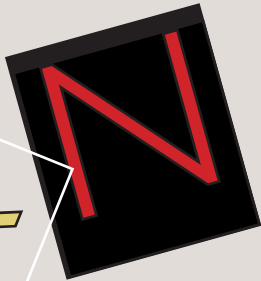
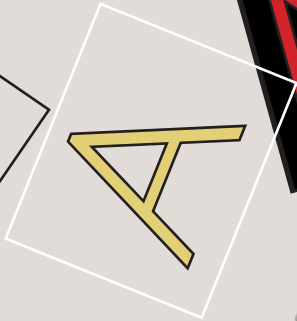
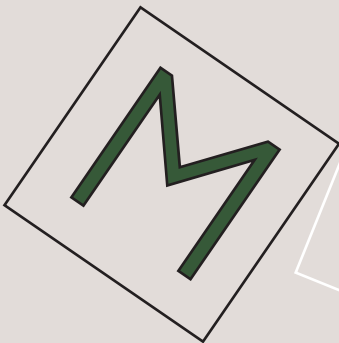


MIKE C OCKRILL

EXIS TENTIAL



MIKE COCKRILL

EXISTENTIAL  
MAN

&

THE INK  
SPOTS

Essay by Darius James

**K E N T**  
F I N E A R T L L C

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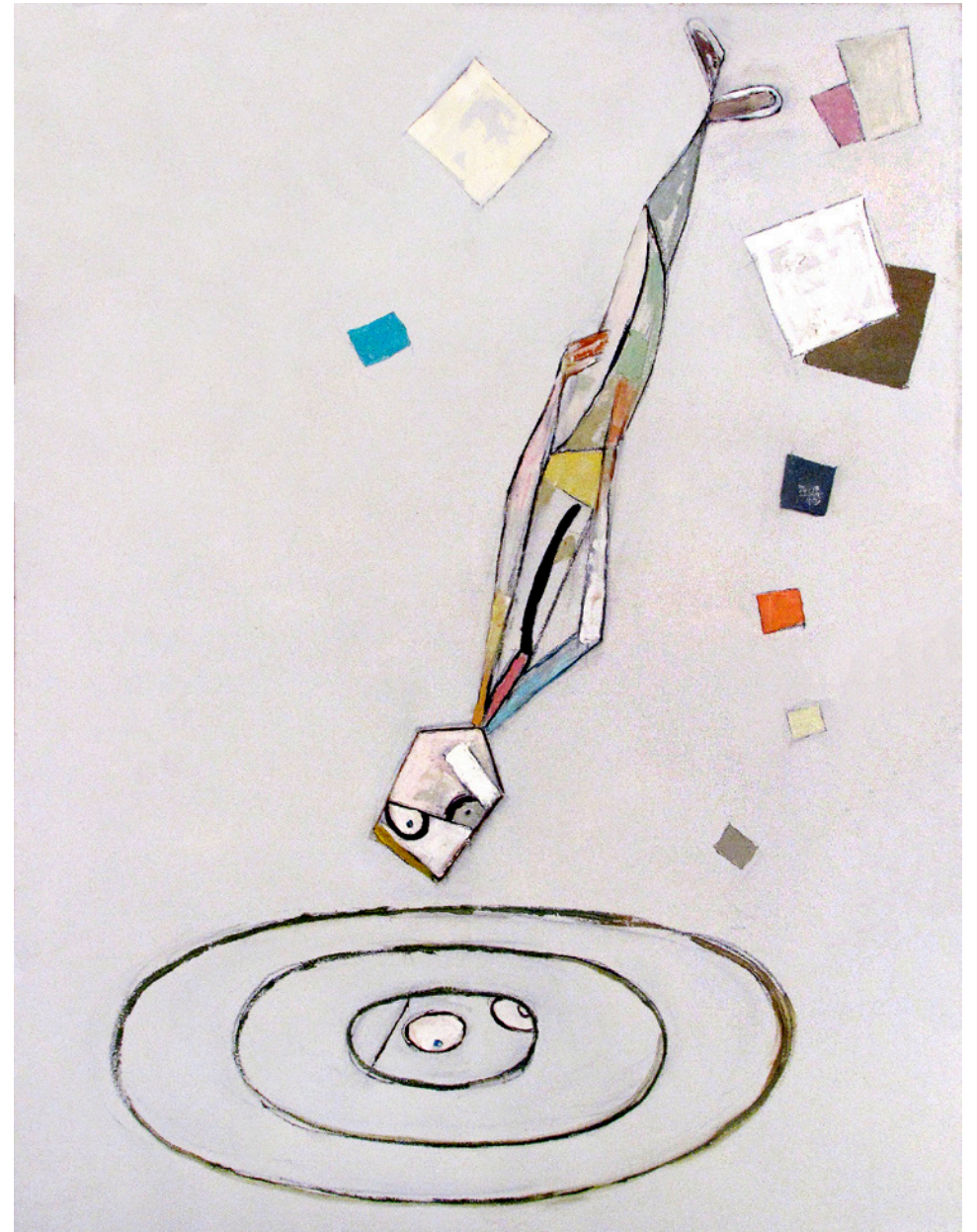
Book design by Asja Gleeson

