

Essex Hemphill: Take care of your blessings

[Press Release](#)

[Press Images](#)

[Checklist](#)

[Wall Text](#)

[Public Programs](#)

[Upcoming Exhibitions](#)

May 17–August 31, 2025



PHILLIPS

The Phillips Collection

UPDATED RELEASE
MAY 16, 2025

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The Phillips Collection Presents *Essex Hemphill: Take care of your blessings*

Exploring the intertextual relationship between the writings of poet and activist Essex Hemphill and contemporary visual art.



WASHINGTON, DC—The Phillips Collection presents [*Essex Hemphill: Take care of your blessings*](#), the first exhibition to chart the interdisciplinary relationship between poet, writer, and activist Essex Hemphill (1957–1995) and contemporary visual art. *Take care of your blessings* highlights Hemphill's influential relationships with visual artists who, like him, created genre-defying works that explore race, culture, community, gender, love, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS. While Hemphill died of AIDS-related illness at just 38, his work persists, reflected in visual dialogues with his contemporaries and inheritors. **Organized by The Phillips Collection, the exhibition will be on view May 17 through August 31, 2025.**

Raised in Washington, DC, Essex Hemphill emerged as a vital and dynamic voice of the DC arts scene in the 1980s and 1990s. His poetry—raw, politically charged, and deeply personal—challenged societal norms and bridged the worlds of literature and visual art. His influence endures through the work of his friends and collaborators, such as **Sir Isaac Julien**, **Joyce Wellman**, and **Lyle Ashton Harris** as well as the work of a generation of younger artists including **Diedrick Brackens**, **Tiona Nekkia McClodden**, and **Clifford Prince King**, who have found inspiration in Hemphill's artistic and political vision.

"This exhibition is a powerful tribute to Hemphill's profound impact on shaping an interdisciplinary arts scene," says **Jonathan P. Binstock**, **Vradenburg Director & CEO of The Phillips Collection**. "It celebrates his contributions to poetry and activism while honoring Washington, DC's significant cultural legacy in contemporary art, a legacy we are proud to highlight and support."

The exhibition's title, *Take care of your blessings*, is drawn from Hemphill's personal signature and highlights the ways in which his legacy of honesty and courage lives on through the work of others. "This exhibition honors the lesser-known connections between Hemphill's literary work and the array of visual artists who knew or have been inspired by his writings," says **Camille Brown, Associate Curator at The Phillips Collection**. "It reflects the deep roots of his legacy, which has continued to resonate profoundly across time."

The exhibition features several works by Hemphill's contemporaries, such as **Lyle Ashton Harris**, whose work explores themes of representation and cultural memory. Harris's *The Watering Hole* (1996) engages with Black culture through a series of photographs that question how Black culture is represented, consumed, and appropriated in media. DC-based artist **Joyce Wellman's** *Someone Different* (1987) was featured in a 1988 interdisciplinary program organized by Hemphill titled *Dear Muthafuckin' Dreams* in which his poetry was performed over projections of visual art.

Among Hemphill's contemporary inheritors, **Tiona Nekkia McClodden's** *THE BRASS RAIL (After Essex)* (2017) reimagines a rail used by patrons at the Brass Rail, a gay bar in Washington, DC, which operated from 1967–1996. McClodden utilizes archival materials, rituals, and ceremonies to combat the erasure of queer Black creators, forging a kind of posthumous dialogue with the work of artists like Hemphill. **Diedrick Bracken's** tapestries narrativize allegorical compositions rooted in literature, folklore, history, and poetry, as is the case in *the night is my shepherd* (2022), drawing inspiration directly from Hemphill's writings. The communion of these artists and works reflects Hemphill's ongoing influence, revealing a local, national, and international network of artists creating innovative, genre-expanding work that spans time, mediums, and place.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a series of programming, including film screenings on [May 24](#) of works such as *Looking for Langston* (1989) and *Paris is Burning* (1990), and a poetry reading and discussion on [June 14](#) featuring artists and friends of Hemphill, including Gregory Adams, Jericho Brown, Lyle Ashton Harris, Wayson Jones, Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Danez Smith, and more. For more information, visit phillipscollection.org/events.

Take care of your blessings was organized with the support of an advisory committee—many of whom were Hemphill's friends and collaborators—whose insights and expertise were vital to the exhibition and the accompanying publication: Dr. Darius Bost, Associate Professor of Black Studies and Gender & Women's Studies, University of Chicago; Brian Freeman, co-producer of *Tongues Untied*; Maleke Glee, writer and former Director of STABLE; Wayson Jones, artist and performance partner of Essex Hemphill; Ethelbert Miller, poet, writer, professor, and Hemphill's obituarist; Dr. Charles I. Nero, Professor of Rhetoric, Film, and Screen Studies at Bates College; Michelle Parkerson, Assistant Professor in Film and Media Arts at Temple University; and Dr. James Smalls, Professor and Chair of Visual Arts, Art History, and Museum Studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

ARTISTS

Diedrick Brackens
Sharon Farmer
Lyle Ashton Harris
Sir Isaac Julien

Clifford Prince King
Glenn Ligon
Tiona Nekkia McClodden
Richard Bruce Nugent

Shikeith
Joyce Wellman



EXHIBITION SUPPORT

The exhibition is organized by The Phillips Collection.

