

BUTTONS ON!

BEAU
McCALL

Buttons are usually viewed as an everyday object serving the routine purpose of fastening one's clothes. But creative artist Beau McCall, through his wearable and visual artwork, inspires us to see buttons anew. In his hands, buttons are transformed into dazzling maximalist fashion statements and awe-inspiring sculptural objects. Buttons—small, humble, and rendered virtually invisible—become giant, powerful, and visually arresting when McCall transforms them with his unique artistic vision. He reveals the limitless potential of the button to captivate, provoke, inspire, and to tell stories of joy, strength, and beauty.

Buttons On! marks the first-ever retrospective for McCall. Proclaimed by American Craft magazine as the "Button Man," McCall creates wearable and visual art by hand-sewing clothing buttons onto mostly upcycled fabrics, materials, and objects.

Buttons On! showcases pieces from McCall's nearly forty-year career, the debut of several new works, and select archival material. Organized into several themes, the exhibition explores McCall's mastery of the button and offers commentary on topics such as pop culture and social justice.

The exhibition's four themes each represent a different facet of McCall's creative practice. They include: "Buttons on the Body," an exploration of nearly forty-years of button-embellished wearable art; "Buttons on the Mind," a survey of over ten years of visual art created by using buttons as the primary medium; "Buttons on the Soul," a collection of archival materials documenting McCall's career and evolution; and "Buttons Off!," a selection of items from McCall's forays into buttonless wearable and visual art.

Now, nearly four decades since his professional debut, McCall is receiving the recognition he deserves for his cultural contributions and command of the button in art. This retrospective aims to amplify McCall's legacy as an artist whose works are among the most original and innovative

of our time. May this exhibition inspire you to put your buttons on!

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Sections

Buttons on the Body

In 1976 (at the age of 19), McCall was captivated by a jar of buttons in his home. Ever since then he has created intricate hand-sewn button designs on mostly upcycled materials. Thereby his works are part of a history that has sought to re-envision the button and blur the seams between fashion, craft, and wearable art.

In the world of fashion, buttons have ebbed and flowed from the spotlight. In the 1980s, designer Patrick Kelly helped bring buttons to the attention of an international audience, mostly through the use of the fastener as a decorative trim. More recently, designers such as Gucci, Jean Paul Gaultier, and Jeremy Scott have all dabbled in button-embellished garments. Buttons in wearable art date even further back to the UK's Pearly Kings and Queens, who have been adorning themselves in mother-of-pearl buttons since the mid to late 1870s; the Lega people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo who used buttons to create prestigious hats for members

of their elite group called Bwami in the early 20th century; and more modern creations by the likes of artists Charlie Logan and Nick Cave. McCall's button-inspired works exist within this history that has helped to shift the narrative of buttons from fastener to fashion statement.

Furthermore, McCall pushes the categorical limitations of the terms fashion, craft, and wearable art. It is an act that is similar to artists of the Art to Wear movement, which began in the late 1960s and helped redefine art with mixed-media works designed to be worn. Like these artists, McCall's hand-crafted and one of a kind works exist primarily as a form of artistic expression imbued with his own personal history and worldview. It is a view that compels us to reimagine the button and appreciate fashion as an art form.

Buttons Off!

McCall's creative practice includes forays into buttonless wearable and visual art, including

his wearable art line called Triple T-shirts, an embroidered garment, a necklace created using clothing tags, and one of his first visual artworks. While these pieces are devoid of buttons there is still a connection to be found in the buttonhole. Through these works McCall has learned new techniques that he can apply when working with buttons, while extending his practice into other areas that spotlight his versatility and boundless creativity.

Buttons on the Mind

After a hiatus from pursuing a career in the fashion industry, McCall reemerged in 2012 with his professional debut as a visual artist. Since then, he has applied the button with dexterous versatility in the ongoing movement to redefine what is art.

Similar to his use of the button and other materials in wearable art, McCall's visual art is rooted in the practice of upcycling found objects. According to traditional Western art history, the use of found objects in visual art is credited to

European artists such as Marcel Duchamp of the Dada art movement. However, this narrative excludes other parts of the world such as Africa where repurposing everyday materials for artistic purposes existed even prior to Dadaism. For example, around the 18th-19th century, Bakongo, aka Kongo, culture (located primarily in present-day the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Angola) produced sculptural objects known as *minkisi*, aka power figures. These creations were decorated with common items such as nails, cowrie shells, beads, rope, and cloth strips.

Due to racism, classism, gender bias, and elitism, found object artists such as McCall have had to contend with widespread institutional dismissal of craft or folk art as less valuable than fine art. Yet, McCall and other artists who work with buttons (e.g. Amalia Amaki, Lisa Kokin, and Dalton Stevens, aka The Button King) have continued to challenge such objective hierarchies, while celebrating the global and historical use of found objects in visual art.

In these works, McCall has pushed buttons past their conceivable limits and transformed them into an array of sculptures, installations, and even, sound art. Here, McCall offers a deeper exploration into his thoughts on various timely topics and personal experiences as he elevates the button from the practical to the conceptual.

Buttons on the Soul

This collection of archival materials documents McCall's career and evolution. Included are photographs from his early years and of his family, loved ones, and his time as a member of the Harlem Institute of Fashion; press highlights; video clippings of select career milestones; and more. Framing the personal narrative is a short film about McCall's life and practice and a timeline documenting his history, as well as that of the button. Through these intimate and mostly never-before-seen materials, McCall becomes unbuttoned as we get to know the man behind the buttons.

Object Labels

Button Sweater: Black, c. 1982

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, safety pins, upcycled wool sweater

This sweater is the earliest example of McCall's button-embellished wearable art. Thus, it illustrates key differences between his earlier and more advanced technique.

