

An abstract painting by Joseph Holston, featuring bold, geometric shapes in various shades of blue, purple, orange, and black. The composition is dynamic and layered, with overlapping forms that create a sense of depth and movement. The colors are vibrant and saturated, typical of Holston's style.

JOSEPH HOLSTON: CALL AND RESPONSE

ALPER INITIATIVE FOR WASHINGTON ART

Holston

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ALPER INITIATIVE FOR WASHINGTON ART

IN CONCERT: THE ART OF JOSEPH HOLSTON

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A man in a dapper black suit sits pensively with his saxophone draped across his lap. Newspaper clippings are patched across the background, with headlines that include "Business," "The Arts," and "Afro-America." In *Jazz* (fig. 1), elements of Joseph Holston's signature style begin to peek through, from the monumentality of a subject's form to the flat planes of color that comprise his suit and the painting's background. *Jazz* is an early example of Holston's work dedicated to music, a theme that the artist returns to regularly throughout his decades-long career. For Holston, this subject matter holds a special significance. Holston first began listening to jazz music at the age of ten when his cousin, Douglas Burton, brought jazz albums to his family's home.¹

Opposite, Fig. 1: Joseph Holston, *Jazz*, 1990. Screenprint, 35.375 x 25 in. Courtesy of the artist.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Holston, an artist who almost exclusively represents the depth and breadth of the Black American experience, would be drawn to a form of music whose roots are so intrinsically connected to Black culture. In the late 19th century, jazz emerged out of Black musical and storytelling traditions such as spirituals and blues, and moved away from the standard musical scale, an improvisational, multi-rhythmic form of music.² Just as jazz developed and transformed over time to include more experimental approaches to the form,³ Holston's depictions of the theme in his own practice, likewise, evolved. Considering his representations of jazz musicians provides a route to interpreting and understanding the development of his own practice.

In 1992, Holston created the small gouache, *Reminiscing* (fig. 2). Like *Jazz*, the work has more discernible facial features, while reflecting a move towards a more geometric aesthetic as it relates to the forms of his figures. Two men sit beside one another, one playing an upright bass, the other a guitar. The man

playing the bass wears a dapper suit, while the man next to him is dressed more casually in blue slacks. Notably, the background of the work takes on a more abstracted feel. While the background of *Jazz* appears to more closely resemble an interior scene, in *Reminiscing*, the background is made up of bold sheets of color, hanging between and behind the men playing music.

The curvilinear forms used in Holston's work only became more pronounced as the artist continued his practice. In an etching titled *Solo Performance* (fig.



Fig. 2: Joseph Holston, *Reminiscing*, 1992. Gouache on paper, 5.875 x 7 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 3: Joseph Holston, *Solo Performance*, 1992. Etching, 11 x 15 in. Courtesy of the artist.

3) made the same year as the gouache, Holston captures a male figure bent over a xylophone. The rounded solo figure is composed of a series of stacked semi-circles, his mounded hands holding mallets. In this work, we see Holston treading the line between abstraction and figuration, creating identifiable forms without tethering the subject to a specific identity. This absence adds to the universal quality of the figures Holston depicts.

As Holston's practice developed, he began to lean into abstraction, a shift most pronounced in the removal of the identifiable facial features of his subjects. Take *The Piano Player* (fig. 4) for example. Holston takes a



Fig. 4: Joseph Holston, *The Piano Player*, 2005. Mixed media on canvas, 30 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 5: Joseph Holston, *Livin' the Moment*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 42 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist.

bird's-eye-view to a figure bowed over his piano. The only identifiable forms are the piano keys the player sits in front of. The medium emphasizes the work's abstraction, with portions of the player's arm and the background rendered using a textured material.