Essex Hemphill: Take care of your blessings is made possible by Teiger Foundation.

Teiger Foundation

Presented with essential support of the Carolyn Alper Fund for Contemporary Art and The Marion F. Goldin Charitable Fund.

Additional support is provided by Daniel W. Hamilton and an anonymous donor.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue published by The Phillips Collection and designed by Common Name LLC. The catalogue features contributions by exhibition curator Camille Brown, as well as the following noted professors and contemporaries of Hemphill: Brian Freeman, Maleke Glee, Dr. James Smalls, and Ajamu X (FRPS). The exhibition and catalogue also correspond with New Direction's publication of *Love is a Dangerous Word: the Selected Poems of Essex Hemphill*, a compilation of selected writing from Hemphill's only published full-length collection, long out of print. Available at the museum gift shop and online at shopphillipscollection.org.

IMAGES: Lyle Ashton Harris, *Essex Hemphill*, *LA Contemporary Exhibitions*, Los Angeles, 1992, Chromogenic print, printed 2025, 15 x 20 15/16 in. © Lyle Ashton Harris; Isaac Julien, *Pas de Deux No. 2 (Looking for Langston Vintage Series)*, 1989/2016, Ilford classic silver gelatin fine art paper, mounted on aluminum, 22 7/8 x 29 3/8 in., The Beth and Richard Marcus Collection.

IMAGE GALLERY

High-resolution press images are available upon request. Please contact lcantrell@phillipscollection.org.

ABOUT THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION

Founded in 1921, The Phillips Collection is a welcoming home for all where the vision and spirit of artists thrive in intimate settings. As the first museum of modern art in the United States, the Phillips houses one of the world's most celebrated Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and modern art collections, and continues to grow its permanent collection with the work of important living artists. Its distinctive domestically scaled architecture combines three structures built over more than 125 years, among them the former home of the founders, Duncan and Marjorie Phillips. The Phillips's impact extends nationally and internationally through its diverse, scholarly exhibitions; award-winning education programs for educators, students, and adults; and renowned Phillips Music series. Popular and impactful programs include those focused on art and wellness, its festive monthly Phillips after 5 events, and intimate Living Room talks. Through authentic programs and partnerships at Phillips@THEARC, the museum's satellite location in Southeast DC, the Phillips is able to extend its reach into Wards 7 and 8 and Prince George's County, Maryland. The Phillips Collection is a private, non-government museum, supported primarily by donations.

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PRESS IMAGES

Essex Hemphill: Take care of your blessings

May 17–August 31, 2025

Lyle Ashton Harris

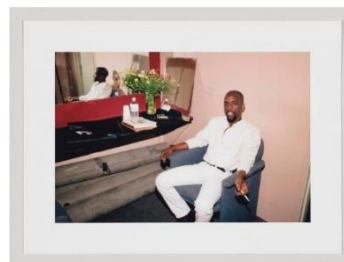
Essex Hemphill, LA Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles

1992

Chromogenic print, printed 2025

15 x 20 15/16 in.

© Lyle Ashton Harris



Shikeith

Visiting Hours

2022

Archival inkjet print on Photo Rag Baryta paper

49 15/16 x 60 7/8 in.

© Shikeith

Courtesy of Yossi Milo, New York



Isaac Julien

Pas de Deux No. 2 (Looking for Langston Vintage Series)

1989/2016

Ilford classic silver gelatin fine art paper, mounted on aluminum

22 7/8 x 29 3/8 in.

The Beth and Richard Marcus Collection



Tiona Nekkia McClodden

THE BRASS RAIL (After Essex)

2017

Brass with steel

48 x 2 1/4 x 3 3/8 in.

Courtesy of the artist



Page 2—Press Images: Essex Hemphill: Take care of your blessings

Lyle Ashton Harris

The Watering Hole III

1996

Chromogenic print

35 1/2 x 29 in.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of
Agnes Gund



Diedrick Brackens

the night is my shepherd

2022

Cotton and acrylic yarn

84 x 82 in.

Rubell Collection, Miami and Washington, DC



Joyce Wellman

Someone Different

1987

Oil paint stick on paper drawing

50 x 38 in.

Courtesy of the artist



Clifford Prince King

Conditions

2018

Chromogenic print

24 x 16 in.

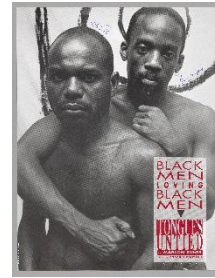
Courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, NY and
STARS, Los Angeles



Poster announcement for Wayson Jones and
Essex Hemphill performance at d.c. space
Courtesy of Wayson Jones



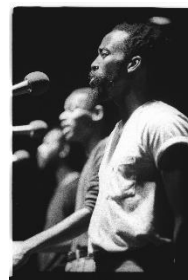
Poster for *Tongues Untied* by Marlon Riggs,
featuring Essex Hemphill, 1989
Courtesy of Brian Freeman



Essex Hemphill performing in Washington, DC,
the 1980s
© Sharon Farmer/sfphotoworks



Wayson Jones, Christopher Prince, and Essex
Hemphill perform Saturday, May 31, 1986, at d.c.
space in Washington, DC
© Sharon Farmer/sfphotoworks



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CHECKLIST

Essex Hemphill: Take care of your blessings

May 17–August 31, 2025

Richard Bruce Nugent

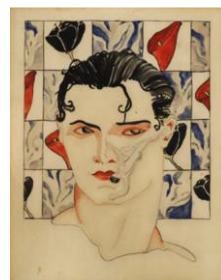
Smoke, Lillies and Jade

c. 1925

Black ink and watercolor with graphite underdrawing on paperboard

11 1/2 x 9 in.