The first noticeable difference is the use of wool, unlike later works that primarily use upcycled denim. The switch in fabrics came after McCall learned that the wool knit material could not sustain the weight of an abundance of buttons. Secondly, unlike his later works, the buttons here are not sewn in a continuous thread pattern. Instead, the thread is cut off with the placement of each button. Finally, there is a less layered fashion than McCall's later works. Here, the buttons are sewn onto the garment without a base layer of buttons to conceal the original fabric.

What remains similar between this object and later

works is McCall's mostly maximalist approach to button embellishment. Do you notice any other significant differences and/or similarities?

Button Armor Ensemble, 2023

Armor: metal and plastic buttons, wire; denim caftan: designed by Beau McCall with garment production by Strugala; hoop skirt

Here, McCall showcases his application of the button without the use of needle and thread. He uses the knotting skill of macramé to manipulate wire and connect the buttons into an elaborate net or cage. The top of the piece features a dramatic collar while the bottom wires stretch out like tentacles; both capped by gold metal buttons. Earth tone buttons accented by gold colored details form the body. When placed over the denim caftan and hoop skirt the work balloons into extravagant proportions, mimicking an opulent opera cape.

The title is derived from McCall's 2014 piece *Button Armor*, a smaller scale version primarily worn

as a necklace. Through both works McCall has created a series of what he refers to as "armor" to encourage bold, proud, and courageous self-expression through the nonconformity of wearable art.

Button Yoke and Apron Ensemble: Flower Power, 2021

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, latex, plastic pendant, upcycled Levi's denim jacket and jeans

During the COVID-19 pandemic, McCall began to create a series of button yokes and aprons. He cuts away the main part of the jacket and leaves the armholes and/ or sleeves, chest pockets, and the yoke area, which is the piece that fits over the shoulders. For the aprons he cuts away the back of the jeans and adds fabric or material to fill in the space between the front pants legs.

McCall's placement of lighthearted and serious messages on an apron (a garment typically used to protect oneself while engaging in various acts of labor) and on a yoke (a part of a garment which

as a standalone allows for greater free-flowing upper body movement) speaks to the sense of confidence, security, and freedom he wants to give the wearer.

In this piece, McCall pays tribute to the hippies of the 1960s and 1970s. Members of this countercultural movement were known to transform their denim attire into wearable art as a form of creative self-expression. The use of buttons with floral motifs and the title Flower Power reference the movement's emphasis on nonviolence, peace, and love.

Do you notice the embroidery thread on this work? It's a technique McCall calls, "webbing." The embroidery thread is woven not only through the buttons, but also on top of them, to create a weblike pattern.

Button Apron: Glam Garbage, 2023

Assorted buttons (metal, rhinestone, faux pearl, and plastic), embroidery thread, upcycled Levi's denim jeans

Hood Classic: The Ice Durag, 2021

Assorted buttons (ceramic buttons collaboration with Glaze Girl Designs, plastic, and glow-in-the-dark buttons), cotton base collaboration with Strugala, embroidery thread. Commissioned by Souleo.

In the series titled "Hood Classic," McCall references various items that have historically been stereotyped as "hood." This terminology has been interpreted as synonymous with "low-class, ghetto, and unsophisticated." Yet, within Black culture "hood" can also be a term of endearment. Thus, McCall attempts to subvert the negative connotations attached with labeling these items as "hood." He offers a more balanced perspective as he celebrates—and at times calls into question—the role they play within our culture.

The durags within this series extol the beauty of Black natural hair and demonstrate an appreciation for durags—fiber scarves used in the maintenance of Black hair and to accessorize one's

outfit. Gaining increased popularity in the 1970s and exploding onto the pop culture stage through hip-hop during the 1990s and 2000s, the durag has been both criminalized and popularized within the mainstream.

Each work features a majestic train and a crown, both embellished with shimmering clear buttons. McCall then adds custom made ceramic buttons that capture an array of Black hair care tools and hairstyles (many of which have been politicized and deemed unacceptable by mainstream society at various points throughout history). Through this alchemization of durags and lauding of Black natural hair, McCall engages with issues of identity and respectability when it comes to Black style.

Button Apron: Glam Construction, 2023

Swarovski crystal and plastic buttons, embroidery thread, construction mesh

Button Vest, Shorts, and Cuffs Ensemble: Gold Clouds, c. 1991–2009

Metal and plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled Lee denim jacket, upcycled Levi's denim jeans and jacket cuffs

Button Necklaces I (set of 10), c. 1994

Mother-of-pearl buttons, embroidery thread

In McCall's necklaces, his wearable art extends into jewelry, displaying his flexibility at crafting high-impact works even on a smaller scale. *Button Necklaces I* is one of the earliest examples of McCall's button jewelry and a grouping of his first necklaces. McCall created this set after his mother gifted him a button necklace in the late 1970s. Inspecting the jewelry, he learned how to create his own version. Such necklaces were and continue to be worn by McCall to identify himself as an artist.

Meanwhile *Button Necklace: Angel* and *Button Necklace: Harlem 116* are portraits of strangers McCall comes across during his travels and daily outings. The latter finds beauty in the visages of African immigrants who make up the community

known as Le Petit Sénégal, or Little Senegal, located along West 116th Street in Harlem.

Collectively, these works exemplify how McCall's button jewelry is tied to themes of self-expression, identity, and community.

Button Necklace: Angel, 2018

Assorted buttons (leather, metal, plastic, et al.), embroidery thread, raffia, plastic, upcycled Adidas sneaker wings, upcycled cotton t-shirt

Button Necklace: Harlem 116, 2018

Faux metal and plastic buttons, embroidery thread, raffia, cotton (African print)

Button Yoke: Motherland, 2020

Assorted buttons (bone, glass, plastic, et al.), embroidery thread, upcycled Levi's denim jacket

McCall's first trip to Johannesburg, South Africa in

2016 inspired Motherland. "I was amazed to see so many people of my culture and race in one place as the majority population," reminiscenced McCall. "There was an abundance of kindness, creativity, and history that I experienced during that trip. This yoke celebrates my African culture that I connected with during my time in Johannesburg."