Part of the power and impact of Holston's work lies in its distinctiveness. The artist's mature style includes a blending of abstraction and figuration, a figural solidity of shape, form, and the usage of a bold, primary color palette. It is through these later works that some of the Cubist impulses of Holston's work really shine through. The use of flat sheets of color on the canvas's surface emphasize the two-dimensionality of the work, as does the shift away from

traditional techniques of perspective.⁴ We see this in Holston's 2013 painting, *Livin' the Moment* (fig. 5). Three men play brass instruments in front of a warmly toned background with shapes patterned and assembled against one another. Trapezoids, semi-circles, rectangles, and ovals are assembled to create the figures' forms. Notably, in this work, rather than the figures having a discernible hairline or facial features, their faces are rendered using black ovals. This erasure of distinguishable facial features is, likewise, a signature of Holston's work. Rather than citing a specific brass band or pointing to a distinct figure in musical history, Holston allows the viewer to interpret who his ultimate subjects are.

Fig. 6: Joseph Holston, *Grand Finale*, 2013.
Oil on canvas, 42 x 50 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

Whether considering his works featuring a single subject or his work with more than one musician, there's a kinetic energy that reverberates throughout much of the Maryland-based artist's oeuvre. This sense of action is reflected in the technical and formal considerations of the artist in relation to music. While his early works, like *Jazz*, demonstrate the artist's talent for detail, and preview his later approach to shape, his later works reflect the work of an artist in full command of his own aesthetic and figural compulsions. In *Grand Finale* (fig. 6), Holston captures the moment just after a performance's end. A sextet stands together, receiving their final ovation. Six ovals nod towards the viewer as they take their final bow. Their bodies are made curvilinear forms intertwining yellow, orange, pink, and purple into and out of one another. Holston's work communicates a lively moment in time, rendered in simplified forms.

In one of his most recent works, *Tantalizing Keys* (fig. 7), Holston returns to the subject of his 2005 work, *The Piano Player*. While the earlier work leans more heavily towards abstraction, the later



work is more discernably figurative. The assemblage aspects of *The Piano Player* are replaced with a more pared down approach to form. While both works depict a player intently playing their instrument, the newer work notably removes the black and white keys from the image, reflecting Holston's confidence in his ability to communicate through abstraction. There's also a focusing of the artist's color palette, a continuation of the use of dynamic color to punctuate his musical imagery.

Throughout his career, Joseph Holston has consistently returned to music as a means of communicating his long held and deeply felt relationship with jazz. For Holston, musicians like John Coltrane, Ramsey Lewis, and Lionel Hampton inspired his own practice, and reflected a "positive energy" that he has skillfully and thoughtfully integrated into his art throughout time, a crescendo of the sonic and visual.⁵

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Email exchange with Sharon and Joseph Holston, June 20, 2024.
- ² Stephanie Hall, "The Painful Birth of Blues and Jazz," *Folklife Today*, Library of Congress Blogs, February 24, 2017, <https://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2017/02/birth-of-blues-and-jazz/>.
- ³ See the music of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Sun Ra.
- ⁴ Sabine Rewald, "Cubism," *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2004, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cube/hd_cube.htm.
- ⁵ Email exchange with Sharon and Joseph Holston, June 20, 2024.