Howard University Gallery of Art



Sharon Farmer

Hope

1980

Inkjet print

11 x 14 in.

Courtesy of the artist



Sharon Farmer

Living Monuments

1980s

Inkjet print

11 x 14 in.

Courtesy of the artist



Sharon Farmer

Mrs. Moses

1980s

Inkjet print

11 x 14 in.

Courtesy of the artist



Sharon Farmer

Sisterfire

1980s

11 x 14 in.

Courtesy of the artist



Isaac Julien

Pas de Deux No. 2 (Looking for Langston Vintage Series)

1989/2016

Ilford classic silver gelatin fine art paper, mounted on aluminum

22 7/8 x 29 3/8 in.

The Beth and Richard Marcus Collection



Joyce Wellman

Someone Different

1987

Oil paint stick on paper drawing

50 x 38 in.

Courtesy of the artist



Isaac Julien

Portrait in Blue: Essex Hemphill

1996 (Remastered 2005)

Video: 4:42

Courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery



Lyle Ashton Harris

Essex Hemphill, Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, and Akilah Nayo Oliver, Hobart Street, Los Angeles

Early 1990s

Chromogenic print, printed 2025

15 x 20 15/16 in.

© Lyle Ashton Harris

Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York



Lyle Ashton Harris

Essex Hemphill, LA Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles

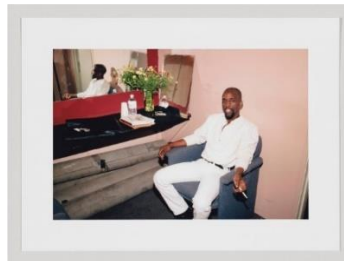
1992

Chromogenic print, printed 2025

15 x 20 15/16 in.

© Lyle Ashton Harris

Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York



Lyle Ashton Harris

Marlon Riggs, Sekou Shepard, Bobby Shephard, Chris Hall, and Essex Hemphill on production set of Black Is...Black Ain't (1994), Truce Between Crips and Bloods, Los Angeles

1992

Chromogenic print, printed 2025

15 x 20 15/16 in.

© Lyle Ashton Harris

Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York



Lyle Ashton Harris

Essex Hemphill, Hobart Street, Los Angeles

1992

Chromogenic print, printed 2025

15 x 20 15/16 in.

© Lyle Ashton Harris

Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York



Lyle Ashton Harris

Kobena Mercer, Essex Hemphill, and Samuel Delany, Black Nations/Queer Nations? Lesbian and Gay Sexualities in the African Diaspora conference, Graduate Center, City University of New York, March 9–11

1995

Chromogenic print, printed 2025

15 x 20 15/16 in.

© Lyle Ashton Harris

Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York



Lyle Ashton Harris

The Watering Hole III

1996

Chromogenic print

35 1/2 x 29 in.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Agnes Gund



Lyle Ashton Harris

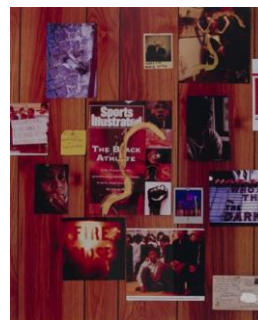
The Watering Hole IV

1996

Chromogenic print

35 1/2 x 29 in.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of
Agnes Gund



Lyle Ashton Harris

The Watering Hole VII

1996

Chromogenic print

35 1/2 x 29 in.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of
Agnes Gund



Glenn Ligon

Untitled (Stranger in the Village/Crowd #2)

2000

Coal dust, printing ink, oil stick, and adhesive on
screenprinted paper

40 x 53 1/4 in.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Acquired
through the generosity of The Friends of
Education of The Museum of Modern Art and
Marie-Josée Kravis, 2001



Tiona Nekkia McClodden

THE BRASS RAIL (After Essex)

2017

Brass with steel

48 x 2 1/4 x 3 3/8 in.

Courtesy of the artist



Clifford Prince King

Conditions

2018

Chromogenic print

24 x 16 in.

Courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, NY and
STARS, Los Angeles



Clifford Prince King

Night Sweats

2018

Chromogenic print

24 x 16 in.

Courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, NY and
STARS, Los Angeles



Clifford Prince King

Orange Peel and Biktarvy

2018

Chromogenic print

24 x 16 in.

Courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, NY and
STARS, Los Angeles



Clifford Prince King

Sonny and David

2019

Chromogenic print

24 x 16 in.

Courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, NY and
STARS, Los Angeles



Diedrick Brackens

the night is my shepherd

2022

Cotton and acrylic yarn

84 x 82 in.

Rubell Collection, Miami and Washington, DC



Shikeith

Visiting Hours

2022

Archival inkjet print on Photo Rag Baryta paper

49 15/16 x 60 7/8 in.

© Shikeith

Courtesy of Yossi Milo, New York



Clifford Prince King

David and Michael

2024

Chromogenic print

16 x 24 in.

Courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, NY and
STARS, Los Angeles



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WALL TEXT

Essex Hemphill: Take care of your blessings

May 17–August 31, 2025

Essex Hemphill: Take care of your blessings

"Some of us bake wonderfully, write, paint, do any number of things, have facilities with numbers that others don't have. Those are your blessings. Some of us are very strong and candid and some of us are nurturers or combinations of all of those things. Just be aware of what your particular things are and nurture them and use them toward a positive way of living."—Essex Hemphill

Essex Hemphill (1957–1995) was a poet, essayist, performer, and activist whose work explored the complexities of race, gender, sexuality, love, politics, and community during the height of the AIDS epidemic and the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. Through self-published chapbooks; his influential full-length collection *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry*; and contributions to anthologies, zines, and journals, Hemphill emerged as a luminary of the DC arts scene, gaining national and international recognition for his deeply personal and incendiary work.

Take care of your blessings explores the interdisciplinary relationship between Hemphill's writing and visual art, bringing together the work of artists who knew or collaborated with Hemphill during his life or created work decades later that speaks toward his writings. Their aesthetic responses explore themes such as the politics of representation, personal and collective memories, and queer desire. Their communion reveals a dynamic network of artists creating innovative, genre-expanding work that spans time, media, and place.

Hemphill, who was 38 when he succumbed to AIDS-related complications, signed his correspondence: "Take care of your blessings." This message is a reminder and a call to action, a note of affection and intention. It has also served as this exhibition's organizing principle—a way to view Hemphill's impact and a nod to the robust practices of artists who've engaged with his work. Finally, it's an acknowledgment of the extensiveness of Hemphill's blessings, a reflection of how the gifts we're given can multiply and outlast us, reified through the care and work of others.

Joyce Wellman

b. 1949, Brooklyn, New York; lives and works in Washington, DC

Someone Different

1987

Oil paint stick on paper drawing

Courtesy of the artist

In 1988, Essex Hemphill performed alongside Terence Johnson and Christopher Prince in the interdisciplinary program "Dear Muthafuckin Dreams" at Franklin Furnace in New York. In the program, aimed at contending with the myth of the American Dream—that hard work leads to success regardless of socio-economic standing—Hemphill, Johnson, and Prince recite poetry over projected images or "visuals" by artists Joyce Wellman, Sharon Farmer, and Ron Simmons.

This work by Wellman was paired with Hemphill's poem "Black Beans" in which the poet redefines wealth as a richness of love and desire, imbuing love with the power of transfiguration. Filled with swirling shapes and colors, Wellman's body of work—a network of coded messages, hidden signs,

and symbols—requires deciphering, not unlike the similes, metaphors, and visuals Hemphill conjures through his words.

Glenn Ligon

b. 1960, The Bronx, New York; lives and works in New York, New York

Untitled (Stranger in the Village/Crowd #2)

2000

Coal dust, printing ink, oil stick, and adhesive on screenprinted paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Acquired through the generosity of The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art and Marie-Josée Kravis, 2001

On October 16, 1995, hundreds of thousands of primarily Black men converged on the National Mall for a political demonstration known as the Million Man March, aimed at highlighting the social and economic issues faced by Black men. Atop an image from the march, Ligon places text from James Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village" which addresses the historical absences of Africans and African Americans from Western history.

In this work, Ligon draws from a conversation between Essex Hemphill and artist Isaac Julien published in the anthology *Speak My Name: Black Men on Masculinity and the American Dream* (1995) to consider how the march reflected contemporary debates around group identity and ideas of solidarity. Julien argued that the protest presented Black heteropatriarchy as a salve to vast inequities and questioned whether Black gay men should participate in the event; Hemphill viewed the visibility of Black gay men (both in the march and throughout contemporary culture) as vital to the affirmation of the existence of Black, gay male life. Ligon's work comments on the broadness of the experiences of Black men in the United States while spotlighting two writers who ushered in wholly original and urgent reflections on contemporary Black life.

Lyle Ashton Harris

b. 1965, The Bronx, New York; lives and works in New York, New York

Chromogenic prints, printed 2025

Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York

Essex Hemphill, Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, and Akilah Nayo Oliver, Hobart Street, Los Angeles

Early 1990s

Essex Hemphill, Hobart Street, Los Angeles

1992

Marlon Riggs, Sekou Shepard, Bobby Shephard, Chris Hall, and Essex Hemphill on production set of Black Is . . . Black Ain't (1994), Truce Between Crips and Bloods, Los Angeles

1992

Kobena Mercer, Essex Hemphill, and Samuel Delany, Black Nations/Queer Nations? Lesbian and Gay Sexualities in the African Diaspora conference, Graduate Center, City University of New York, March 9–

11

1995

Essex Hemphill, LA Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles
1992

Lyle Ashton Harris's *Ektachrome Archive* consists of a collection of photographs and journals that chronicle the emergence of a new generation of Black artists and scholars in the early 1980s and 1990s. Harris explains: "The images I produce offer a way for me to bear witness to myself... [while] also making a visual record of situations, friends and lovers, my families of choice, as witnesses to my belonging and to the community that we collectively create."

The images presented here—intimate, candid, and documentarian—record Essex Hemphill at events in Los Angeles and New York where he presented his writings.