Mike Cockrill has invented a character—*Existential Man*—who seems to have stepped out of the 1960s, but who, unlike the confident adman in his Brooks Brothers suit, is a hapless middle-manager in a short-sleeved cotton-poly shirt, with a bad buzz cut. Cockrill's deft use of period detail signals to us what his character is not as much as what he is. He will not be having martini lunches and rising to the top of the postwar American dreamscape. Instead, Cockrill's *Existential Man* is an everyman who inevitably finds himself in extremis in the midst of mundane everyday routines, who has no real chance in the land of opportunity, and who still carries dutifully on.

With *Existential Man*, Cockrill breaks into fresh territory with a series of mordantly witty paintings that mine the artist's thirty-year practice of drawing, cartooning, and doodling. These astringent, abbreviated figures are skillfully constructed, and rendered in a pitch-perfect palette that conveys—in the artist's words—"the earnest cheerfulness of a therapist's waiting room."



*The Abyss*, 2012  
Oil on canvas  
54 x 64 in.



*The Circus*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
66 x 56 in.



*The Puzzle*, 2012  
Oil on canvas  
36 x 30 in.



*The Fall*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
56 x 38 in.



*Bike Girl*, 2012  
Oil on canvas  
54 x 64 in.

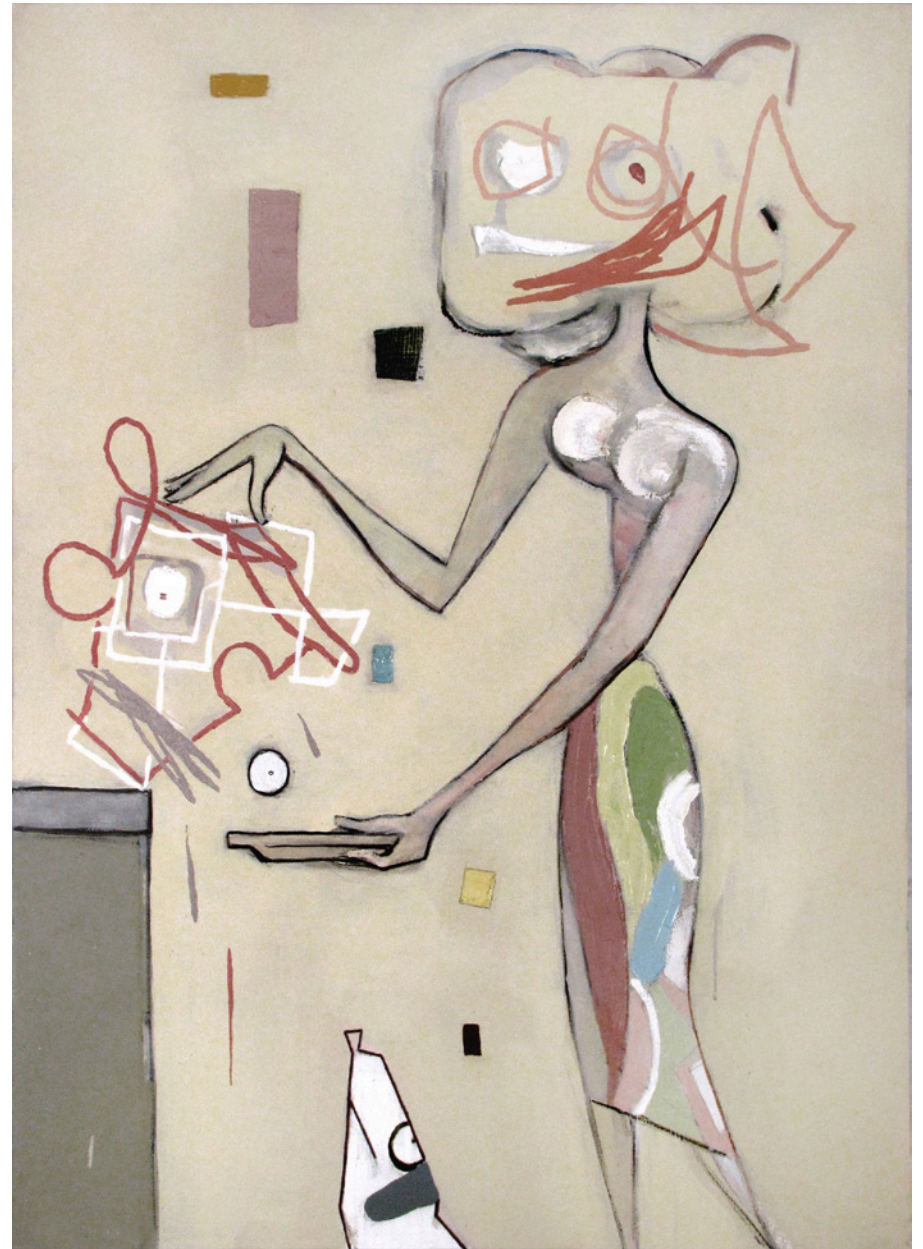




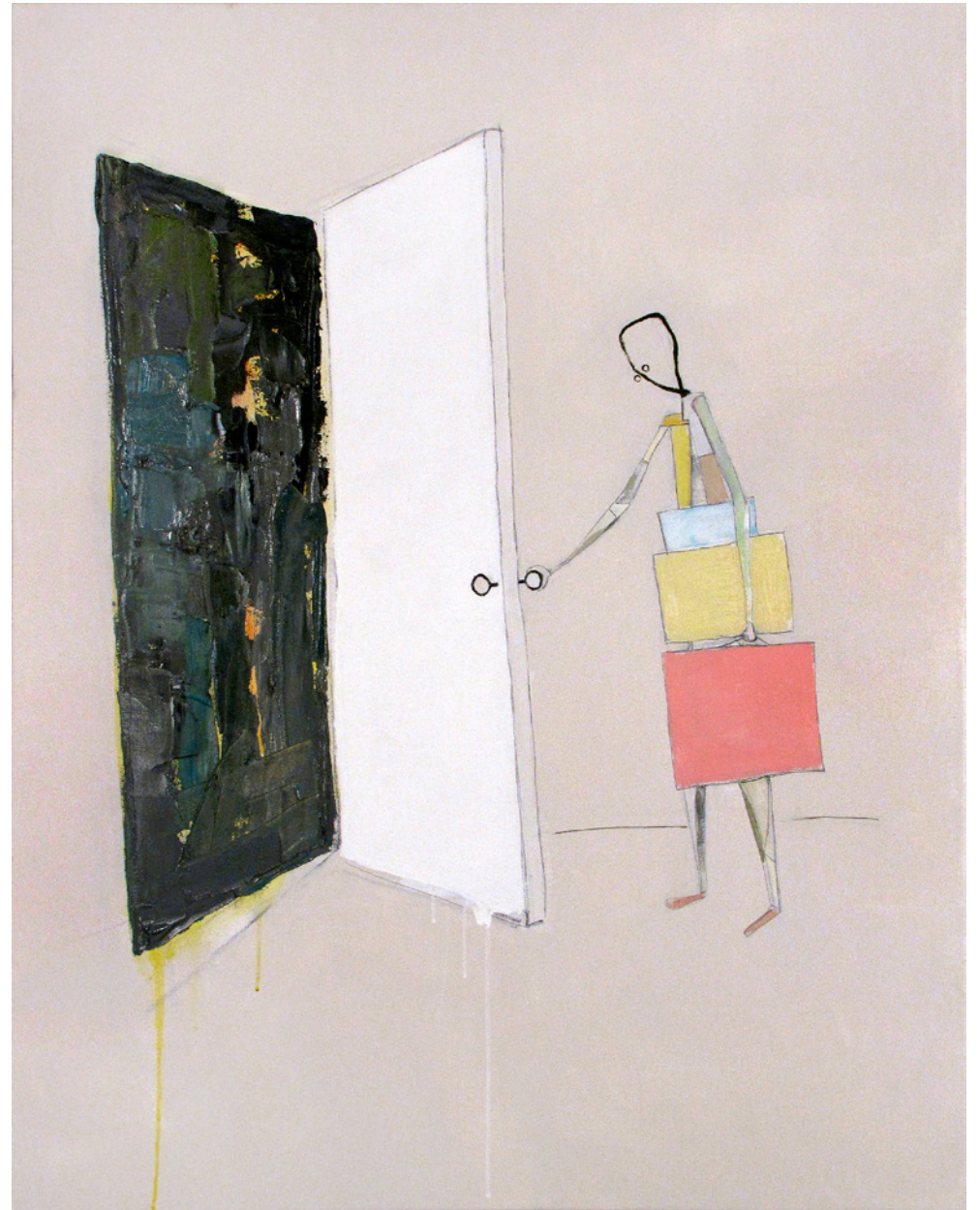
*The Clean-up Guy*, 2012  
Oil on canvas  
48 x 30 in.



