

URHOBO + ABSTRACTION

Press Release

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On View: From May 12th, 2025

Public Hours: Monday – Thursday, 12:00 – 3:00 PM by appointment.

(New York, NY) – **Adam Lindemann**, founder of Venus Over Manhattan, is pleased to announce **Urhobo + Abstraction**. Organized in collaboration with **Dr. Bernard de Grunne**, a distinguished scholar and longtime friend of Lindemann's, the show brings together **five monumental Urhobo sculptures** from southern Nigeria with abstract works by celebrated African and African American artists of the modern era. By placing traditional West African carvings alongside contemporary abstraction, the exhibition examines shared themes of spiritual potency, material innovation, and diasporic continuity. Featured artists include **El Anatsui, Ed Clark, Melvin Edwards, Sam Gilliam, Norman Lewis, Richard Mayhew, Merton D. Simpson, Alma Thomas, and Jack Whitten**. Timed to coincide with the reopening of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's newly renovated Michael C. Rockefeller Wing—the museum's galleries dedicated to the art of sub-Saharan Africa, the ancient Americas, and Oceania—*Urhobo + Abstraction* will be on view from May 12th, 2025.

At the heart of the exhibition is a **rare ensemble of five over-life-size Urhobo figures**, carved between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries by master artists from the western Niger Delta. Once venerated within clan shrines, these towering wooden sculptures depict ancestral warriors and community founders whose spiritual authority was honored during annual ceremonies. Their articulated features, intricate surface details, and commanding scale convey a potent force, reflecting both regional aesthetic conventions and the expansive cosmology of the Urhobo people. This marks the first time such a grouping has been presented together in the United States, with several works on loan from major private collections.

A focal highlight of the exhibition is **Confrontation (1974)** by **Merton D. Simpson**, whose dual legacy as an artist and a pioneering dealer of African art helped shape the show's overall ethos. Simpson was a member of Spiral, a New York-based collective of African American artists who convened on the eve of the 1963 March on Washington to examine their role in the civil rights movement and the evolving landscape of American culture. Their discussions addressed the challenges facing Black artists amid stark inequality, which influenced Simpson's synthesis of African artistic traditions and modern abstraction. As Lindemann notes, the exhibition pays tribute to this vision, conceived "in part as an homage to Mert's lifelong dedication to bridging the gap between African sculpture and abstract painting." Set in dialogue with these historic carvings, the exhibition's modern and contemporary abstract works reflect a dynamic engagement with African heritage, diasporic histories, and personal modes of expression. **El Anatsui's** shimmering tapestry, made from re-purposed

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aluminum packaging, parallels the ritual and material transformation central to shrine artistry. **Ed Clark's** sweeping brushstrokes and radiant colors evoke the dramatic silhouettes and bold contours of the carved figures, while **Melvin Edwards'** welded steel assemblages pay homage to African American history and notions of struggle and resilience. **Sam Gilliam** and **Alma Thomas** offer luminous explorations of color and form that suggest transcendent possibilities akin to spiritual invocation, and **Norman Lewis'** atmospheric painting channel ancestral worship through calligraphic, rhythmic gestures. **Richard Mayhew's** visionary "mindscape"—the last large-scale painting he completed before his death in 2024—merges landscape and memory, reflecting the unseen energies at the heart of shrine traditions.

Complementing the Urhobo works are **five impressive Igbo figures**, characterized by rich patinas, bold scarification patterns, and human-scale proportions. Traditionally displayed in groups of up to thirty within Igbo shrine structures, these sculptures illustrate a distinctive approach to honoring ancestral spirits. Together, the Urhobo and Igbo carvings underscore the region's rich stylistic diversity, highlighting multiple approaches to form and scale that emerged from distinct local traditions.

Urhobo + Abstraction resists the conventional division between "traditional" and "modern," proposing instead a living continuum of cultural dialogue. By juxtaposing monumental Urhobo and Igbo sculptures—rarely viewed outside museum contexts—with modern abstract masterpieces, the exhibition demonstrates how historical, emotional, and formal motifs travel and shift across the African diaspora. Some artists draw explicit inspiration from African aesthetics, others identify parallels through shared spiritual and communal impulses, and still others question or deconstruct these connections. Inviting engagement not only with formal dialogues but also with historical narratives and lived experiences, *Urhobo + Abstraction* underscores the enduring vibrancy and relevance of both Urhobo and Igbo carving traditions—among the most accomplished and spiritually charged in Africa.

For additional information about the exhibition, please contact info@venusovermanhattan.com

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