Lyle Ashton Harris

b. 1965, The Bronx, New York; lives and works in New York, New York

The Watering Hole III, IV, VII

1996

Chromogenic prints

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Agnes Gund

Multimedia artist Lyle Ashton Harris cites Hemphill, his friend and contemporary, as a major influence in the creation of his nine-photograph series *The Watering Hole*. In the series, which draws its title from the metaphor of the watering hole as a place of restoration and violence, Harris photographs various forms of ephemera tacked on a wood-paneled backdrop: articles on Magic Johnson's HIV-positive status and Jeffrey Dahmer's murder trial, a *Sports Illustrated* cover, and a Donna Summer calendar. By combining various media adjacent to Black culture that spans time, *The Watering Hole* becomes a reflection on how Black culture is represented, consumed, appropriated, adapted, or negated.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden

b. 1981, Blytheville, Arkansas; lives and works in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

THE BRASS RAIL (After Essex)

2017

Brass with steel

Courtesy of the artist

Named after the predominantly Black gay bar in Northwest DC, Essex Hemphill's "The Brass Rail" was a call and response choral poem performed by Hemphill and artist Wayson Jones. In her readymade sculpture *THE BRASS RAIL (After Essex)*, Tiona Nekkia McClodden reimagines a rail used by the patrons descending and ascending into what Hemphill referred to as the "raunchy Black gay club" where "drag queens ruled." Throughout McClodden's research-based practice, she utilizes archival materials, rituals, and ceremony to combat the erasure of queer Black creators, forging a kind of posthumous dialogue with the work of artists like Hemphill and poet and writer Brad Johnson.

Operating from 1967 to 1996, the Brass Rail, like many gay bars throughout the country during this time, was one of the few spaces where LGBTQ people in DC could find community. McClodden's sculpture then functions as an extension of her restorative work, a totem imbued with the "possibility of memory" monumentalized in time.

Sharon Farmer

b. 1951, Washington, DC; lives and works in Washington, DC

Inkjet prints

Courtesy of the artist

Perhaps no one captured Essex Hemphill more than Sharon Farmer, best known for her deeply felt images of the people and places of DC. Like Wellman's *Someone Different*, in the performance "Dear Muthafuckin Dreams," these photographs were paired with poems by Hemphill.

Hope

1980

Hope captures a minister standing in front of his church on 14th and U Street NW after losing the location of his ministry for the third time due to gentrification. The work accompanied Hemphill's "Heavy Corners," dedicated to the poet's friend, writer and editor Joseph Beam who passed away of AIDS-related illness in 1988. Farmer's photograph, with the minister foregrounded in a kind of defiance, parallels how Hemphill describes the importance of fortitude and community in the face of the AIDS epidemic.

Mrs. Moses

1980s

Mrs. Moses was paired with Hemphill's "Alpha Wave Disruptions," a poem written at the onset of the internet about mass surveillance and the relationship between technology, violence, visibility, and isolation. In the photograph, Sybil Moses sits alone at the Roosevelt Home for Seniors in DC, looking fearfully out of a window into darkness. Together, Hemphill's poem and Farmer's image communicated a sense of anxiety around changing times.

Living Monuments

1980s

Sisterfire

1980s

"Dear Dreams" culminated in the recitation of one of one of Hemphill's most well-known poems, "American Wedding," accompanied by Farmer's *Living Monuments* and *Sisterfire*, drawing an explicit connection to DC's cultural and historical landscape. In the poem, Hemphill provides a potent affirmation of gay love that prophesizes a "new world coming," one in which gay intimacy—represented by sexual gear, a wedding ring, and a condom—is openly expressed.

Sisterfire, featuring a sea of hands covered in rings and heavy bangles reaching toward the sky, was taken at the Takoma Park Festival which ran from 1982 to 1989 and was dedicated to women and lesbian musicians. The work nods to the feminist tilt to many of Hemphill's poems and demonstrates his recognition of the contributions of Black women—including his friends feminist scholar Barbara Smith and writer Audre Lorde—to his own practice as well as the American landscape.

Diedrick Brackens

b. 1989, Mexia, Texas; lives and works in Los Angeles, California

the night is my shepherd

2022

Cotton and acrylic yarn

Rubell Collection, Miami and Washington, DC

Diedrick Brackens's woven tapestries are allegorical compositions rooted in literature, folklore, history, and poetry. Part of a suite of works created in dialogue with Hemphill's writing, this tapestry alludes to the biblical verse "The Lord is my shepherd," mirroring Hemphill's own scriptural references in poems including "Where Seed Falls." In his poem "Tomb of Sorrow," Hemphill identifies Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park in DC as a cruising spot for gay men and speaks to the danger of using these places in search of physical, spiritual, and emotional respite, particularly during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Brackens's Black figures, whose facelessness imbues them with a kind of mythic presence, appear to inhabit one of these spaces. Three figures stand beneath an archway, one in shadow. Their communion is both public and private. The lone arm entering to the right of the composition alludes to further intimacies just out of view.