McCall intentionally selects buttons to signify his appreciation for African culture. The gold metal cowrie shell button (front upper left) speaks to the historical uses of cowries in African culture as a form of currency and decorative element in wearable art. Meanwhile the buttons depicting masks celebrate traditional ceremonies and rituals.

Button Yoke: Sunny, 2020

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled Levi's denim jacket

Button Yoke: Burgundy Yellow, 2020

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled DDC
Lab denim jacket

Button Vest and Cuffs Ensemble: Ice Cold Blue,
1991

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled
Levi's denim jacket

Button Vest: Caramel Crayons, 1991

Assorted buttons (metal, mother-of-pearl,
plastic), embroidery thread, upcycled denim vest.
Permanent collection of RISD Museum.

Hood Classic: The Spike Ice Durag, 2022

Ceramic buttons collaboration with Glaze
Girl Designs and plastic buttons, cotton base
collaboration with Strugala, glow-in-the-dark
embroidery thread. Permanent collection of RISD
Museum.

Button Apron: Black Target, 2022

Assorted buttons (Swarovski crystal, rhinestone,

and plastic), embroidery thread, upcycled Levi's denim jeans

McCall created this tribute to reference the history of oppression and resilience of the Black community. Targets in the colors of the Pan-African flag (red, black, and green) denote how the Black community has been attacked by the forces of racism, colorism, and classism. In the centers of two of the three targets are buttons with the images of assassinated social justice leaders, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. Yet, their presence here, along with shimmering Swarovski crystal buttons, also speaks to the beauty, strength, and courage of Black people.

What do you think the hand-shaped button in the center of the top-right target represents?

Button Apron: Rainbow Target, 2022

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled Levi's denim jeans

Here again, McCall creates an apron to reference the history of oppression and resilience of the

marginalized. In this instance, the focus is the LGBTQ+ community.

The rainbow—arguably the most universal symbol of the queer community—is depicted here as a target through the use of embroidery thread in various hues. The pink triangle references a symbol that has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community since its original usage (in an inverted form) by the Nazis in concentration camps to identify and persecute those they labeled as gay. The positioning used here—with the pink triangle facing upwards—is an homage to the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and their mission to call attention to the AIDS crisis and LGBTQ+ social justice issues. McCall's inclusion of these symbols speak to the strength and pride of the queer community.

Button Apron: Wood Works, 2021

Assorted buttons (wood, leather, and horn), embroidery thread, latex, upcycled Levi's denim jeans

Button Sneakers: Sunny, 2022

Assorted buttons (cloth, rhinestone, plastic, et al.), embroidery thread, upcycled Adidas nylon and rubber sneakers

Sneakers and pop culture frequently influence one another. For example, the classic song *My Adidas* by Run-DMC was inspired by the sneaker brand and simultaneously helped increase Adidas's mass appeal. Furthermore, works by artists such as Andy Warhol have been adapted into sneaker brand collaborations. In this series, McCall contributes to this long-standing relationship between sneakers and pop culture. He upcycles Run-DMC-inspired Adidas to create works that celebrate mass culture.

Moonwalk tributes recording artist Michael Jackson's popularization of the moonwalk dance. *Sole Power II* was inspired by the film *Black Panther* and its fictional city of Wakanda. *All Sports* draws a direct connection between sneakers and athletics where they are ubiquitous both for their functionality and aesthetics.

Sunny are of special importance as they also represent a recurring theme within McCall's work: joy. In several of his works, McCall includes yellow smiley face buttons. This popular ideogram and communication tool (e.g. emoticons) represents joy worldwide. Here McCall places a smiley button on top of a saturation of mostly yellow buttons to evoke feelings of fun and whimsy.

Button Sneakers: Sole Power II, 2022

Assorted buttons (horn, ceramic, glass, wood, rhinestone, bone, plastic, et al.), embroidery thread, raffia, upcycled Adidas nylon and rubber sneakers

Button Sneakers: Moonwalk, 2018

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled Adidas nylon and rubber sneakers¹¹

Button Sneakers: All Sports, 2022

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled

Adidas nylon and rubber sneakers

Button Corset, c. early 1990s

Assorted buttons (mother-of-pearl, wood, metal, et al.), embroidery thread, upcycled corset

In these works, shapewear in the form of corsets and bustiers, and undergarments such as bras are reenvisioned as standalone outerwear(able) art. The corsets and bustiers feature McCall's signature abstract collage of buttons that are combined with columns or rows of uniform buttons to contour the body. For example, see the string of mother-of-pearl buttons that visually cinch the waist area of the button corset.

The button bras were inspired by McCall's observations of the late 1980s queer nightlife scene in NYC. Recalling his first time seeing women dancing in bras in public he created *Black Mirror* and *No Means No* as celebrations of women's sexuality, sartorial freedom, and queer liberation.

The latter bra also takes direct aim at the sexual assault women face within sports culture.

With these works McCall is in conversation with designers such as Vivienne Westwood (e.g. corsets) and Jean Paul Gaultier (e.g. cone bra), as they all have reimagined our most intimate garments as art.

Button Bustier I, c. early 1990s

Assorted buttons (mother-of-pearl, metal, glass, et al.), embroidery thread, upcycled Carnival bustier

Button Bustier II, c. early 1990s

Assorted buttons (metal, rhinestone, and plastic), embroidery thread, upcycled Carnival bustier

Button Bra: Black Mirror, 2016

Assorted buttons (metal, mirror, and plastic), embroidery thread, upcycled Maidenform bra

Button Bra: No Means No, 2013

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled
Maidenform bra

Button Speedo: Black Ice, c. early 1990s

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled
Gazelle swim briefs

With these button speedos, McCall playfully draws connections between buttons and sexuality. The word "button" has been used colloquially to reference a clitoris and breasts and one of the meanings behind the idiom "pushing someone's buttons" is to arouse someone's sexual interest.