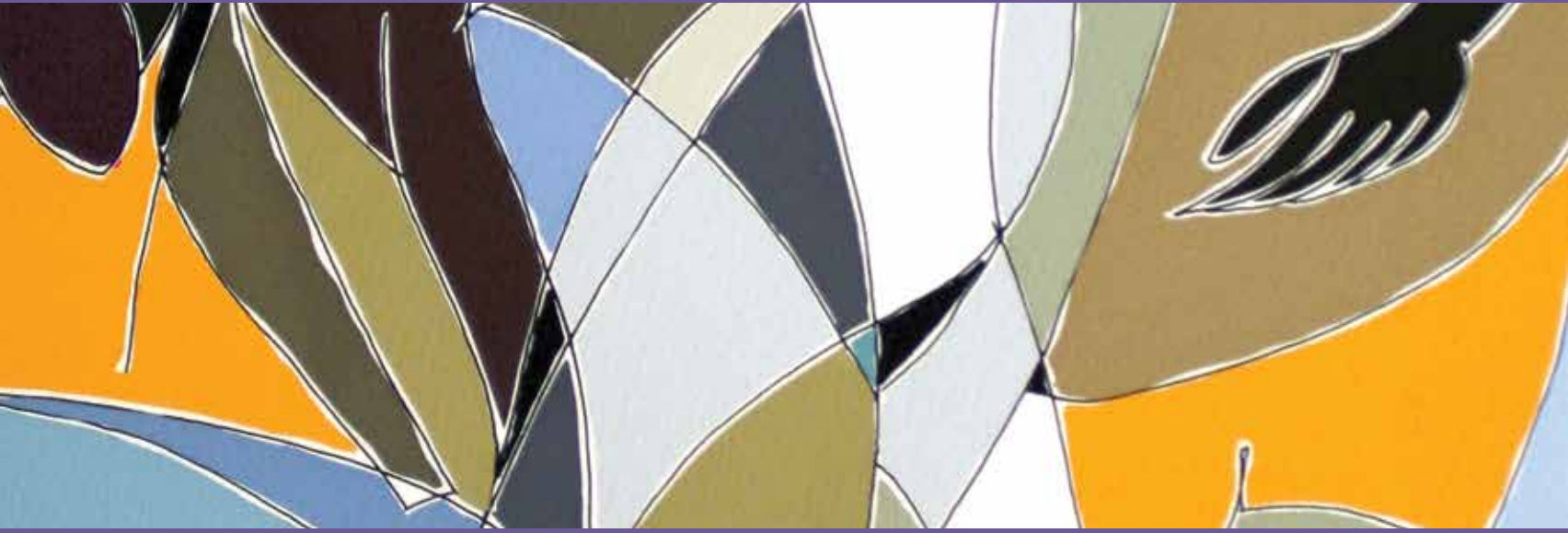
Fig. 7: Joseph Holston, *Tantalizing Keys*, 2024.
Oil on canvas, 38 x 38 in. Courtesy of the artist.





JOSEPH HOLSTON:

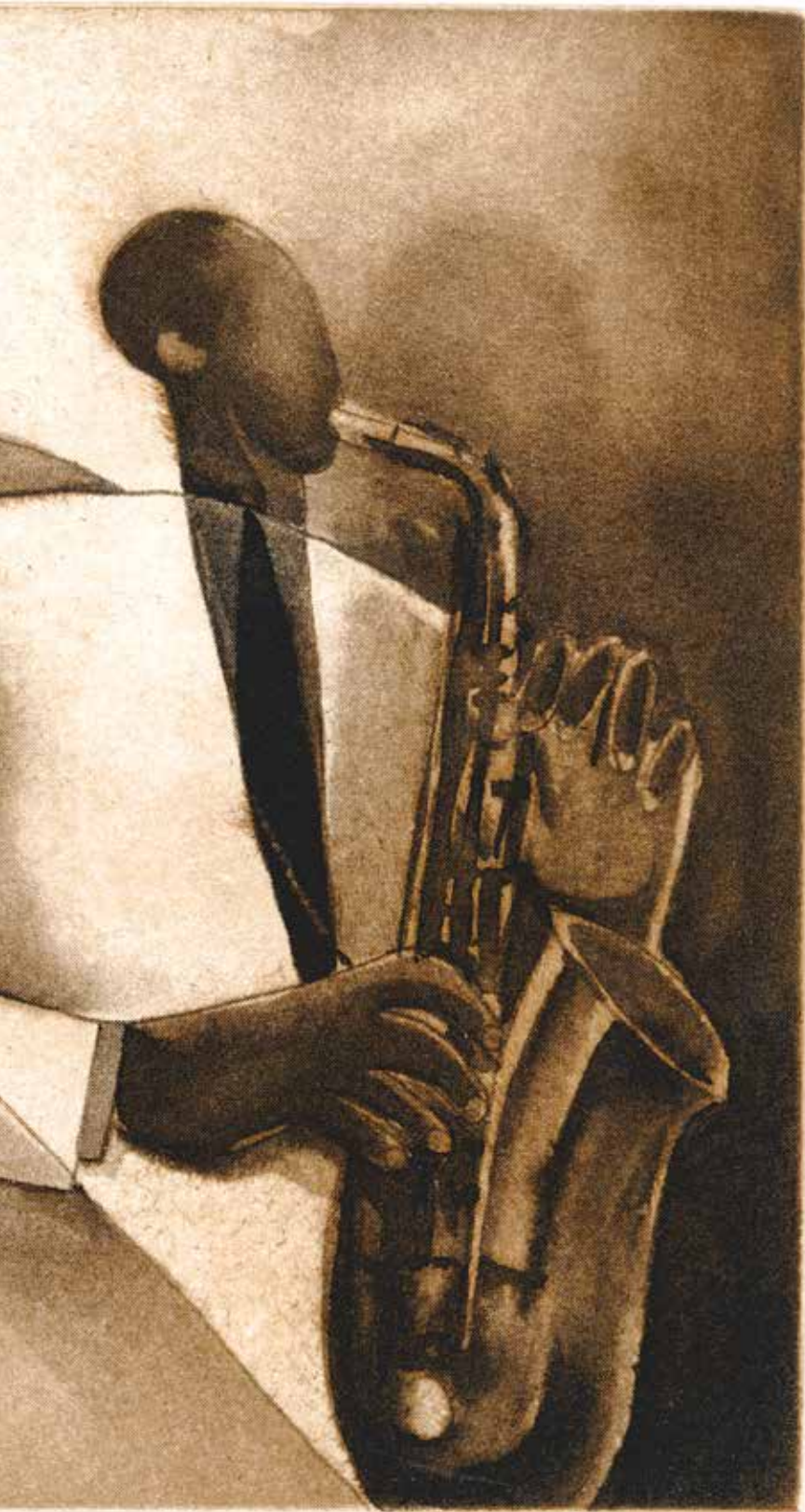




CALL AND RESPONSE







Joseph Holston, *Jazz at Takoma Station*, 1990.
Etching, 12 x 14.75 in. Courtesy of the artist.



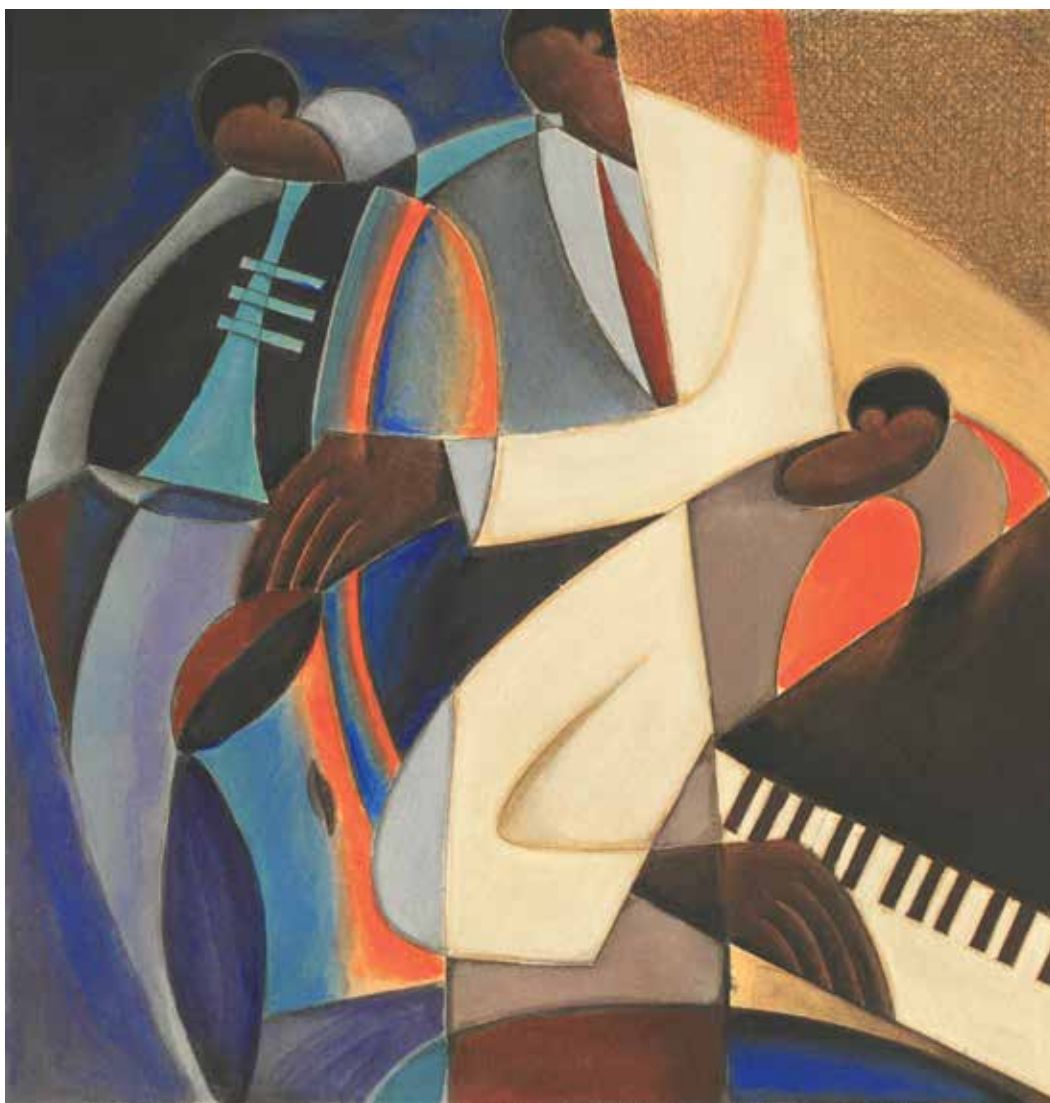
Joseph Holston, *Jazz*, 1990. Screenprint, 35.375 x 25 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *Ballerina*, 1991. Screenprint, 25.75 x 18.75 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *Two Dancers*, 1991. Screenprint, 26 x 18.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.



