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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, Glenn Ligon, 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 Brackens’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.

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

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*, *LA Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles*, 1992, 2015, Chromogenic print, 15 x 20 15/16 in., © Lyle Ashton Harris; Isaac Julien, *Pas de Deux with Roses (Looking for Langston Vintage Series)*, 1989/2016, Ilford classic silver gelatin fine art paper, mounted on aluminum and framed, 22 7/8 x 29 3/8 in., Courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery.

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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