Here, McCall was specifically inspired by the male strippers of the 1980s, whose costumes became more creative and provocative than in the mid-to-late 1970s when male stripping first started to become popular. McCall's spin features his signature stacking technique with buttons cleverly arranged to emphasize one's bulge.

Do these pieces push your buttons (wink-wink)?

Button Speedo: Ice, 2021

Mirror and plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled Polo swim briefs

Button Shorts: Brand Stackin' New, 1990

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled Calvin Klein denim shorts

Notice the buttons running along the outseam of the shorts like spikes? They're one of the earliest examples of McCall's technique that he refers to as "stacking." McCall sews multiple buttons on top of one another and strategically places them at various locations within his visual and wearable art. In this instance, the shorts, when worn, are given fluidity as the stacked buttons undulate with each motion.

Button Shorts: Chillin' Chaps, 1990

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled Calvin Klein denim shorts

Button Shorts: The Revolution, c. 1995

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled Calvin Klein denim jeans

Whatever their length, shorts are associated with leisure and the liberation of fashion along the lines of sexual and gender identity and expression. Thus, the cultural significance and practicality of these garments have inspired McCall to celebrate shorts in an array of themes from the whimsical to the political.

These shorts are some of the earliest examples of McCall using the colors of the Pan-African flag (red, black, and green) to send a message. Created in the mid-1990s, *The Revolution* speaks to the popular style at the time of Afrocentricity. Such styles sought to celebrate Black pride and heritage by incorporating elements derived from and inspired by the various tribes and cultures within Africa.

Button Shorts: A Plaid Agenda, c. 1994

Metal and plastic buttons, embroidery thread,
upcycled Levi's denim jeans

Button Shorts: Boss Bees, c. 1994

Metal and plastic buttons, embroidery thread,
upcycled Levi's denim jeans

Button Shorts: Red Spy, c. 1994

Metal and plastic buttons, embroidery thread,
upcycled Lee denim jeans

Button Shorts: Hue Smash, c. 1991

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, Plastic
buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled Jordache
denim jeans

Hood Classic: The Alien Ice Durag, 2022

Ceramic buttons collaboration with Glaze Girl
Designs and plastic buttons, cotton
base collaboration with Strugala, glow-in-the-
dark embroidery thread

Button Jacket: Born in Philly, Made in Harlem, c. 1988

Assorted buttons (glass, wood, rhinestone, metal, ceramic, et al.), embroidery thread, upcycled Levi's denim jacket

Since the late 1980s McCall has created wearable art using upcycled denim, a durable and sustainable material that also has important links to the Black experience in America. These connections include the production of indigo to create the sturdy denim uniform worn by the enslaved on plantations, and the history of repurposing denim. McCall's button works on denim pay tribute to this tradition of reclamation and upcycling.

Born in Philly, Made in Harlem is the earliest example of McCall's use of denim. It is also the earliest example of his fine-tuned creative process with buttons in both his wearable and visual art. He begins by cutting the denim (if necessary) into a specific silhouette. Then he sews a base layer of buttons onto the fabric. This foundation

is usually of a uniform material and color to create a solid sheet or canvas. Simultaneously, while constructing the base layer McCall sews decorative buttons on top to convey the story, message, mood, or emotion he wishes to impart.

Here, the message is pride as McCall celebrates his hometown of Philadelphia, PA (e.g. a pretzel shaped button referencing this Philly food staple) and his second home of Harlem. Thereby McCall invites us to reminisce on the places we call home and that help inform our identity.

Button Jacket: Just Bee, 1991

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled Levi's denim jacket

Just Bee is one of McCall's earliest examples of him being inspired by the elements of our natural world. Taking his cue from the yellow denim, McCall accented the cuffs, sleeves, and hem in mostly black glossy buttons for a bee-like color

pattern. The yoke area of the jacket buzzes with an abstract assemblage of multicolored buttons producing visual contrast and sweet honey for the eyes.

In 1991, acclaimed actor Michael K. Williams (The Wire) modeled this button jacket at the 11th Annual Monarch Awards at Sardi's Restaurant in New York City. View the original photo of Williams in this work in the *Buttons on the Soul* section.

Button Jacket: Candy, 2020

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled Levi's denim jacket

Button Jacket: Stacked Sleeves, c. early 1990s–2021

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled Levi's denim jacket

Button Bolero: Chocolate Sprinkles, c. 1990

Metal and plastic buttons, embroidery thread,

upcycled Levi's denim jacket

A mélange of dazzling buttons is sprinkled over this brown denim bolero. When activated by bodily movements the work becomes musical as the jingling sounds of buttons charm the ear. This visual and "eargasmic" effect is what led to this bolero being included in the 1991 PBS production of *The Colored Museum*, a play by George C. Wolfe.

Watch video footage in the *Buttons on the Soul* section.

Button Eye Patch: Sunny, 2019

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled eye patch

Here, bracelets, cuffs, and even the protective coverings of eye patches are morphed into button statements. An important highlight are McCall's eye patches which aim for inclusivity, a nod to the growing adaptive fashion movement which advocates for clothing and accessories designed for people with disabilities. The eye patches-witty

and whimsical in their visual narratives—are also inspired by the stylized ones worn by the likes of hip-hop legend, Slick Rick.