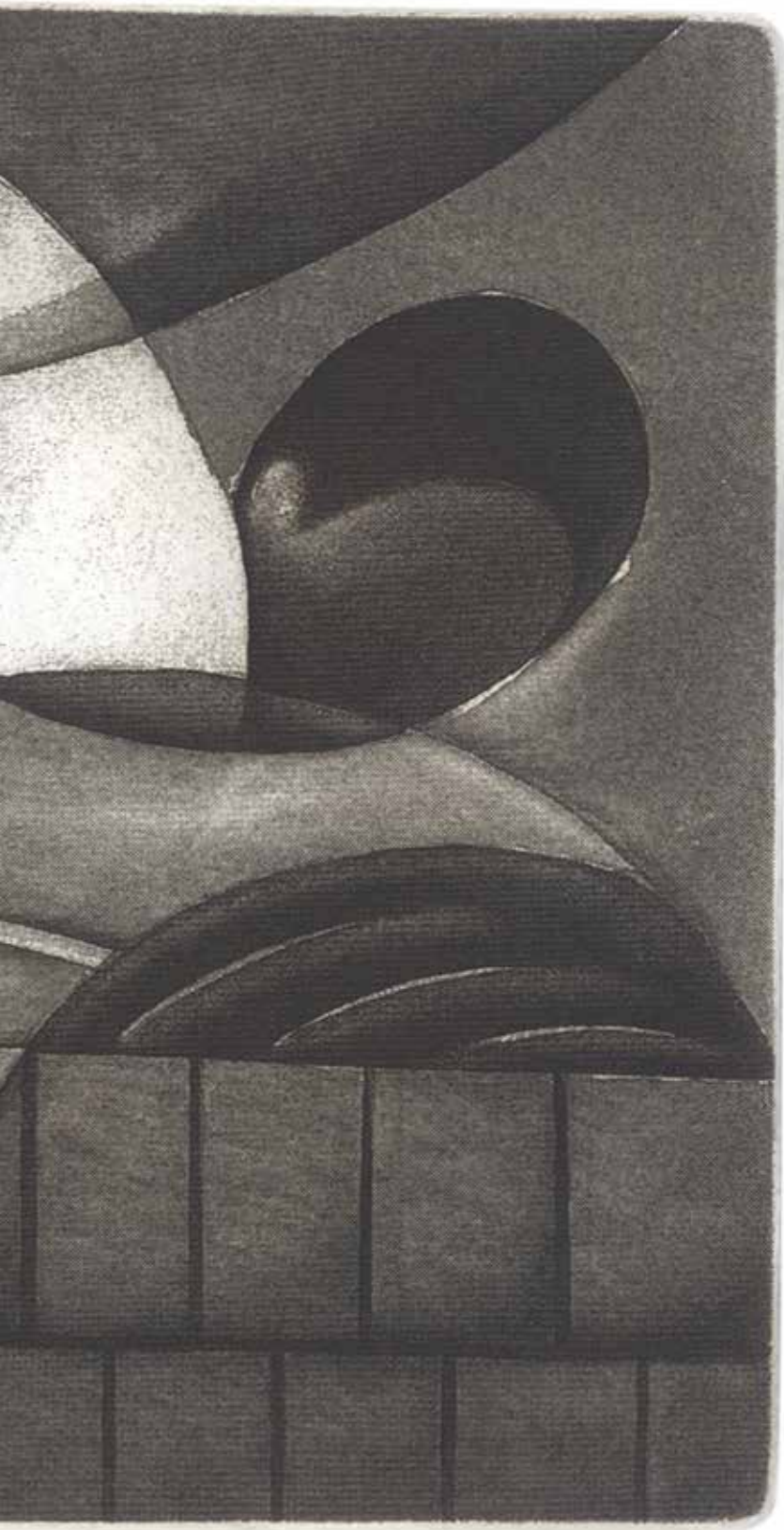
Joseph Holston, *Perfect Blend*, 1992. Hand-colored etching, 12 in x 14.75 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Joseph Holston, *Reminiscing*, 1992.
Gouache on paper, 5.875 x 7 in.
Courtesy of the artist.









