

# Michael Massenburg: Continuing the Tradition

by

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The nation's finest African American artists combine outstanding technique and social vision and critical commentary with effective community involvement and leadership. Michael Massenburg exemplifies all these attributes, making him a leading figure in this growing community in the Los Angeles area. His paintings, murals, and multi-media collages express a compelling commitment to family and racial heritage, while also providing the kind of incisive critical perspective about race, politics, and history that has pervaded African American visual art for well over a century. His work as teacher and mentor for young people has been an integral feature of his artistic career—one that is as rewarding and valuable as any of his actual artistic creations themselves.

Born in San Diego in 1959, he moved around frequently as a member of a military family. As a young child, he eventually settled in the Los Angeles area, first in Long Beach and then in Los Angeles itself. Although like most artists, he began drawing early on, he received no actual art instruction until junior high school and high school. But even then, he did his artistic work largely on his own, without any systematic guidance or mentorship.

At Washington High School, like many African American teenagers, he was frequently stopped by the Los Angeles police—a common experience for minority youth both in Los Angeles and throughout much of the nation. As he notes, when the police appear with guns, “you’re at their mercy.” Although Massenburg never committed any criminal acts, he was sometimes at the wrong place at the wrong time, a reality widely shared by his African American contemporaries. This record of racial harassment left an indelible impression on him and helped to inform his strong commitment to using his art to addressing many enduring issues of racial injustice, including those in the system of justice in the United States.

He began developing his art more methodically after enrolling at California State University in Long Beach following high school graduation. One instructor became a mentor, pushing him to develop a higher level of personal discipline, even while he majored in business and marketing. At the same time, he began working with his father and also worked at other jobs in order to earn a living. He had yet to make the decision to pursue art as a full time profession, but that would develop in due course.

As he matured both in his technique and in his consciousness of becoming an artist, Massenburg took additional art classes at local community colleges. Equally (perhaps even more) important, he met some iconic figures in the African American artistic community in Los Angeles, including John Outterbridge, Cedric Adams, William Pajaud, and Charles Dickson as well as artists of his own generation like Willie Middlebrook and Richard Wyatt. Beyond their specific styles, the young Massenburg learned about their work habits and profound dedication to their craft. He also met Cecil Ferguson, longtime community arts activist widely known as the “Community Curator,” who also encouraged him to pursue his artistic activities. That contact with this creative community helped him establish a personal identification with a group of people whom he would eventually join as a premier figure in his own right.

When he enrolled at Otis Art Institute in 1990, he augmented his artistic journey. A key fact was that Otis was an art school, where visual talent and production were *the* major concerns. Moreover, one of his favorite artists, Charles White, taught there. White was a legendary artist as well as a key mentor for a huge number of black artists in the Los Angeles area. Massenburg had seen his work in books and magazines like *Ebony Magazine* and was deeply impressed with White’s social realist perspective and his commitment to African American dignity in his art; this remains Massenburg’s preeminent artistic influence to the present. Although Michael Massenburg never finished the Otis program owing to financial issues, that experience was fundamental to his growing artistic maturity.

The early 1990s also had other major effects on the young artist. The 1992 LA civil unrest, widely viewed as the Los Angeles Rebellion in many communities of color, profoundly affected millions of African Americans in Southern California and throughout the nation, including Michael Massenburg. Watching the brutal beating of Rodney King in achingly repeated television accounts, combined with the outrageous jury verdict that acquitted the police officers responsible for the beating, and the resulting violence through the city led Massenburg to question what it meant to be an artist in such an environment. He felt a sense of helplessness as the destruction raged throughout the minority neighborhoods of Los Angeles.

To help address this serious existential crisis, he spoke extensively with Outterbridge and Dickson. Both artists had long experience with racial turmoil in the community and they assisted Massenburg in determining what it really meant to be an African American artist in a racially charged community. These conversations helped him develop the community focus that has informed his artistic production and identity to the present. It led him to teaching and community and it also gave his artwork a more specific social and political orientation.

The other traumatic event from that time period was the serious illness and subsequent death of Massenburg's mother. At her memorial service, one of the speakers noted how his mother was proud of his artistic work and accomplishments. This maternal validation, which actually surprised him because both parents never actually encouraged him to become a practicing artist in lieu of another profession or regular source of income, was another key catalyst in his decision to make art the primary feature and identity of his life. The loss of a parent is always difficult, but his mother's death and her revelation of maternal pride gave him the inner strength to continue and to face the inevitable challenges of pursuing an artistic career. This was especially significant for an African American in an art world that, despite its protestations to the contrary, still largely rewards the most privileged members of American society.