Button Eye Patch: Hello, 2019

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled eye patch

Button Eye Patch: Pink Eye, 2019

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled eye patch

Button Cuffs: Blue, 2019

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled Levi's denim jacket cuffs

Button Cuffs: Mickey Mouse, 2019

Wood and plastic buttons, embroidery thread, upcycled Levi's denim jacket cuffs

Button Cuffs: Earth Tones, c. 2009

Assorted buttons (wood, leather, and plastic), embroidery thread, upcycled Levi's denim jacket cuffs

Button Bracelet: Buggin' Out I, 2016

Metal and plastic buttons, embroidery thread, cotton fabric, plastic

Button Bracelet: Buggin' Out II, 2016

Metal and plastic buttons, embroidery thread, cotton fabric, plastic

Triple T-shirts: The REWIND Collection: Harlem Institute of Fashion, 2021

Polyester T-shirts

For this object, McCall combines three T-shirts into one garment that can be worn in six unique ways. Each style—from poncho to hoodie to shawl and beyond—brings dynamic versatility to traditional T-shirts. This *Triple T-shirt* is an ode to the former

Harlem Institute of Fashion (HIF), an organization dedicated to elevating Black talent in the fashion industry. McCall made his professional debut in 1988 at a HIF show. The center shirt spotlights McCall and HIF founder, Lois K. Alexander- Lane. The left shirt features the logo of HIF's subsidiary, the Black Fashion Museum, and on the right are business cards from some of the designers, models, photographers, and administrators McCall met while at HIF.

Aunt Viv's Bottle, c. 1970

Michelob beer bottle, cotton twine, wooden beads, metal ring, felt Private collection of Vivian Fambro McCord.

This is one of the earliest visual artworks created by McCall. After recognizing and helping to support her nephew's emerging talent, Aunt Viv requested that McCall make her something special. He decided to transform a Michelob beer bottle into an abstract sculpture using the knotting skill of macramé. The body of the work has square knots and the bottom has a clove hitch knot.

McCall learned how to macramé during his early teenage years, and it's the same skill he used decades later to create Button Armor Ensemble.

Label Whore I, 2015

Assorted fashion labels, large ball chain

With this work, McCall upcycles clothing tags (mostly from his own wardrobe) to form a necklace. The cheeky title pokes fun at consumerism culture and society's obsession with high-end labels as status symbols.

Which designers and brands do you spot on the necklace?

Confessions, c. 1983

Assorted fabrics, zippers, embroidery thread, upcycled Lee denim overalls

On this pair of overalls, McCall reveals some of the people and things he values. He sews onto the denim the names of family members, friends, song titles, and lyrics from some of his favorite songs, alongside lyrics for Strange Beauties Theme, a song he wrote for his short-lived punk rock band (Strange Beauties).

The embroidery he executes here would later inspire him to experiment with thread in his button works. He learned to not only use the thread as a practical connector, but as a decorative accent as well as seen through his “webbing” technique in works such as Button Yoke and Apron Ensemble: Flower Power.

Visit the *Buttons on the Soul* section for a photo of McCall wearing this pair of overalls.

Jar of Buttons, 2024

Assorted buttons (mother-of-pearl, metal, plastic,

et al.), mason jars, shelves

Jar of Buttons is a site-specific installation in tribute to the buttons across households that serve as keepsakes and sources of inspiration. Starting in the industrial period, having a jar of buttons in one's home (usually to make or repair clothes) became common. McCall's own button journey began at the age of 19 with his mother's jar of buttons that he discovered in the basement of their home. Ever since then he has been fascinated by this humble material that also has distinct links to Black history.

During the 19th century in the United States, buttons were used to identify the enslaved. In the early 20th century, in parts of Africa such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, buttons decorated prestigious hats for members of their elite group called Bwami. Through the mid-20th century memory jugs to memorialize the dead were found with buttons on them, relating to a ritual practiced mainly in the South that is said to have origins in Central Africa's Bakongo, aka Kongo, culture. And, as within Beau's household,

they've also been collected and preserved in jars that are tied to personal memories and experiences.

Here McCall celebrates buttons for their sentimental value, ability to inspire, connection to Black history and culture, and universal appeal.

Scan here to listen to oral history recordings with select button collectors and enthusiasts.



*darkmuskoilegyptiancrystals&floridawater/
redpotionno.1, 2014*

Assorted buttons (mother-of-pearl, rhinestone, cloth, et al.), embroidery thread, cotton fabric, cast iron tub. Commissioned by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

In the creation of this work, McCall was inspired by

the poem one from Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. He depicts the climax of the poem when lady in red, after giving herself to a lover—and cycling through emotions of possible regret or ambivalence—prepares a bath to wash away his scent and the glittering elements she uses to adorn her body. Thereby, McCall's imagining of this bathtub becomes a spiritual and ritualistic sanctuary and site of one's search for inner peace and self-love.

McCall's intentionality in the buttons he selects for each work is brilliantly manifested here through buttons of iridescent, shimmering, and vibrant hues that elevate the work with visual splendor. The poetic approach to the source material's theme combined with skillful artistry place it in conversation with other artworks inspired by the work of writers such as Sir John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1851-1852) inspired by Shakespeare's Hamlet; and Salvador Dalí's *Mad Tea Party* (1969) inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

Scan here to read one from Ntozake Shange's *for*

colored girls...



Until We're Free, 2012

Plastic buttons, glow-in-the-dark embroidery thread, denim, burlap, plexiglass

McCall reimagines the U.S. flag using four crowns and the colors of the Pan- African flag: red, black, and green. Since its adoption by Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1920, the flag has represented Black freedom and unity. Thus, McCall transforms the American flag into a symbol of the perseverance of Black people seeking freedom and social justice throughout the African diaspora.

The title is from the 1973 self-titled album by Elaine Brown (the first and only female leader of the Black Panther Party). With this work, McCall joins a chorus of artists who have used the Pan-African flag colors in their work(s) and/or been

inspired by the Black Panther Party such as David Hammons and Black Panther Party members Emory Douglas and Dorothy E. Hayes.

This was the first visual art piece McCall debuted after returning from his professional hiatus in 2012.