Joseph Holston, *Solo Performance*, 1992.
Etching, 11 x 15 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *Jam Session*, 1993.
Screenprint, 20 x 28 in. (diptych).
Courtesy of the artist.







Joseph Holston, *Hypnotic Keys*, 1993.
Screenprint, 15 x 17.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *Rhythm Reunion*, 1995. Etching, 11 x 15.25 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *Rhythmic Blues*, 2000. Etching, 14.75 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *Street Corner Musician*, 2003. Hand-colored etching, 18 x 14.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *The Piano Player*, 2005. Mixed media on canvas, 30 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *Bottom Note*, 2007. Etching, 17.5 x 15 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *The Legend*, 2012. Oil on canvas, 40 x 32 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *Double Beat*, 2012. Oil on canvas, 44 x 38 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *Captive Tone*, 2012. Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *Smooth*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.



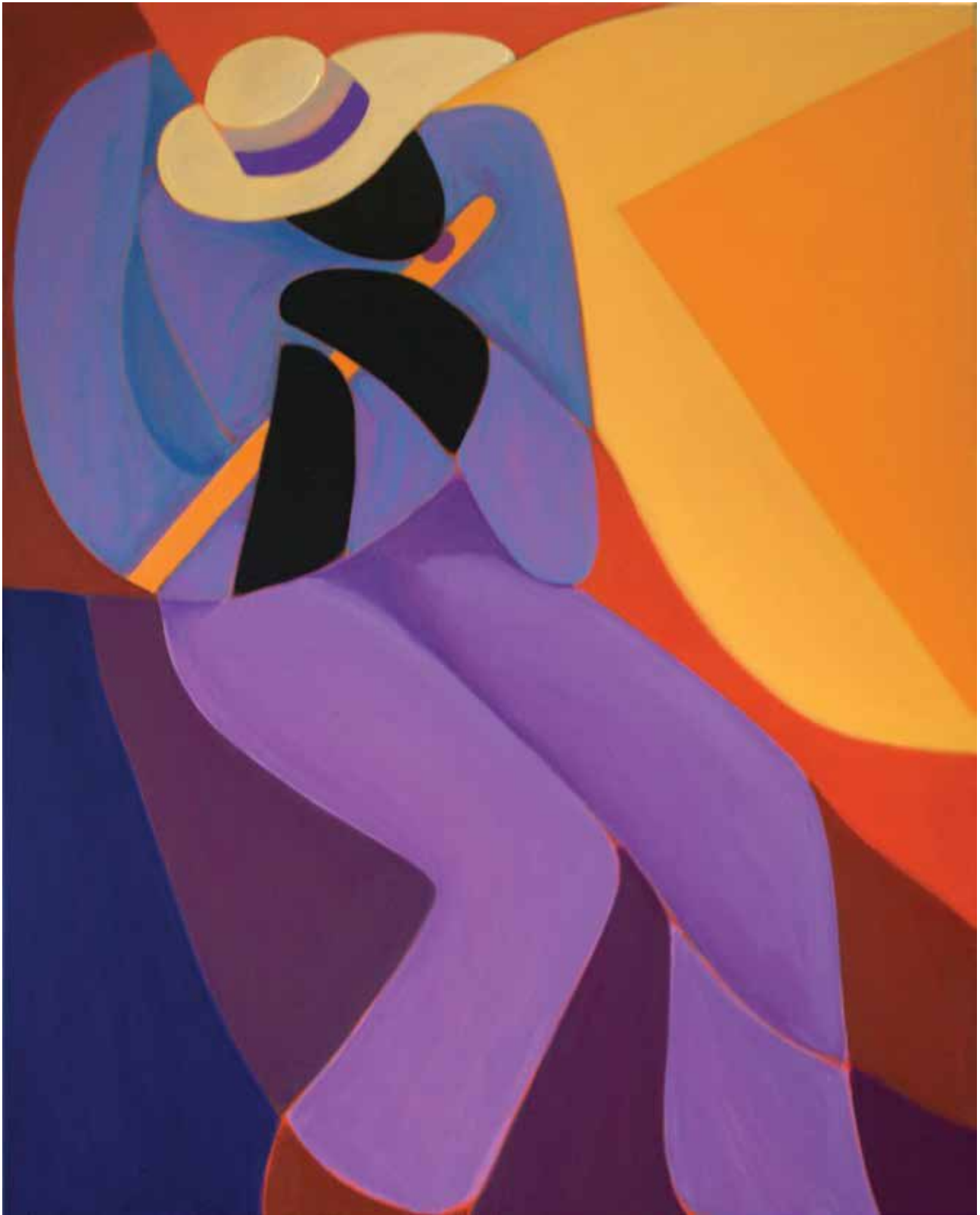
Joseph Holston, *Livin' the Moment*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 42 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *Grand Finale*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 42 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *Tantalizing Keys*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 38 x 38 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *Real Mellow*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 40 x 32 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Joseph Holston, *Goin' Low*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 40 x 32 in. Courtesy of the artist.