Michael Massenburg is quick to acknowledge the key sources of his own artistic work. Beyond the seminal influence thematic and draftsmanship excellence of Charles White, he also recognizes the powerful impact of Romare Bearden. In 1992, he attended a major Bearden exhibition at UCLA, fulfilling a requirement from an art class he was taking at El Camino College. That was his first serious exposure to collage, from one of the masters of that form in 20<sup>th</sup> century American art. After seeing the show, he started making his own collages, which have become a major feature of his body of work for more than 20 years. This form allowed him to experiment with different colors and materials and was crucial in enabling him to create a unique personal style.

The late artist Robert Rauschenberg, whose works incorporating non-traditional materials and objects in collage-like compositions, also provided a strong formal influence on Massenburg, which can be clearly discerned in many of his creations. Rauschenberg also regularly used his art to promote various social issues including the environment, the discrimination against African Americans, the war in Vietnam, and the assassinations of American political figures like the Kennedy brothers and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. That feature of his artwork, understandably, also resonated with Michael Massenburg.

A major reason for his increasing recognition is his dedication and skill as a public artist. Throughout his career, Michael Massenburg has produced many murals that reflect his commitment to his people and to their vibrant cultural accomplishments. In 1997, he installed his first effort, “Jazz Era” (Figure 1), inside the American Jazz Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. Like the finest muralists in the nation and the world, he did extensive research in preparation for painting the mural, which he produced in California and then shipped to the Kansas City site. In the process, he came to appreciate even more deeply the profound depths of African American contributions to the cultural life of the United States.

That appreciation is reflected throughout the mural, readily available for appreciative audiences in an ideal venue. Its 10’ by 25’ size highlights some of the giant figures of American jazz, including both national and local musicians. At the center is Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington, one of the most acclaimed musical figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was a composer, bandleader, and pianist whose career spanned more than a half century throughout America and the world. Few visitors (if any) to the Jazz Museum fail to recognize Ellington’s face; his visual presence reinforces their pleasure in attending a venue where such a profound and engaging African American artistic heritage is celebrated daily.



“Jazz Era” (Figure 1)

Other musical celebrities join this parade of honor. Below the Duke is Ella Fitzgerald, the iconic vocalist, the “Queen of Jazz,” whose career of six decades brought her international acclaim and many awards, including numerous Grammys, the National Medal of Arts, and then Presidential Medal of Freedom. At the upper left of the composition is Louie Armstrong, “Satchmo,” the great New Orleans trumpeter and singer whose musical influence on American jazz and music generally was huge. These and the other figures in Massenburg’s mural reinforce viewers’ pleasure in the monumental accomplishments of African American jazz musicians. The mural augments the museum’s other exhibitions and interactive displays, adding a dynamic visual arts dimension to its overall tribute to African American artistic excellence.

Most of Massenburg’s public artworks are appropriately located in the Los Angeles area. One of his most engaging efforts from 2006 is “Visions” (figure 2), painted on the side of the Vision Theater in Leimert Park, the historic neighborhood that is one of the major centers of African American art, music, and culture in the region. This 18 by 70 foot work pays tribute to some of the neighborhood’s visionary leaders, including Vision Theater founder Marla Gibbs, community poet Kamau Daood, jazz musicians Billy Higgins and Horace Tapscott, visual artists Ramsess and Alonzo Davis, the co-founder with his brother Dale Davis of the famed Brockman Gallery, and several others.

“Visions” also depicts other African American institutions like the World Stage and the Museum in Black as well as names like Alden Kimbrough, who operated the Zambezi Bazaar for many years, the former Brockman Gallery site that featured African and African American products and that regularly held African American cultural and historical exhibitions. Above all, this mural celebrated the vibrant African American culture of that neighborhood and of Los Angeles in general. Over the years, many local and out-of-town visitors included Massenburg’s mural as an integral feature of their tours to Leimert Park.



