

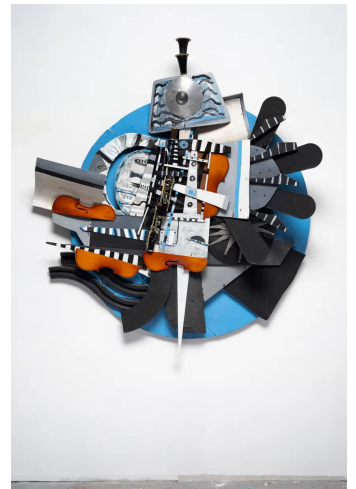
ARTSEEN | SEPTEMBER 2026

Reginald Madison: *New Slant Old Story and Caravan*

By Sara Farrell Okamura

Reginald Madison, known to most in his widespread community as Reggie, passed away on May 12, 2026, at the age of eighty-five. Reggie was an anomaly. As an artist, he adamantly refused to be categorized. He painted and drew figurative images as well as constructed complex abstract and representational assemblages from salvaged materials. He was inspired by Jacob Lawrence, Fernand Léger, and Stuart Davis. He was an artist whose independent study and practice of art could rival any noted artist, critic, curator, or academic. Born in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood in 1941, Reggie became entranced with visual art upon finding an abandoned box of paints. Not having the financial freedom to study at art school, he relied on local artists to instruct him in the technical aspects of painting in addition to frequently visiting the Art Institute of Chicago.

He was spellbound by improvisational jazz and the musicians who practiced it, and was able to inculcate its methodology in his practice. As a young man, he worked at US Steel South Works, signing up for additional grueling shifts, which allowed him to save enough money to travel with his wife and two young children, where he visited museums in Paris, Madrid, and Munich, only to discover that the most exciting art was being created back home. As part of the Black Arts Movement (1965–75), he had his first professional exhibition in 1968 as part of Art & Soul. He received third prize in a competition from a jury composed of the artist Richard Hunt and the founding director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Jan van der Marck. This gave him the confidence and determination to pursue a career as a working artist in New York City, where from 1975–2009 he was represented by the prestigious Phyllis Kind Gallery in SoHo. He then moved to Western Massachusetts and



REGINALD MADISON, *BLUE RONDO*, 2022. OIL ON SALVAGED VIOLIN PARTS, CLARINET PARTS, SALVAGED WOOD, SALVAGED METAL, SALVAGED FAN GUARD, CANVAS, WIRE, HARDWARE, 64 × 58 INCHES. COURTESY HUDSON HALL. PHOTO: LUCA PEARL KHOSROVA.

finally settled in Hudson, NY. Fortunately for the arts community, as well as Madison, he signed on to SEPTEMBER Gallery in 2021. Since that time, Founder/Director Kristen Dodge has curated three exhibits that demonstrate Reggie Madison's breadth and visual intelligence. Two distinctively different shows recently opened, both curated by Dodge, with input from Madison prior to his passing. *New Slant Old Story*, at SEPTEMBER in Kinderhook, graphically revisits his experience of attending Catholic School on Chicago's South Side in the mid-twentieth century. The other, *Caravan*, at Hudson Hall in Hudson, is a joyous homage to improvisational jazz.

In *New Slant Old Story*, expressionistic images elicit the abuse, lack of understanding, and trauma endured by students at the hands of predominantly white clergy members, but Madison's boundless sense of humor comes through in many of these works, created over a span of forty-six years. *The Dance Lesson* (1980) and *Foul Fish* (1990) are two examples of Madison's ability to see the dark humor in challenging situations.

Three recycled wooden slabs are the platform for *The Dance Lesson*, which feels like a rotting altarpiece. A devil conducts or choreographs a musical based on nuns descending into hell, some dancing wildly, making love, grimacing, or falling down, rosaries flying about. In addition to the nuns, the other figures seem to be having a great time playing the piano, dancing, and joyfully seducing the sisters into a life they have sadly missed. Madison's palette tends toward muted colors and earth tones, and the bottom panel of this work details the flames of hell in alizarin with burnt umber outlined in black. Each panel ascending from the flames brings to mind an abridged version of Dante's *Inferno*, except Madison's creatures are more frolicsome. In the middle section of the gallery, several fish paintings portray Madison's repulsion for the Catholic tradition of eating fish on Fridays. *Foul Fish* is particularly repugnant but also hilarious. A pile of several putrid-colored fish flopped on top of each other is painted in a variety of greens and ochre hues that clearly communicate a tangible sense of revolting slime.



INSTALLATION VIEW: REGINALD MADISON: CARAVAN, HUDSON HALL, HUDSON, NY, 2026. COURTESY HUDSON HALL GALLERY. PHOTO: LUCA PEARL KHOSROVA.

The final space at the end of the gallery is gut-wrenching. *New Slant Old Story* (1992) is not only the title of the painting, it also conveys the connecting foundation for all the work in the exhibit. Centered on the wall, it is a large oil painting, 76 by 55 inches, with its composition packed. The large head of a young boy dressed in a button-down shirt and tie is prominent; his wide open eyes express trepidation as he looks to his right. A naked man, his mouth wide open in front of a microphone, in a ghoulish manner, places a hand on the boy's shoulder. A nun is to the left of the boy, her eyes looking in his direction. She wears lipstick, and although dressed in a traditional nun's habit, her hair is visible. The figures feel so confined as if they are going to break the stretcher bars that held the canvas.

Caravan, on the other hand, is a blissful explosion of sculptural euphoria for Madison's first love, improvisational jazz. Composed of sculptural wall reliefs and two series of abstract works on paper, including the 1990s suite "In a Silent Way" (a reference to Miles Davis's 1969 studio album) and a never-before-exhibited 1986 painting, Caravan, featuring a live ensemble, the exhibition shows how he was an aficionado his whole life, showing great love and admiration for Hyde Park musicians, who introduced him to the genre and organized jazz events, while paying homage through his visual work to giants of the field. He was able to take the innovative methods used by the likes of John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Ornette Coleman and apply them to his visual arts practice.

The exhibition graces two spaces in Hudson Hall: a space at the gallery's entrance and a large exhibition space with a baby grand resident piano. Many of the drawings and paintings in *Caravan* utilize strategies akin to music. Lines in abstract drawings in oil pastel radiate from an off-center curl, bringing to mind a contrapuntal canon or round. Picasso-like drawings of instruments share the wall as do abstracted guitars and double basses constructed from recycled materials. Entering the exhibition space is especially mesmerizing. Several sculptural paintings made from materials foraged from closed factories and abandoned detritus are featured. Gone are many of the muted colors of past work. One piece, directly in front of you when you enter the room, is *Blue Rondo* (2022). Made by integrating madder red violin remnants, black and silver discarded clarinet keys, springs, and a flattened ligature, a salvaged fan guard, and wood and metal, then painted in keyboard start black and white stripes, held together with a startling blue and modest gray, this piece exemplifies intuitive acumen fueled by unconscious experience and knowledge. This is just one example of the several pieces that move with their own improvisation and inventiveness that is entirely unique to Reggie Madison.