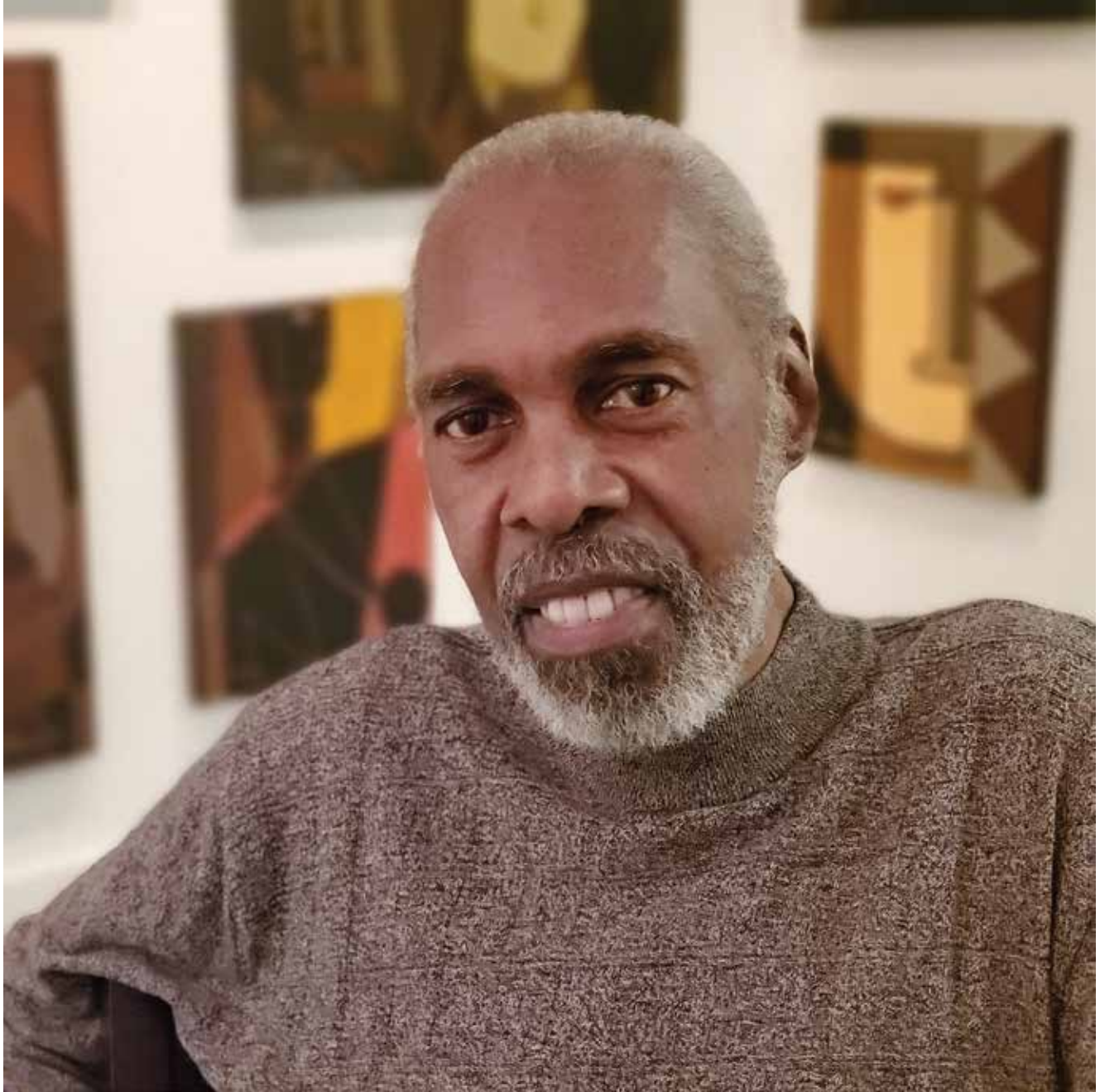
Joseph Holston, *A Perfect Moment*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 48 x 84 in. (triptych). Courtesy of the artist.



JOSEPH HOLSTON is a Maryland painter and printmaker, whose art celebrates black life, history and culture.

His work can be found in numerous public collections, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum; the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC; Baltimore Museum of Art; Library of Congress Fine Print Collection; Yale University Art Gallery; Butler Institute of American Art; the US Federal Reserve Fine Art Collection; Honolulu Art Museum; Georgia Museum of Art; Washington County Museum of Fine Arts; the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, and the collections of the David C. Driskell Center, as well as the University of Maryland Global Campus at the University of Maryland.

Holston's visual story of slavery and escape, *Color in Freedom: Journey along the Underground Railroad*, consisting of fifty paintings, etchings and drawings, has toured nationally and internationally, including an exhibition at the United Nations Office in Geneva, Switzerland. Holston's work is also included in the exhibition *All Stars: American Artists from The Phillips Collection*, recently on view at the Denver Art Museum. Works by Holston were also included in the 2021 exhibition *Seeing Differently: The Phillips Collects for a New Century*, which celebrated the centennial of The Phillips Collection, America's first museum of modern art.



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Front cover: Joseph Holston, *Smooth*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.
Back cover: Joseph Holston, *Captive Tone*, 2012. Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist.

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