“Visions” (Figure 2)

Among many others, he has painted murals throughout the Los Angeles area on addressing numerous themes. His 2001 mural “Educate to Elevate” at an alternative high school deals with the value of education for young people; “Reading to Learn Knowledge” at the Mark Twain Public Library in South Los Angeles deals with the same topic; “All in a Day” at the Ferndale MTA Station depicts the rich history of Dorsey high School and many of its celebrated figures, including artist Dale Davis; and “Circa 1912,” which honors black firefighters at the African American Firefighter Museum in South Los Angeles.



“The Bridge” (Figure 3),

In his mixed media works, Massenburg continues his homage to the senior African American artists of Los Angeles who have paved the way for younger generations to continue the tradition of visual excellence. In a compelling work from 2009 entitled “The Bridge” (Figure 3), he offers a portrait of one of the most accomplished and respected artists in America, his personal mentor John Outterbridge, affectionally known throughout the community as “Bridge.” Here the venerated painter, sculptor, and assemblage master, now in his 80s, is shown with his characteristic seriousness as he works on one of his efforts during his prolific career. John Outterbridge is universally acknowledged as one of the premier figures in the Los Angeles renaissance of three-dimensional artwork using found objects in the wake of the Watts uprising in 1965. Like Noah Purifoy and Betye Saar, he inspired scores of younger artists, including Massenburg, to use their own talents to express their critiques of dominant society and visions and aspirations of their own people.

The title itself underscores Outterbridge's role as bridge both to other artists and to the community as a whole. Massenburg selected the title deliberately to underscore not only John Outterbridge's role in helping his contemporaries and his heirs in the African American artistic community of Los Angeles, but in the deeper role of black mentorship in a society where racism is far from dead. This artwork is the visual manifestation of the African American proverb "each one teach one" and is, at bottom, a deeply political expression characteristic of Massenburg's work as a whole.



"Don't Look Back" (Figure 4)



In a similar vein, he has used his talents to pay tributes to the tradition of Negro League baseball. In both “Colorball” and “Don’t Look Back” (Figure 4) from 1996, he celebrates one of the great achievements of African American athletics. Although the Negro Leagues are now increasingly well known as a result of accounts in film, television, books, and official recognition in the Baseball Hall of Fame, the full and rich knowledge of the heritage of this long episode is still largely absent from the majority of white Americans. This includes the millions of enthusiastic American baseball fans, a reality that has increased as people with personal experience of Negro League baseball become fewer and fewer. Massenburg joins many other black artists in trying to recapture this history, a longtime function of all forms of African American expressive culture.

“Don’t Look Back,” a relatively small mixed media assemblage piece, highlights the immortal star pitcher Satchel Paige, one of the greats of Negro League baseball like other giants like Josh Gibson, “Cool Papa” Bell, Josh Gibson, and many others. The artist appropriates Paige’s famous quotation for his title: “Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you.” Above all, this work offers viewers a deeply sympathetic view of one of the finest baseball players in American history and an enduring appreciation of the institution that enabled him to establish his stellar athletic legacy.

Younger (and even some older) viewers, perhaps, may be encouraged to look further into Paige’s brilliant career, where they can discover just how amazing he was. During his career, he faced several white major league stars in exhibition games, showing that he was more than their equal in baseball skill and prowess. He was one of the few Negro league players like Jackie Robinson, Larry Doby, Monte Irvin, Hank Aaron, Minnie Minoso, Larry Doby, and a few others to make it to the major leagues. He became the oldest rookie to play at the age of 42 when he joined the St. Louis Browns. Massenburg’s artwork may also stimulate audiences to (respectfully) disregard Paige’s advice not to look back. The announcement at the left of the composition shows that the colored all-stars played against the white all-stars; this was a common arrangement. But even more important, a fuller discovery of Negro league baseball enables people to develop a greater appreciation for African American history and struggle. That knowledge would reveal the dynamic history of the iconic teams like the Kansas City Monarchs, the Homestead Grays, the New York Black Yankees, and many others.

It would also yield the more disconcerting knowledge of the pervasive racism that kept talented black players from entry into the major leagues, forcing them to play for much smaller salaries and often with inferior vehicles, equipment, and facilities. The historical and educational focus of “Don’t Look Back” makes it fundamentally the same kind of social and political statement that has characterized thousands of African American artworks for well over one hundred years. Massenburg adds impressively to the long tradition of black artists who celebrate the past and simultaneously critique the racism that catalyzed black excellence in many fields.

