of radiating light. Eyes multiply and vibrate, and the figure refuses to be fixed in either time or space. In other works, eyes, brows, mouths and hands rise and recede, dancing in and out of the viewer's field of vision. Even when his paintings tend towards representation, Aiken never abandons the ambiguity of abstraction. His forms and figures are always opening themselves up, unfolding into multiple dimensions that seem to contain the past, present, and future. As Aiken himself says: "[my] paintings are recordings of a time traveler's diary."

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Through his tireless work as an artist, activist, and educator, Ta-coumba has made an immeasurable contribution to the civic and artistic life of the Twin Cities. Aiken's artworks can be found across Minneapolis and St. Paul in the Walker Art Center's Sculpture Garden, at the Hennepin Theatre Trust, at the Walker West Music Academy and at the Gillette Children's Hospital, among many other sites.

Aiken attended the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and is the recipient of numerous awards including a 2022 Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in Fine Arts, a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant, a Gottlieb Fellowship and a Bush Visual Arts fellowship and his work is included in numerous public art collections including the Walker Art Center, The McKnight Foundation, Minneapolis Central Library, Augsburg University, the Bush Foundation and the Saint Paul Foundation. Aiken has also served on numerous boards including the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, City of Minneapolis Arts Commission, African American Cultural Arts Center, Forecast Public Arts, Saint Paul Art Collective, Springboard for the Arts, and he has been a public arts advisor to the cities of St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Bloomington, Minnesota, and Marin City, California.

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Ta-coumba T. Aiken
Awakening, 2019
Acrylic on canvas
45 x 68 inches



Ta-coumba T. Aiken
Ripple Effect, 2021
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 36 inches