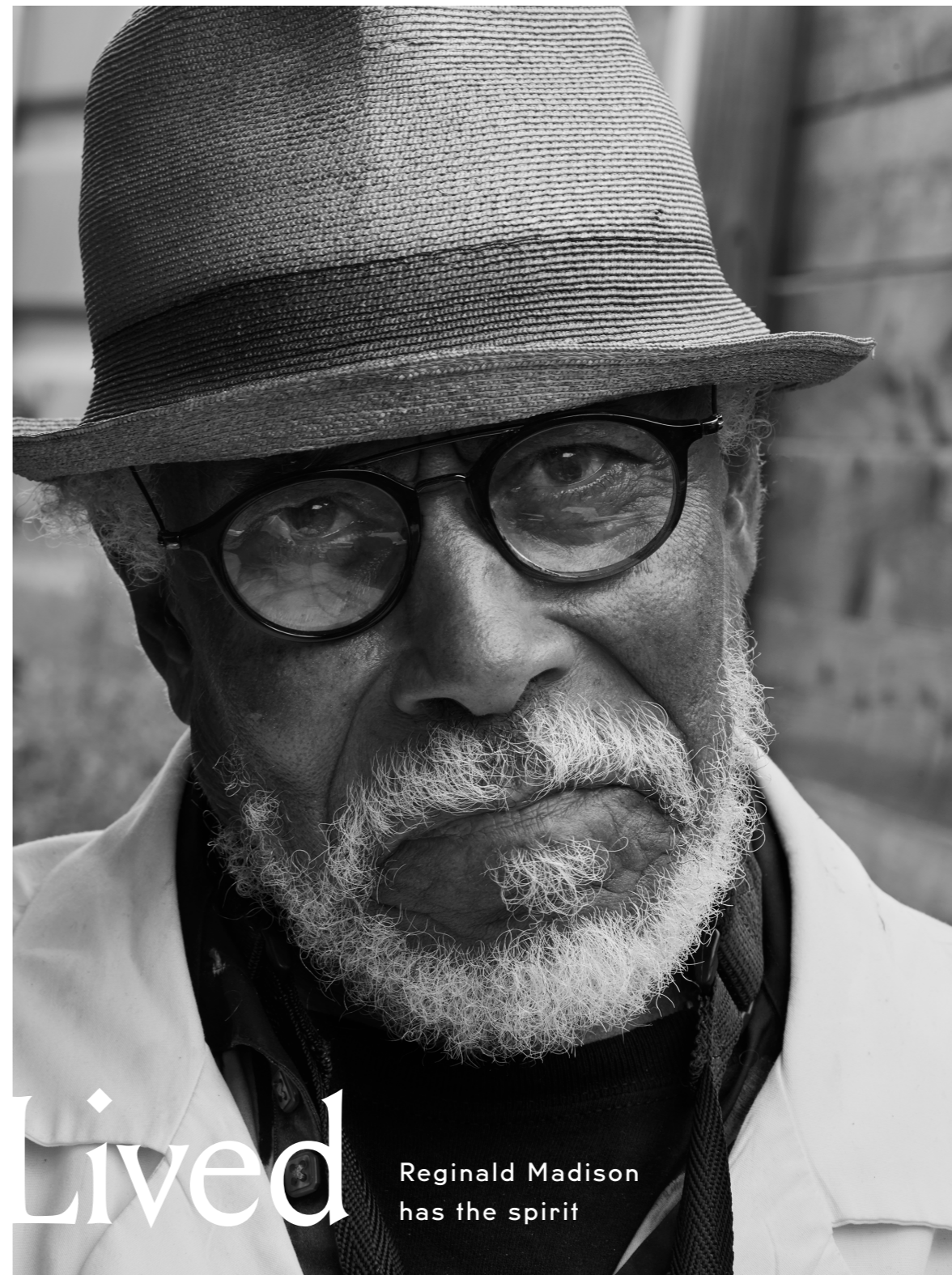


Life

Well

Reginald "Reggie" Madison surrounded by his work at his studio in the Basilica, in Hudson, NY