He has also turned to overt political commentary in his work. In another mixed media collage from 2004 entitled “1965,” he addressed the Watts Rebellion of that year. A young man with outstretched arms is surrounded by various details from those turbulent days, including a distorted U.S. flag, suggesting accurately that many of the underlying issues of race, class, and economic inequality have hardly disappeared.

In 2006, he created “LAPB” (Figure 5), a mixed media work. The catalyst for this piece was the 1969 shootout on the UCLA campus between the Us organization and the Los Angeles Black Panther Party, when Panther members Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter and John Huggins were killed. Massenburg features Carter in the center of the composition, highlighting his status as a black power martyr. Other details surround the portrait, most notably the text about the disgraceful and discredited “Cointelpro” program of the Federal Bureau of Investigation of the era, which sought to target and destroy militant black groups and organizations including the Black Panther Party. Another striking detail in this work is the young boy, signifying the Panthers’ free breakfast program, a key component of their broader commitment to the welfare of the black community.



“LAPB” (Figure 5)

“LAPB” also joins a large tradition of recent African American artists who provide an alternative to conventional stereotypes about the Panthers. His view offers a welcome to more sympathetic vision. It also brings Bunchy Carter back into public consciousness and provides audiences with an insight into recent history they seldom find in conventional media and educational sources.

Artwork addressing African subject matter is likewise deeply political in a nation like the United States that is still fundamentally ignorant of African history, culture, and politics. Massenburg created a work entitled “Fela Lives” (Figure 6) that focuses on the iconic Nigerian musician and human rights and political activist Fela Kuti, known simply as Fela. His music became extremely political, reflecting his contact with the Black Panther Party and black nationalism, which he discovered in Los Angeles in the 70s.

Back in Nigeria, he pioneered music called Afrobeat and increasingly used political lyrics that attacked the brutal Nigerian military. This made him a popular figure among millions of Nigerians and throughout Africa, but an enemy of the Nigerian regime. He was jailed and beaten, yet he continued to resist. He also produced anti-apartheid music as part of the worldwide protests against the racist South African government. His early death at 58 from AIDS brought an end to a brilliant and tumultuous career. More than a million people attended his funeral.

Since his death, a Fela revival has occurred, including new bands that reflect his Afrobeat musical influence, the reissue of his albums, and a successful off-Broadway production of a play entitled *Fela*. Massenburg’s artwork augments that revival and adds another artistic dimension to its vigor. Positioning the musician/activist with his back turned to the viewers, the title “Fela Lives” occupies the central space. The complex supporting details contribute to a comprehensive view of a man little known outside African, African American, and some musical circles. Massenburg does here what he has done throughout his artistic career: he uses his art to serve as an educational corrective, informing audiences of major black figures, including African, largely ignored in conventional educational settings. Observers with intellectual curiosity are doubly rewarded, combining aesthetic pleasure and gratification with deeper knowledge and appreciation of African political and music



“Fela Lives” (Figure 6)

No account of Michael Massenburg’s artistic efforts would be complete without specific mention of his community efforts. He has taught at the Watts Towers Arts Center, served as the president of Inglewood Cultural Arts, and as an arts commissioner for the City of Inglewood, where he has been effective in arts and cultural leadership and advocacy. He has also worked with scores of young people in encouraging them to develop their personal skills and creativity. This can be in the arts or in any area that would lead them to productive lives and careers and vocations. In the process, he is following the mentors like John Outterbridge and others who helped him with both skills and confidence in forging his own creative path.

In 2015, Masemnborg co-curated a stunning exhibition, “50 Years and I Still Can’t Breathe,” at the Watts Towers Arts Center that dramatically highlighted issues of police brutality and murder that pervaded the news in 2014 and early 2015. This was one of the most compelling shows of socially conscious art in California in many years.

It featured a powerful collection of visual works addressing themes of legal and police injustice against minority communities. With contributions by African American and other artists, this exhibition used the arts to reveal the distressing absence of progress despite the gains of the civil rights/black power movements.

Relatively young for an established visual artist, Michael Massenburg has begun to achieve both national and international recognition and visibility. Travel to Senegal has encouraged him to travel to others countries, which will increase his artistic themes and range. Likewise, he expects to augment his commitment to public art projects. He will accordingly have a major presence in the community of African American artists of the Los Angeles area for many years in the future.

### **Bibliography**

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