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Art Review: Sarah Sze, McArthur Binion and Dana Schutz [Excerpt]

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McArthur Binion (b. 1946) has been rigorously going at mostly muted, abstract paintings for over 40 years. Although Mr. Binion spent the early part of his career in New York, he's thought of primarily as a Chicago artist. (Since 1992, he's been a professor of art there at Columbia College.) Given his work's visual affinity with the likes of Dorothea Rockburne, Robert Mangold, Robert Ryman and Jasper Johns's "The Dutch Wives" paintings—he isn't nearly as well known in New York as he should be.

In this exhibition, however, Mr. Binion's paintings aren't fully abstract. More accurately, they're more than abstract. Underneath, acting as a kind of template for gridded marks in black, white and occasionally brightly colored oil-paint-stick, are pages from Mr. Binion's copious old address books and negatives of his birth certificate. Besides lending these paintings a delicious painterly texture, the words overtly introduce narration. The infusion of storytelling implies in turn that Mr. Binion, an African-American artist who was born in Mississippi and has lived in Detroit, might be saying something about the black experience with American authority and bureaucracy.

Whatever one perceives more strongly—Mr. Binion's formalist gifts or his personal history—his paintings reward the viewer in different ways depending on whether one is up close or farther away. For their beauty and meaning to be fully appreciated, they must—repeat, must—be seen in the flesh.