Lived

Reginald Madison
has the spirit

Words Daniel Fuller

Photography Guzman

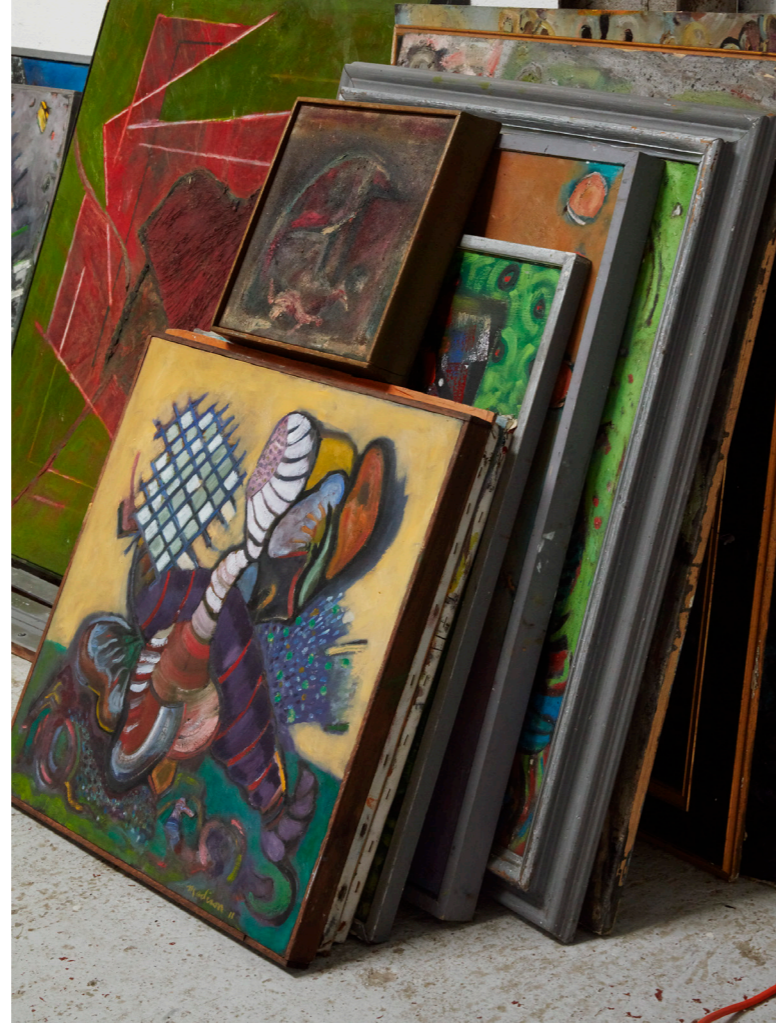
When I asked Reginald Madison how he first came to painting, his answer was as unexpected as it was perfect: “I remember going to the beach one day as a teenager. I looked in the big wire metal garbage can, and there were all these paints. Like some artist said, ‘Fuck it.’ So I grabbed the paints and that was a reason for me to start dabbling a bit.” And so, it began.

He was a teenager then, growing up on the crest of a great wave of cultural excitement, where art, music, fashion, politics and ideas overlapped. Chicago was one of the significant cities of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 1970s, where activists realized the potential of the political uses of art. His family lived in Hyde Park, a middle-class community on the South Side. Jazz was a constant in their home. Madison’s parents were regulars at the infamous Club DeLisa, where they would tell him stories of a jazz arranger named Herman Blunt, later known as Sun Ra. Art surrounded him, and Madison wanted in.

The waiting is the hardest part. Galleries tend to position artists in a box but much like his improvisational jazz heroes, Madison lived in an artistic now, expressing himself as he pleased, never lingering long enough to be defined by a box. There were opportunities. He traveled independently, painting in Paris, Venice, and Copenhagen. He showed sporadically while living in New York and, later, in the Berkshires. But nothing stuck, he’d sooner let a prospect vanish before compromising his art. Madison is an artist from a different time. During his formative period, he watched, listened, and tried to emulate the older artists, like those from The Art Ensemble of Chicago. The Art Ensemble expanded parameters combining the Black roots of jazz and blues, sprinkling in some world music, and spoken word with a mind-altering kaleidoscope of ritual and folklore. They were the avant-garde’s avant-garde. Despite being insanely prolific, they were also an economic cooperative that pooled their compensation after every gig. No one got rich.

He learned this in a world where art’s great rewards are self-discovery, otherworldliness, and potential liberation. The idea was that money would come, or it wouldn’t; it’s the spirit inside an artist that mattered. Madison always kept making, often not sharing publicly. What do you do when taught that you aren’t supposed to get recognition until after the older generation have received theirs — yet their proper due still hasn’t arrived?

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In a world obsessed with youth, in Fall 2021, at the age of 80, September Gallery in Hudson, N.Y., presented Madison’s solo exhibition titled *Home Grown*. Sometimes, the moment is right. Sometimes you just need the proper introduction. Madison was first connected to the gallery by curator Michael Mosby. Madison was between studios, so he met Kristen Dodge, the gallery’s founder, at his storage units of unsold paintings. Dodge knew immediately that she wanted to show his work. “She started grabbing stuff,” Madison told me. “She grabbed a painting I wanted to paint over and that’s how the show got put together. She made me see my work so differently than I’d ever seen it.” The works in the exhibition spanned three decades.