World Spinnin' on a 45 (B-Side), 2023

Assorted buttons (metal, cloth, rhinestone, plastic, et al.), embroidery thread, polywood, cotton fabric

This is the companion piece to McCall's earlier work, *World Spinnin' on a 45*. Both works are inspired by the 1972 song by The Staple Singers, *We The People*. This socially conscious song calling for unity arrived in a year that included the Vietnam War, Watergate, the Black Power Movement, and the early days of disco. To celebrate the power of music to unite people and spread joy, McCall used decorative buttons

featuring smiley faces, musical instruments, and the peace emblem. Thus, here is the world spinning in harmony on a 45 rpm (revolutions per minute) adapter.

This is McCall's first visual artwork to include his "webbing" technique. The embroidery thread is woven not only through the buttons, but also on top of them, to create a weblike pattern, or in this case, simulate the scratches on a worn-out vinyl record.

Wondering what a 45 rpm adapter is? According to ElectroHome.com, "It is a small metal or plastic piece that is placed in the center of a 45 rpm record. The adapter allows for the record to be played on a turntable's 78 rpm or LP size spindle."

Hood Classic: Domino Kool, 2013

Plastic buttons, embroidery thread, wood shelf, doilies, plastic jar, plexiglass

This work is part of McCall's "Hood Classic" series which finds him subverting the negative

connotations attached with labeling items as "hood." Yet, in this work he not only celebrates, but also calls into question the role such items play within our culture.

For McCall, Kool-Aid was a popular drink growing up in the "hood." It simultaneously recalls the joys of youth while being a sugary unhealthy choice of beverage that was mostly targeted to economically disadvantaged families.

McCall captures the duality of this popular drink through his choice of two buttons for the Kool-Aid Man's eyes: a skeleton head (left) and a smiley face (right). Like some of the best pop art this work makes us simultaneously revere and question the mass culture products we (literally) consume. What does Kool-Aid mean to you?

A Harlem Hangover: Tiiipsssy, 2012

Plastic buttons, metallic embroidery thread, wine bottle, denim, felt

A Harlem Hangover: Pop, pOp, poP, 2012

Plastic buttons, metallic embroidery thread, wine bottle, denim, felt

In the series "A Harlem Hangover," McCall is inspired by joyous late-night parties from the Harlem Renaissance era to current times. Each bottle signifies a different type of partygoer and the relationship between spirits and social gatherings. Tiiipsssy is the unabashed (and sometimes clumsy) party enthusiast who accidentally knocks over a bottle of wine. *Pop, pOp, poP*, is the party ringleader who makes every gathering a festive occasion as portrayed here with the arrangement of buttons into overflowing champagne bubbles. Collectively, the works reflect the use of spirits as a social lubricant for special occasions that often leads to humorous and pleasantly unforgettable memories.

ABCDEFU, 2016

Plywood and plastic buttons, embroidery thread, cotton fabric, wood chair, rulers, yardsticks

ABCDEFU is informed by the traumatic physical and mental abuse, and racism, experienced by McCall and numerous students in Catholic school during the 1960s. The crosshair represents being a target of abuse by nuns. It is comprised of rulers and yardsticks which the nuns used to beat students. These items are adorned with buttons spelling out phrases such as "Yes, sister," and "No, sister."

The school chair is the site of pain, reflection, healing, and holy revenge as McCall gives a middle finger to the Catholic school system using buttons spelling out "FU." Adding levity, McCall arranges pink buttons into wads of chewing gum under the chair and desk.

Back then, McCall was able to get some immediate revenge when a nun punched him and he courageously hit her back. But mostly during this challenging time, McCall's refuge was in creating art and here he once again demonstrates craft's cathartic power.

Strange Beauties III: Antoine aka DeeDee

Somemore, Beau McCall, and Tracy Monroe, 2020

Collage printed with dye sublimation on aluminum

From the book and series *REWIND: MEMORIES ON REPEAT*

Strange Beauties X: Antoine aka DeeDee

Somemore, Beau McCall, and Tracy Monroe, 2020

Collage printed with dye sublimation on aluminum

From the book and series *REWIND: MEMORIES ON REPEAT*

Antoine aka DeeDee Somemore and Beau McCall
I, 2020 Collage printed with dye sublimation on
aluminum

From the book and series *REWIND: MEMORIES ON REPEAT*

Beau McCall and Tracy Monroe I, 2020

Collage printed with dye sublimation on aluminum

From the book and series *REWIND: MEMORIES ON REPEAT*

*Strange Beauties VIII: Tracy Monroe, Beau McCall,
and Antoine aka DeeDee Somemore, 2020*

Collage printed with dye sublimation on aluminum
From the book and series *REWIND: MEMORIES ON
REPEAT*

*Strange Beauties XIII: Antoine aka DeeDee
Somemore, Tracy Monroe, and Beau McCall, 2020*
Collage printed with dye sublimation on aluminum
From the book and series *REWIND: MEMORIES ON
REPEAT*

The collages on display capture McCall with two of his deceased friends: Tracy Monroe and Antoine aka DeeDee Somemore. Along with McCall they formed a punk rock band named Strange Beauties. The short-lived band (circa 1983-1986) created an important outlet for their creative expression and exploration of sexuality and gender-nonconforming identities.

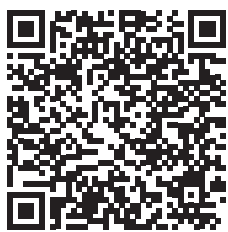
In this collage, McCall reimagines one of the

band's promotional photos. The eclectic choice of buttons, yellow highlighter, and striking lines across the band's countenances creates a punk rock aesthetic that is both edgy and glamorous. Each collage is created by hand using McCall's personal archival photos and papers, along with images from his button-embellished artwork.

Once completed the works are then scanned and printed on metal for luminosity.

Additional collages in this series (included in McCall's debut artists' book which you may peruse in the gallery) include eight of his other close friends. Collectively, the images capture the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, from Philadelphia to New York, during the LGBTQ+ rights movement, the height of disco music, and the AIDS crisis. Through this intimate series McCall represents the experiences, hopes, challenges, and heart of the LGBTQ+ community.

