



OGDEN MUSEUM
OF SOUTHERN ART

**Ogden Museum of Southern Art to Present Expansive Career Survey
of Artist William Christenberry in October**

**Featuring More Than 125 Works of Art,
Including Artist's Iconic Photographs and Lesser-Known Works Across Media**

**Ogden Museum to Open Concurrent Exhibition of Contemporary Works
By New Orleans-based Level Artist Collective**

New Orleans (September 10, 2019)—Artist William Christenberry, long hailed as a pioneer in establishing color photography as a fine art medium, will receive a wide-ranging career survey at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art this October. The exhibition will feature a selection of his iconic photographs of Hale County, Alabama alongside drawings, paintings, sculptures, assemblages, and installations, positioning his acclaimed photography practice within the context of his broader oeuvre. Titled *Memory Is a Strange Bell: The Art of William Christenberry*, the exhibition will also explore the importance of poetry to the development of Christenberry's vision and approach, highlighting the ways in which the artist's engagement with poetry enhanced his ability to infuse simple tableaux with meaning and emotion. The exhibition will be accompanied by scholarly texts by the exhibition curators, Bradley Sumrall, Curator of the Collection at the Ogden Museum, and Richard McCabe, Ogden Museum Curator of Photography, as well as an essay by renowned director, photographer, and cinematographer RaMell Ross, whose credits include the highly praised documentary, *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* and who will receive his own solo exhibition at the Ogden Museum in 2020. *Memory Is a Strange Bell* will be on view from October 5, 2019 through March 1, 2020.

"*Memory Is a Strange Bell* is an opportunity to rediscover the incredible range of William Christenberry's work, from the photographs that made him a critical figure in the course of art history to the dynamic, but lesser-known, paintings and sculptures that made him a fluid and forward-thinking artist. At the same time, the exhibition provides a platform through which to explore the physical and cultural environment of the American South, through an artist who engaged with it across many decades and viewed it through both the lens of personal experience and broader documentation," said William Pittman Andrews, Executive Director of the Ogden Museum. "As an institution dedicated to promoting broader understanding of the art of the region, it's an incredible opportunity to spark new artistic and social dialogues. We are excited to present this scholarly exhibition alongside the contemporary works of the New Orleans-based Level Artist Collective, who speak so eloquently to the vibrancy of today's creative production."

Born in Tuscaloosa in 1936, Christenberry maintained deep ties to west-central Alabama throughout his life, making the changing natural and man-made landscape of the region the



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primary source and inspiration for his work throughout his multi-decade career. Christenberry was particularly drawn to the rural environs of Hale County, where he spent summers with his grandparents as a child and made annual pilgrimages over the course of a half century after settling in Washington D.C. in 1968. Through his images of vernacular structures and markers, road and community signs, and open expanses, Christenberry captured the shifting culture and psychology of Hale and the surrounding area, returning often to the same subjects to examine the change that the passage of time had wrought. In this way, his work, across media, wove together his personal narrative with a shared history to address and engage with notions of place, memory, and time. Although a sense of poignancy pervades Christenberry's artistic output, he never romanticized his subject, taking up both symbols of unity like the gourd tree and those of evil and hatred, such as the hood of the Klu Klux Klan.

Through more than 125 works, *Memory Is a Strange Bell* traces the trajectory of Christenberry's career, from his early drawings and paintings to the expansion of his photography work through to his later assemblages and installations, making it one of the most comprehensive explorations of his practice to-date. Christenberry began his career in the 1950s, working predominantly as a painter and using a Brownie camera to photograph the sights that would later become his paintings. In 1960, Christenberry discovered James Agee and Walker Evans's book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which vividly documented the lives of impoverished sharecroppers in the American South. So inspired, Christenberry sought Evans out and the two became close friends. Evans proved a great influence on Christenberry's work, calling Christenberry's small-scale Brownie prints "perfect little poems" and encouraging him to pursue his color photography as an artform in its own right.

