

INDEPENDENT

SELF-TAUGHT STORYTELLERS

by Paul Laster
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An American painter and sculptor who emerged from the Black Arts Movement in Chicago of the 1960s and '70s, Reginald Madison (1941–2026) was highly regarded for his deeply intuitive, self-taught genius. Discovering art on his own as a teenager after finding a discarded box of paint supplies, he worked at U.S. Steel in Chicago, taking on extra shifts to support his young family and to fund a formative year of travel in Europe, where he visited museums and galleries in Paris, Munich, and Madrid.

Despite frequently being labeled as an outsider or untrained artist because of his lack of formal education, his deep understanding of art history and materials distinguishes him as a master of spontaneous expression. The artist himself rejected the term “outsider” as another form of marginalization. His first significant artistic breakthrough occurred in 1968 in Chicago, when his work was recognized in a public competition at an experimental art center; the judging panel included the legendary sculptor Richard Hunt and Jan van der Marck, the founding director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Madison’s art, created over a long career in Chicago, Western Massachusetts, and Hudson, New York, is characterized by an intuitive, improvisational style influenced by free jazz and textile traditions. His extensive body of work blurred boundaries between abstraction and figuration, producing richly textured, improvisational canvases characterized by a distinctive palette of vivid colors toned down into earthy, matte shades.



Reginald Madison, *Zenobia*, 1992, oil on canvas, 55 x 75 inches (139.7 x 190.5 cm). Photography by Pete Mauney. Courtesy of Uffner & Liu and SEPTEMBER

He painted directly on his studio walls and used brushes, rags, or his bare hands to apply paint to canvas and wood, while, as a sculptor, he created large-scale assemblages from found materials. Two abstractions in oil stick on paper, *VIII* (1987) and *XIII* (1989), reflect his interest in textiles, while his 1992 oil on canvas, *Zenobia*, seems to capture a communal scene of colorful customers at a lively jazz club. A fantastic late sculptural wall work dubbed *Ohmm* (2024) transforms salvaged wood scraps into a divine work of art featuring repeated crowned figures, star-studded wings, and a title that suggests a sacred sound or mantra.

Madison exhibited with the acclaimed Phyllis Kind Gallery from 1975 to 2009, when the gallery closed. He later became a cultural pillar in Hudson, where he curated local exhibitions and co-organized a jazz music festival. An artist who created each work of art like an avant-garde jazz solo, he experienced a late-career renaissance. At Independent 20th Century, Uffner & Liu from New York partners with SEPTEMBER from Kinderhook to mount an exhibition of Madison's works created between 1987 and 2024.