Richard Bruce Nugent

b. 1906, Washington, DC; d. 1987, Hoboken, New Jersey

Smoke, Lillies and Jade

c. 1925

Black ink and watercolor with graphite underdrawing on paperboard

Howard University Gallery of Art

In the introduction of *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, Essex Hemphill cites Harlem Renaissance writer Richard Bruce Nugent's "beautiful" and "daring" short story "Smoke, Lillies and Jade" as the first published work by a Black writer to examine queer desire. Published in *Fire!!*, the controversial African American avant-garde magazine, Nugent's short story follows a young artist named Alex as he explores queer and interracial love. In a watercolor of the same name, Nugent paints the object of Alex's affection, a chiseled man named Beauty, surrounded by visual motifs that occur throughout the story, including red calla lilies, black poppies, and tendrils of smoke.

Like Nugent, who was one of the few openly gay Black men writing during the 1920s and 1930s, Hemphill contends explicitly with desire and its related politics throughout his work. The earliest work in this exhibition, this watercolor demonstrates the line of artistic producers from which Hemphill emerged—bold, boundary-breaking, and interdisciplinary.

Isaac Julien

b. 1960, London, England; lives and works in London, England, and Santa Cruz, California

Pas de Deux No. 2 (Looking for Langston Vintage Series)

1989/2016

Ilford classic silver gelatin fine art paper, mounted on aluminum

The Beth and Richard Marcus Collection

Isaac Julien first met Essex Hemphill in 1986 through the Black Gay International Association in Los Angeles. They would go on to collaborate on *Looking for Langston*, Julien's iconic film that blends archival footage from the Harlem Renaissance with fictionalized depictions of dapper queer men. Julien conjures Langston Hughes as an openly gay cultural icon, placing him in a lineage of queer Black thinkers including Richard Bruce Nugent and James Baldwin. The insertion of Hughes into this pantheon vocalized historical silences, a result of rampant homophobia, that enabled the AIDS epidemic.

In Julien's words: "The whole question of bringing Langston out, so to speak, really united intergenerationally with what the poet Essex Hemphill was contesting. What does silence look like? What does oppression look like in those spaces? Essex Hemphill was . . . at the forefront of articulating that." Julien's work adds Hemphill to the continuum of dynamic, genre-shaping writers explicitly addressing Black, male, and gay experiences.

Isaac Julien

b. 1960, London, England; lives and works in London, England, and Santa Cruz, California

Portrait in Blue: Essex Hemphill

1996 (Remastered 2005)

Video: 4:42 min.

Courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery

Isaac Julien shot *Portrait in Blue: Essex Hemphill* shortly after Hemphill died of AIDS-related illness. In the same dream-like style as *Looking for Langston*, *Portrait in Blue* blends footage of Hemphill and artist Wayson Jones recording audio for *Looking for Langston* in a DC studio in 1988. Hemphill appears as if in a vision, laughing and reciting his own poetry as well as lines from Langston Hughes's poem "Tell Me," first published in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*:

Why should it be *my* loneliness,
Why should it be *my* song,
Why should it be *my* dream
deferred
overlong?

Clifford Prince King

b. 1993, Tucson, Arizona; lives and works in New York, New York

Chromogenic prints

Courtesy of the artist, Gordon Robichaux, NY and STARS, Los Angeles

Night Sweats

2018

Orange Peel and Biktarvy

2019

Clifford Prince King's photographs depict scenarios he's experienced, scenes he's observed, or images historically absent from public view. His images serve as visual compatriots to Hemphill's assertion that

within the sphere of literature, gay Black men must “look closely at intimacy and the constructions of our desire” providing “honest pictures” divorced from hypersexualized stereotypes of Black men.

King first encountered Hemphill’s work through the experimental documentary *Tongues Untied* directed by Marlon Riggs in 1989. Hemphill’s openness about living with HIV encouraged King to contend publicly with his own diagnosis. *Night Sweats* documents King’s body working to fight the infection, while *Orange Peel and Biktarvy* draws from the still life tradition, replacing a bounty of fruit with an orange peel and a tablet of HIV medication. Together they form a tender self-portrait of the artist.

Conditions

2018

In 1986, Essex Hemphill self-published the chapbook *Conditions* under his own imprint Be Bop Books. The cover image, shot by Sharon Farmer, captures the artist holding a knife and a rose, reflecting the juxtapositions Hemphill expresses in his poetry—love and hate, hope and despair, and desire and loathing. King restages the photograph with the same composition, though the subject looks directly into the camera. Taken nearly 30 years after Farmer’s, King’s photograph points toward a lineage of Black image makers of both text and image.

Sonny and David

2019

In *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, Hemphill writes of his “search for evidence of things not seen, evidence of black gay experiences on record, evidence of ‘being’ to contradict the pervasive invisibility of black gay men.” Rendered in warm hues, *Sonny and David*, which captures a private moment of queer connection, meets this prompt and functions as an “archive of closeness.”

David and Michael

2024

Shikeith

b. 1989, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; lives and works in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Visiting Hours

2022

Archival inkjet print on Photo Rag Baryta paper

Courtesy of Yossi Milo, New York

Shikeith, whose practice explores the psychological landscape of Black masculinity, captured this photograph on expired film from the 1950s causing the spectral glow, reminiscent of a portal, that stretches down the center of the image. The intimacy of the composition communicates a sense of longing for spiritual, physical, and emotional connection.

