

# ARTFORUM

## "Milford Graves: Artists Space"



Milford Graves, *Bikongo-Ifá: Spirit of the Being*, 2020, wood, tabla, acupuncture model, Batá drum, Nkondi figure, George Washington Carver bust, compass, glass, peanuts, LabVIEW animation, monitors, bells, plasma, lamp, globe, eagle figurine, alarm clock, collaged paper, printouts, copper wire, paint marker, metal fasteners, casters, dimensions variable.

That Milford Graves (1941–2021) was one of the most mesmerizing, energizing, and vibratory percussionists of our era was already evident in 1965, the year of his first recorded appearance on the New York Art Quartet's debut album. For the next five decades, musicians would pilgrimage to witness Graves's unique physical approach to the trap set, his elbows in a reverse-akimbo position. Word of mouth brought the uninitiated to experience his transporting ability to sustain two rhythms or more at the same time—to play in polymeter. What has taken longer to be fully absorbed, however, are the results of his lifelong efforts and accomplishments in many other disciplines, from visual art to nonfetal-stem-cell research.

*Milford Graves: Fundamental Frequency*, an archive-focused retrospective at Artists Space curated in collaboration with Ars Nova Workshop, extended and recapitulated a series of exhibitions, residencies, films, and lectures by Graves in New York and Philadelphia from 2016 right up until his departure last year. These projects brought into focus the breadth of his life's efforts and gave rise to a series of late artworks—sculptures, drawings, and videos, often diagrammatic in nature—that can be either looked at or listened to: primers for many of his theories, concepts, and discoveries.

A throughline in Graves's art is the idea that within the human body lies the key to all music and knowledge—a kind of intelligence that can be accessed through careful listening and observation. This theory may sound like a mystical proposal, but with the force of Graves's determined use of scientific methodologies, it could not be more earthbound, as evidenced in his "heart music." This decades-long project took place not only in his extensively kitted-out basement laboratory but at academic medical institutions in Italy and the United States. The result was a system for the recording and analysis of the micro-rhythms, dynamic flows, and wildly variable electrical frequencies produced by every individual's heart. His investigations produced insights into the origin of polyrhythms and brought about the creation of melodies based on the uniquely nonmetronomic expression of every person's heartbeat.

A piece of ephemera from this project, *EKG Heart Monitoring Print Out, 1978*, was the conceptual center of this exhibition. A document recording the heartbeat of one of his teaching colleagues was displayed in a vitrine like an ancient scroll. Drawn on green-toned paper in bloodred ink, it is a study for rhythm—but it is also inherently a portrait of an individual. Close by was *Pathways of Infinite Possibilities: Skeleton, 2017*, an assemblage that included a life-size model skeleton cradling a *dundun* drum. Inscribed across the instrument's batter head are the words DRUM LISTENS TO HEART. Here one begins to understand Grave's use of language as an invitation to "read" his work. Similarly, inside the "inner ear" section of the kinetic sculpture *Cosmos 2-5, 2017*, one found an equation:  $WORMHOLE \div EINSTEIN ROSEN BRIDGE = BATA DRUM \div LEGBA \times \Delta \times CROSSROADS \times \infty$ . This seemingly mysterious formula is both decipherable and resonant: Wormholes and the Einstein-Rosen bridge (see quantum entanglement and Einstein's "spooky action at a distance") are directly equated with Legba, the West African Yorùbá. god of the crossroads of communication across time and space (the traditional tool used for that interaction is the Batá drum).

The conclusion of the show was a fantastic, colorful, useful sculpture: Graves's trap set, which he wildly painted in a Fauvist palette. Collaged onto the drumheads was a constellation of pastel-hued, Hilma af Klint-style circles that functioned as pressure-point guides for his elbow technique. Suspended above was *Earth Resonance, 2020*, a brightly painted self-reverberating gong, its discreet volume set to suffuse the whole show with metallic tones. The show's coda was a brilliant and funny single-channel video, *Movements in the Snow, 1990*, which documents the artist performing *Yara*, a martial arts and movement system of his own invention that is infused with free-jazz principles of improvisation. Like Buster Keaton, Graves slyly plays with the camera and the viewer's expectations, creating an electric union of landscape with his own being. His dynamic performance made visible how ideas are communicated between music, dance, art through the legible vocabulary of the body itself."