Please scan here to watch McCall discuss this series and to listen to the Strange Beauties demo recordings.



The Conversation, 2017-2023

Assorted buttons (cloth, metal, bone, et al.),
embroidery thread, burlap, plastic bags.

Commissioned by The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach
Art Gallery, Columbia University.

Who gets to have a seat at the table in America?
It's a question the Harlem Renaissance literary
force, Langston Hughes addressed in his 1926
poem, *I, Too*. Published during the Jim Crow era,
the poem was written to empower Black people
living under racial segregation laws.

Here, the "table," which the poem's protagonist
longs to join, is reimagined by McCall to reflect the
nation's history of racism, slavery, and systemic
oppression. The base of the table consists of plaid
plastic bags repurposed to reference the American

flag's red, white, and blue color scheme.

A corner of burlap with button stars represents the 50 states. An assortment of floral buttons and stacked buttons symbolize the growth the nation saw as a result of enslaved labor and destructive capitalism.

Enacting the wish of Hughes's protagonist to have a seat at the table, McCall and StoryCorps invited guests to conduct oral history recordings about living in America. Thereby, McCall honors the message within the poem by amplifying the voices of the underrepresented.

Scan here to listen to the recordings and read Langston Hughes's poem *I, Too*.



Collaboration with Yael Acher "KAT" Modiano, *The Land of Buttons*, 2024

Sound piece, 3 min. 9 sec.

Early on, McCall became aware of the sounds of buttons while creating and digging his hands through buttons in various containers. Thus, the high-pitch chime of mother-of-pearl buttons and the muted whisper of leather buttons along with other button materials inspired this work.

In collaboration with flutist and electro-acoustic composer, Yael Acher "KAT" Modiano, McCall created this multilayered electro-acoustic audio.

McCall's debut sound artwork is composed only with samples from recordings of his voice, breath, and the various sounds he made with buttons in his hands, tapped against each other, and pulled, dropped, and strewn across his home studio's wooden floor. The samples are slightly manipulated and produced with audio effects. The track begins with McCall reciting each type of button as he creates their sound and then the work builds into a musical rhythm with all of the various sounds layered. The result is a playful, haunting, and futuristic soundscape for his creative world which he dubs, *The Land of Buttons*.

Scan here to listen to *The Land of Buttons*.



Photograph of Beau McCall (right) with his parents Harold McCall (center) and Velma Fambro McCall (left) in Philadelphia, PA, 1957. Photographer unidentified. Private collection of Beau McCall.

McCall's parents were the first major influencers on his creative identity. He was inspired by his mother's use of bold color and modern furniture when decorating their home. Plus, throughout the years she encouraged his talents by placing him in arts and crafts programs, teaching him how to sew, and gifting him with buttons. Both of his parents' impeccable sense of style gave him

an appreciation and understanding of the power of visuals and how to create something that is memorable.

Photograph of Beau McCall at St. Theresa's Catholic School in Philadelphia, PA, c. 1964. Photographer unidentified. Private collection of Beau McCall.

Despite his smile in this photograph, McCall's experience in Catholic school was anything but a happy situation. He was one of many students who experienced traumatic physical and mental abuse, and racism, from nuns in Catholic school during the 1960s. In the work on view, *ABCDEFU*, he channels that experience into art.

Class photograph featuring Beau McCall (middle row, second from the left) and his cousin, Miche Fambro (front row, fourth from the right) at The Mastery Charter School Shoemaker Campus, formerly the William Shoemaker Junior High School in Philadelphia, PA, 1968. Photographer

unidentified. Private collection of Beau McCall.

After his parents became aware of the abuse he experienced at Catholic school, McCall entered a public junior high school. Still traumatized, he remained painfully shy and reserved but was grateful to be removed from his former environment. Another highlight was that his cousin, Miche Fambro, went to the same school. McCall would later rely on his cousin—an accomplished musician and singer-songwriter—to play all the instruments on several demo recordings for his punk rock band, Strange Beauties.

Photograph of Beau McCall wearing his *Confessions* creation outside of Hardee's restaurant in Philadelphia, PA, 1985. Photographer unidentified. Private collection of Beau McCall.

Check out these overalls on display in the *Buttons Off!* section to discover how McCall's buttonless works influenced his practice.

Photograph of Beau McCall (left) wearing button necklaces he created and founder of Harlem Institute of Fashion (HIF), Lois K. Alexander-Lane (right) backstage at a HIF show at the Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. State Office Building, c. early 1990s. Photographer unidentified. Private collection of Beau McCall.

HIF was an organization dedicated to elevating Black talent in the fashion industry. McCall made his professional wearable art debut in 1988 at a HIF show and remained an established force within the collective until circa 1995. During this time, he found what he calls his "creative home" where he further developed his skills, connected with other creatives, and gained significant career opportunities

View his tribute to HIF in the *Buttons Off!* section

Photograph of actor Michael K. Williams in wearable art by Beau McCall backstage at the 11th Annual Monarch Awards at Sardi's Restaurant in

New York City, 1991. Photograph by and in the private collection of Beau McCall.

During the early days of his career, McCall met numerous notables (e.g. Tupac Shakur, Al Sharpton, and Bethann Hardison), some even before they were famous. Here is the soon-to-be acclaimed actor, Michael K. Williams (*The Wire*) modeling McCall's *Button Jacket: Just Bee*.

View the piece in the Buttons on the Body section.

Photograph of literary legend Ntozake Shange (left) and Beau McCall (right) at the 11th Annual Monarch Awards at Sardi's Restaurant in New York City, 1991. Photographer unidentified. Private collection of Beau McCall.

McCall didn't know it then but over 20 years after this picture was taken he would debut a commissioned artwork celebrating Shange's groundbreaking choreopoem, *for colored girls...* Shange's response to the work was enthusiastic, resulting in a joyous full circle moment for McCall.