When conceptualizing the work, the artist drew from memories of his grandmother, who described a time of night when spirits would commune and visit the living as “visiting hours.” “Visiting Hours” is also the title Hemphill gave to a poem that speaks to his experience as a museum guard at the National Gallery of Art. In the work, Hemphill writes himself as a ghost, part of the often invisible

Page 8—Wall Text: *Essex Hemphill: Take care of your blessings*

workforce responsible for the protection of cultural artifacts. Blending familial and artistic inspirations, Shikeith's work functions as both a conjuring and a revival of memory.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

Diamonds Was in the Kitty

Published by the author, 1982

Plums

Published by the author, 1983

Earth Life: Poems

Be Bop Books, 1985

Conditions: Poems

Be Bop Books, 1986

Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry

Plume, 1992

Call for submissions to *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, 1989

Courtesy of Lisbet Tellefsen

Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men

First edition, edited by Essex Hemphill and conceptualized by Joseph Beam, published 1991, signed by Essex Hemphill, May 9, 1991

Courtesy of Wayson Jones

***Nethula Journal of Contemporary Literature*, Volume 1,**

Issue 1, with insert, 1979, and first issue celebration invitation, Savile Book Store, February 25, 1979

Courtesy of Kathy Anderson and Cynthia Lou Williams

In 1976, Essex Hemphill met Kathy Anderson and Cynthia Lou Williams at the University of Maryland.

Together they founded *Nethula*, which aimed to fill a dearth of platforms dedicated to the publication and distribution of Black writers and writers of color. They published two volumes with four total issues before disbanding in 1980. *Nethula* represents Hemphill's earliest venture in self-publishing.

Postcard for the DC performance group Cinque

Photograph by Sharon Farmer of Essex Hemphill, Larry Duckette, and Wayson Jones

Courtesy of Wayson Jones

***THING* magazine, No. 5**

Published by Robert Ford. Interview of Essex Hemphill by Tod Roulette

Courtesy of Wayson Jones

Program for "Voicescapes" performance at The Painted Bride, featuring Essex Hemphill, Michelle Parkerson, and Wayson Jones, November 1987

Courtesy of Lisbet Tellefsen

Flyer for “Dear Muthafuckin Dreams” performance at JavaRama, 1980s

Courtesy of Claudia (DePaul) Joseph

Photograph by Daniel Cima, 1980s

Courtesy of Daniel Cima

Photograph by Daniel Cima, 1980s

Courtesy of Daniel Cima

Unpublished manuscript for *When Evening Comes* by Essex Hemphill, 1981

***Ceremonies* public readings flyers in a benefit for *Aché: A Journal for Lesbians of African Descent* and *BLK Magazine*, 1992**

Courtesy of Lisbet Tellefsen

***Tribe: An American Gay Journal*, Volume 1, 1990**

***Black/ Male* by Rotimi Fani-Kayode, 1988**

Essex Hemphill met photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode during a trip to London in the early 1980s. Kayode captured Hemphill and his lover Dennis Carney in a series of intimate positions which were published in *Black/ Male*, “an exploration of desire and forbidden dreams within the matrix of differing cultures.”

Poster for *Tongues Untied* by Marlon Riggs, featuring Essex Hemphill, 1989

Courtesy of Brian Freeman

Poster for Essex Hemphill and Wayson Jones at d.c. space, 1980s

Poster and brochure for “four evenings of music, poetry, and disruption at d.c. space,” featuring Essex Hemphill and Wayson Jones, 1980s

Courtesy of Wayson Jones

Calendars for d.c. space events including a benefit for Hemphill’s publishing imprint Be Bop Books

Courtesy of Claudia (DePaul) Joseph

Program for performance of “From the Anacostia to the Potomac”

Courtesy of Claudia (DePaul) Joseph

Photograph of Essex Hemphill and Wayson Jones performing in Washington, DC, 1980s

Courtesy of Wayson Jones

***Tongues Untied*, 1989, assorted press materials**

Courtesy of Lisbet Tellefsen

PROJECTIONS

This excerpt is from one of the panels held at the Center for LGBTQ Studies at the City University of New York (CUNY) during the “Black Nations/Queer Nations?” conference aimed at addressing the complexities of being queer and part of the African Diaspora. Held from March 9 to 11, 1995, the panel included writer Samuel R. Delaney, artist Coco Fusco, and Essex Hemphill. This was one of Hemphill’s last public appearances before he died from AIDS-related complications later that year.

Runtime: 17:48 min.

Courtesy of CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies

“Between Pathos and Seduction”

“Black Beans”

“For My Protection”

“Heavy Corners”

“In the Life”

“U.S. Planning to Wage War in Space”

By Essex Hemphill, from *Love Is a Dangerous Word*

© 1992, 2025 Essex Hemphill

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Essex Hemphill: Take care of your blessings

May 17–August 31, 2025

The information below was updated May 2025 and is subject to change.

Please visit PhillipsCollection.org/events for the most up-to-date programming information.