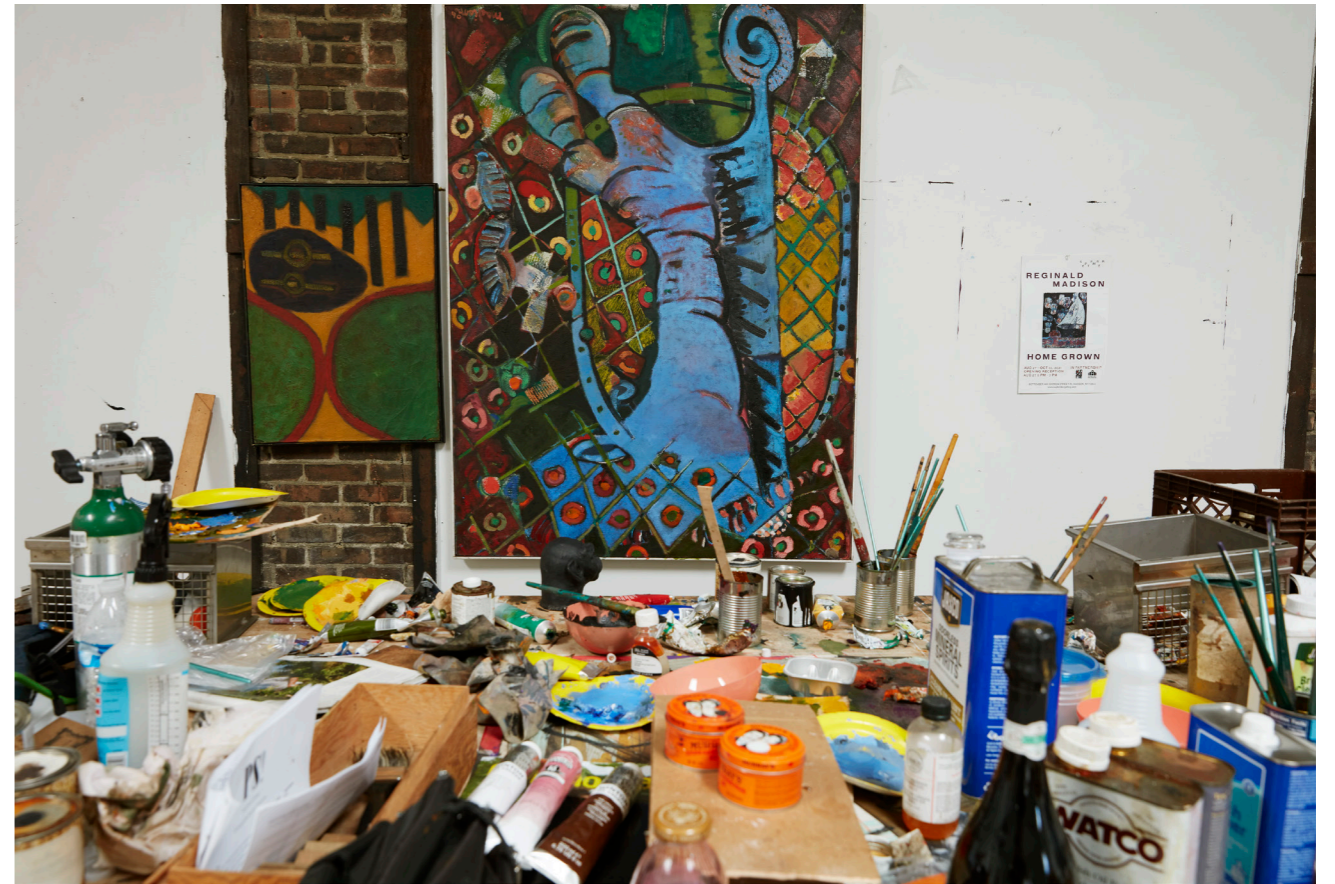
The show served as an index of time, effort, character. Always abstract, always open. While this work might have been too stylistically free in the past, not a cohesive enough body of work in the eyes of gallerists; in this context the works from various decades sing. Be it figurative or abstract, his work is searching for and creating space from now or from then. The paintings are forceful, confident, and calm, sensate as they inhale and exhale. Buckle up. No flight of fancy, the journey can be rough and improvisational. But once you’ve



Clockwise: Madison always kept making, often not sharing publicly. In hand; *Untitled* (62), 1997. Saxophone and *The Mill*, 1966. *Sailor at Sea*, 2000. Opposite page: *Untitled*, 2011.



Madison, a devoted jazz lover and musician. Opposite page, top: above Madison's work table hangs *4 Seen II*, 2006-2022. Below: *Way Out West* (Sonny Rollins), 2019 and *Bluiett*, 2019.



reached cruising altitude, to look down and view a life well-lived is a beautiful thing.

I asked Dodge about the next chapter. As a represented gallery artist, do she and Madison continue to comb an archive of 60-years of accumulated paintings, or do we see a selection of new work? Without being able to contain her delight for what lays in wait in storage, there is a palpable eagerness for the future: "I think Reggie found a new, huge studio this morning. It's very exciting. He has so many ideas, not just for paintings but for sculptures as well. It's endless. I'm excited to see what comes of his practice once he really settles into a more permanent space."

When I was in college for painting, there was a motto a teacher had us memorize and repeat on command. I cringe now, knowing it's still there in the back of my brain. "Less is more, stay pure, stay pure." It's problematic and antithetical to what every artist truly desires in their hearts: for their work to live on. A legacy. Their name staying alive is considered a life well spent. After all this time, Madison no longer has to worry. "I've been having nightmares for years that one day I'm going to die, and those storage units are going to go to the tag sale. And nobody's going to know what to do with it. And now it has some value, and it gets protected. That's been my big dream, just protect my babies and make sure they're okay." ■

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