View McCall's *darkmuskoilegyptiancrystals&floridawater/redpotionno.1*, in the Buttons on the Mind section.

Photograph of Beau McCall (bottom row), models (left to right) Cheryl Colson, Krystal Spriggs, Clarence Treadwell, LaToya, and Tuesday P. Brooks in wearable art by McCall, in the foyer of the Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. State Office Building during the "Uptown Saturday Nite" fashion show by the Harlem Institute of Fashion, c. early 1990s. Photographer unidentified. Private collection of Beau McCall.

Photograph of hip-hop pioneer Monie Love (middle) in wearable art by Beau McCall, unidentified child, and McCall (right), in Harlem, NY, c. early 1990s. Photographer unidentified. Private collection of Beau McCall.

Photograph of Beau McCall wearing his button sweater creation at a promotional photoshoot in

New York City, 1989. Photograph by Larry Naar.
Private collection of Beau McCall.

McCall is wearing *Button Sweater: Black*, the earliest example of his button-embellished wearable art created circa 1982. Learn more about it in the Buttons on the Body section.

Photograph of Beau McCall (second from right) with his siblings Guy McCall, Marti McCall, Chance McCall (left to right), and their mother, Velma Fambro McCall (front) in Philadelphia, PA, 2022. Photograph by Stevi Marie McCall Richburg.
Private collection of Beau McCall.

Family has always been important to McCall and a deep source of inspiration for his practice. "Family is what keeps me grounded and able to thrive as a human being," he says. "My siblings always acknowledged my creativity, even when they didn't understand it. They take great pride in what I do. As the eldest sibling it makes me feel good to let them know anything is possible and it keeps me motivated. On occasion, they even give me buttons

to use in my work."

Photograph of Beau McCall (left) and his life partner, Souleo (right), at Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, MA, 2023. Photograph by Will Howcroft. Private collection of Beau McCall.

Ever since 2010, McCall and Souleo have formed a romantic and creative bond through buttons. After McCall shared his artwork with Souleo, the latter supported him in making a professional return from hiatus. In turn, McCall's work was one of the motivating factors for Souleo becoming a curator.

"When I met Souleo it was a lightning bolt of inspiration that made me want to start fresh again," says McCall. "I finally had a partner interested in me and my art. Souleo is an essential part of what we call 'The Land of Buttons' as my muse, curator, consultant, and all-around support system."

Early business card for Beau McCall, c. 1992.

Designed by and in the private collection of Beau McCall.

Original version of Beau McCall's current business card, c. 2011. Designed by Beau McCall. Graphic production by Alice V. Butts. Private collection of Beau McCall.

Current business card for Beau McCall, 2013. Designed by Beau McCall. Graphic production by Alice V. Butts. Private collection of Beau McCall.

Overbrook High School (Philadelphia, PA)
Yearbook, 1975. Private collection of Beau McCall.

Before he reinvented himself as Beau McCall, he was known by his birth name: Harold Fambro. After his parents married, his surname was changed to McCall. Here he is (second row from the top and second from the left) with his cousin, Clifton M. Fambro aka Miche Fambro (left from McCall). As this yearbook demonstrates, McCall

was a popular student in high school known for his creativity and style.

The Harlem Institute of Fashion (HIF) 27th Anniversary Program, 1993. Private collection of Beau McCall.

On this program, HIF founder Lois K. Alexander-Lane requests that McCall bring one of his "showstopper" wearable artworks for the runway show. Indeed, McCall's button ensembles were some of the most popular pieces at the HIF runway shows and Alexander-Lane's comment attests to the power of his work.

Film stills from the set of *Quartier Mozart* featuring actors wearing a button jacket by Beau McCall, c. 1991. Photographer unidentified. Private collection of Beau McCall.

The Philadelphia Tribune press clippings (photocopy), 1975. Private collection of Beau

McCall.

With the encouragement of his high school teacher, Dolores Jones, McCall entered a popular art contest sponsored by the Gimbels department store in cooperation with the Philadelphia School District. He ended up winning one of the top four prizes in the outstanding crafts and sculpture category and landing in *The Philadelphia Tribune*. Here we can see the type of work McCall created—in this case a rug sculpture—prior to buttons becoming his primary medium.

Women's Wear Daily press clipping (photocopy), 1992. Private collection of Beau McCall.

McCall's first major press opportunity came with this *Women's Wear Daily* write-up by award-winning journalist and fashion expert, Constance C.R. White. It is notable as it shows how McCall has successfully blurred the lines between fashion and wearable art, with his work being praised as the latter in what's been referred to as the "Bible of fashion."

Carpazine magazine cover featuring Beau McCall, 2019. Private collection of Beau McCall.

This magazine is significant as it is McCall's first-ever cover story. The photos were shot by Greg Frederick.

American Craft magazine, 2018. Private collection of Beau McCall.

Several years after his successful return from hiatus, McCall was profiled by the esteemed *American Craft* magazine where writer Joyce Lovelace proclaimed him to be the "Button Man" writing, "In the hands of Beau McCall, humble buttons become poetry."

Sisters in Style magazine, 1996. Private collection of Beau McCall.

Here, McCall received one of his earliest spreads in

a magazine to showcase his wearable art. Several pieces in the spread are on view in the Buttons on the Body section.

Ultimate Black Hair Guide magazine, 2000. Private collection of Beau McCall.

Clam magazine, 2022. Private collection of Beau McCall.

Beau McCall's art supplies (a vintage Maxwell House coffee jar of buttons, embroidery thread, sewing needles, denim swatches, scissors, and a seam ripper), c. late 1970s-2023. Private collection of Beau McCall.

With these supplies, McCall turns buttons into works of art. His button journey began with a jar of buttons at the age of 19. While this isn't the original jar, it is a version of his mother's jar of buttons that he discovered in the basement of their home that forever changed his life.