PROGRAMS

[Film Screenings](#)

[May 24, 11 am-3:40 pm](#)

In conjunction with *Essex Hemphill: Take care of your blessings*, join us for an unparalleled film screening of films connected to the life and legacy of Essex Hemphill. *Free, no reservation required.*

- *Tongues Untied* (1989)
- *Paris Is Burning* (1990)
- *The Watermelon Woman* (1996)
- *Fierceness Served! The ENIKAlley Coffeehouse* (2022)

[The Phillips Plays with Reflective Poetry](#)

[June 14, 10 am-1 pm](#)

Bring your family to investigate materials, methods, and ideas in art. Explore the exhibition with a Phillips Educator, then visit the art workshop to express your ideas and stories through poetry-inspired art-making. *Included with general admission. Drop-in.*

[“Notes on Essex” Poetry Performance and Reflections](#)

[June 14, 2-4 pm](#)

Featuring globally renowned visual artists and poets, The Phillips Collection hosts an unprecedented afternoon of poetry readings and reflections on Essex Hemphill’s transformative impact. *Free, reservation required.*

- Gregory Adams
- Jericho Brown
- Gregory Ford
- Lyle Ashton Harris
- Wayson Jones
- Christopher Prince
- Michelle Parkerson
- Tiona Nekkia McClodden
- Danez Smith

See the exhibition during **Phillips after 5** with music, art activities, drinks, and more (June 5, July 3, August 7, 5-8:30 pm; \$20, free for members) and **Third Thursdays** (July 17, August 21, 5-8 pm; free admission).

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

The information below was updated in May 2025 and is subject to change.

[**Vivian Browne: My Kind of Protest**](#)

June 28–September 28, 2025

Drawing upon previously unknown works and archival findings, this exhibition recovers the depth and variety of the more than three-decade career of Vivian Browne (b. 1929, Laurel, FL; d. 1993, New York, NY). The exhibition features paintings, prints, and works on paper across seven bodies of work, as well as ephemera that highlight Browne’s pioneering activism and influential teaching career. Browne was a founder of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, an organization that fought for Black representation in New York museums; a founder of SoHo20, one of the first women’s art cooperatives in Manhattan; and a professor at Rutgers University (1971–92). Her signature approach to color and form challenged the neatly defined categories of abstraction and figuration, and art and politics, revealing a more nuanced approach to art-making that is part of Browne’s unique contribution to 20th-century art of the US.

This exhibition is co-organized by The Phillips Collection and the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati.

[**Out of Many: Reframing an American Art Collection**](#)

November 8, 2025–February 15, 2026

Coinciding with the 250th anniversary of the United States, *Out of Many: Reframing an American Art Collection* is a celebration and examination of the beauty and complexity of this nation’s history. Presenting artists well-known and understudied from the permanent collection, *Out of Many* builds a dynamic story about how, from the early 20th century to the present, various artists have imagined and depicted the people, cultures, landscapes, and histories of the United States. To tell a more diverse constellation of stories, the exhibition includes artworks from the historic collections of African American art at Howard University Gallery of Art and The David C. Driskell Center at the University of Maryland.

The exhibition is organized by The Phillips Collection.

[**peter campus: there somewhere**](#)

January 15–May 3, 2026

peter campus (b. 1937, New York, New York) is a seminal figure in the history of new media and video art, often mentioned as a key creative force in elevating video to a contemporary art form. This exhibition highlights one of campus’s iconic early videos from the late 1970s, alongside his latest breakthrough landscape video works, including *blessingway* and *no direction known*, which will be shown for the first time. These later pieces, inspired by the serene coastline near the artist’s home in Long Island, are marked by a sense of tranquility and introspection, evoking a feeling of being “there somewhere.”

This exhibition is organized by The Phillips Collection.

[Miró and the United States: Exchanges](#)

March 21–July 5, 2026

Miró and the United States: Exchanges explores the fertile artistic conversation between Spanish artist Joan Miró (1893–1983) and American artists during the period of the artist’s greatest transatlantic contacts from the 1940s to the 1960s. This exhibition will trace Miró’s relationships with American artists, collectors, and institutions, illustrating the ways this exchange spurred new inspiration and experimentation on both sides of the Atlantic. Featuring works by Miró juxtaposed with those by Louise Bourgeois, Alexander Calder, Adolph Gottlieb, Lee Krasner, Norman Lewis, and Jackson Pollock, among others, this exhibition will enrich our understanding of the development of post-war art.

The exhibition is organized for The Phillips Collection by Elsa Smithgall, in collaboration with Marko Daniel and Matthew Gale, with the support of Dolors Rodríguez Roig, at the Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona.

[Juried Invitational](#)

August 1–September 30, 2026

Honoring its long-standing dedication to the exhibiting, acquiring, and supporting the work of living artists in the Washington, DC, area, The Phillips Collection is proud to present a juried invitational exhibition highlighting the work of artists living and working in the region. The exhibition invites submissions of recent works across all visual arts media, including drawing, printmaking, painting, mixed media, photography, sculpture, and video.

This exhibition is organized by The Phillips Collection.

[Avery, Gottlieb, Rothko: A Close-Knit Trio](#)

October 24, 2026–January 24, 2027

This exhibition will tell the story of the friendship between three towering figures in American art: Milton Avery (1885–1965), Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974), and Mark Rothko (1903–1970), and highlight the inspiration they derived from summers in Gloucester, Massachusetts, on Cape Ann. Through approximately 75 paintings, drawings, prints, and waters from the 1920s to the 1960s, this exhibition will reflect for the first time the lifelong artistic exchange between these three artists, the experiences they shared, and the support they provided to each other. Many of the works in this exhibition have never been on public view.

This exhibition is organized by the Cape Ann Museum, Massachusetts, in partnership with The Phillips Collection.

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