By the early 1970s, Christenberry had come to be considered a central figure in the development of color photography as a fine art medium. In his small-scale snapshots, Christenberry mixed the documentary-style approach that had initially drawn him to Evans with an acute sense of the emotional and psychological effects produced by subtle manipulations of light, color, and composition. In his essay for *Memory Is a Strange Bell*, Sumrall explores Christenberry's incredible ability to infuse his work with deeper meaning as an outgrowth of the artist's long-standing engagement with poetry, especially American free verse masters such as Emily Dickinson and William Carlos Williams. Indeed, the exhibition takes its name from a line in one of Dickinson's letters to her sister, which Christenberry is known to have quoted often. Sumrall discusses, how much like Williams, Christenberry is able to evoke brilliant sensations through an economy of space, encapsulating in his seemingly simple snapshots both his love and abhorrence of the place of his youth. In later decades, Christenberry expanded to larger-scale photographs, using the transition in scale to further explore the power of the photograph to elicit visceral response.

Although Christenberry's photographs garnered critical acclaim, he continued to work across media throughout his life, producing drawings, paintings, sculptures, assemblages, and



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installations. His works in other media often took up the same subjects as his photographs, and *Memory Is a Strange Bell* will provide audiences with the opportunity to experience Christenberry's focus on sites like the Palmist Building through the range of his artistic approaches. Among Christenberry's most powerful explorations across media dealt with his experience with the KKK. As a young man, he attended a Klan meeting, and the experience haunted him for the remainder of his life. "I think, I believe, I know that the hooded head form, and what it represents, what that organization represents, is the most terrifying and the most terrible thing in mankind's history anywhere and in any country. And it hurts terribly," he said. Symbols of the Klan and the damage they produced first appeared in Christenberry's work as a drawing from 1962, and then emerged in the mixed-media assemblages, *Hate I* and *Hate II* (1963). Throughout his career, they would also appear in the large-scale installation, the *Klan Tableau* (original 1979), the *Dream Building* prints and sculptures, *K-House* drawings, and in ongoing photographic series. For Christenberry, these works served as critical reminders of a heinous institution and encapsulated his personal struggle to reconcile the land he loved with its dark history. *Memory Is a Strange Bell* will include highlights from this overall body of work.

The exhibition offers an expansive view of Christenberry's practice, exploring his profound impact on photography, the ideas that drove his vision, and the depth and diversity of his overarching creative production. At the same time, the exhibition engages with the complicated nature and history of Alabama and the South through the eyes of an artist, who had a deep and complex relationship with it. This latter exploration is further supported by Ross's essay for the exhibition, which offers a distinct and personal perspective on Christenberry's work and the region he took as his inspiration, as well as through the presentation of the concurrent exhibition of works by the New Orleans-based Level Artist Collective. Comprised of artists Ana Hernandez, Horton Humble, Rontherin Ratliff, John Isiah Walton and Carl Joe Williams, the Collective was established to enhance the visual landscape of the American South through the perspectives of five artists of color with deep ties to the city of New Orleans. At the Ogden Museum, each of the Collective's members will have a dedicated gallery to present new and recent works, offering a contemporary vision of the region and an artistic engagement influenced by it. More details on this presentation will be released in the coming weeks.

About the Ogden Museum

Located in the vibrant Warehouse Arts District of downtown New Orleans, Louisiana since 1999, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art welcomes 85,000 visitors annually to experience and learn about the artists and art movements of the American South. It is home to a collection of more than four thousand works, making it the largest and most comprehensive repository dedicated to Southern art in the nation, with particular strength in the genres of Self-Taught art, Regionalism, photography, and contemporary art. The Museum is further recognized for its original exhibitions, public events and educational programs, which examine the development of visual art alongside Southern traditions of music, literature and local craft. Among its recent exhibitions are *Piercing the Inner Wall: The Art of Dusti Bongé* (2019), *New Southern Photography* (2018-



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2019), *The Whole Drum Will Sound: Women in Southern Abstraction* (2018), and *Solidary & Solitary: The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection*, presented by The Helis Foundation (2017-2018).

The Ogden Museum is open daily from 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. with extended hours on Thursdays from 6 – 8 p.m. for Ogden After Hours. Admission is free to Museum Members and \$13.50 for adults, \$11 for seniors 65 and older, \$6.75 for children ages 5-17 and free for children under 5.

The Museum is located at 925 Camp Street, New Orleans Louisiana 70130. For more information visit ogdenmuseum.org or call 504.539.9650.

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