*Loop*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
15 x 36 in.



*The Door*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
56 x 38 in.





*The Ice Cream Man*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
40 x 37 in.

*Sleepwalker*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
58 x 50 in.





*Into Thin Air*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
50 x 38 in.

*Clock Face*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
42 x 36 in.



*In Box*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
40 x 30 in.





*Good Save*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
42 x 36 in.



*The Wrecking Ball*, 2012  
Oil on canvas  
36 x 30 in.









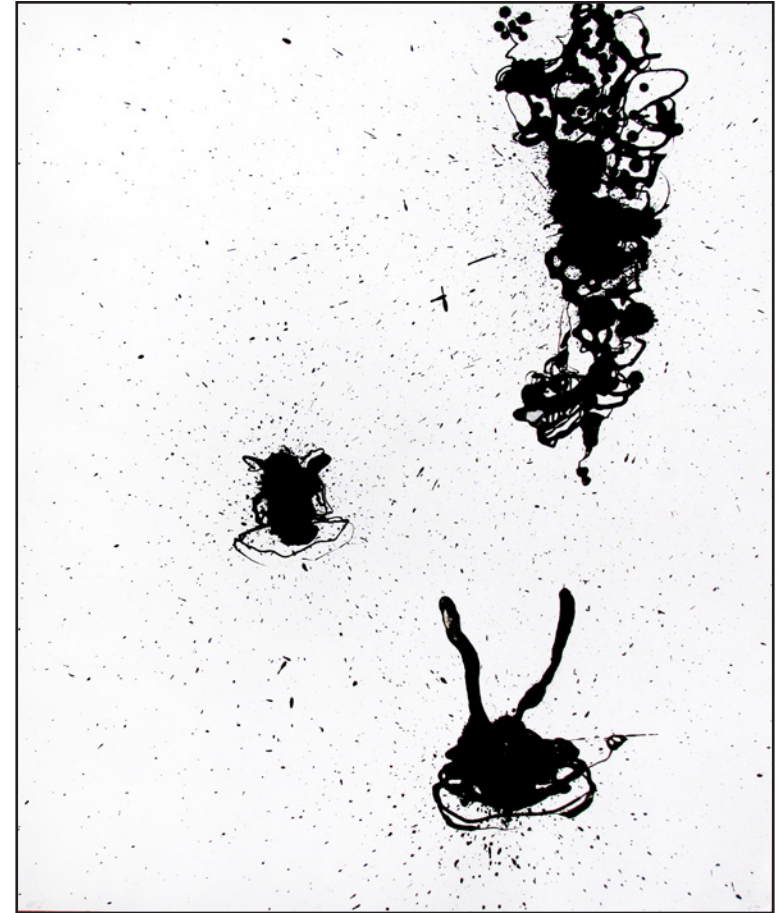
## Out of the Inkwell

by Darius James

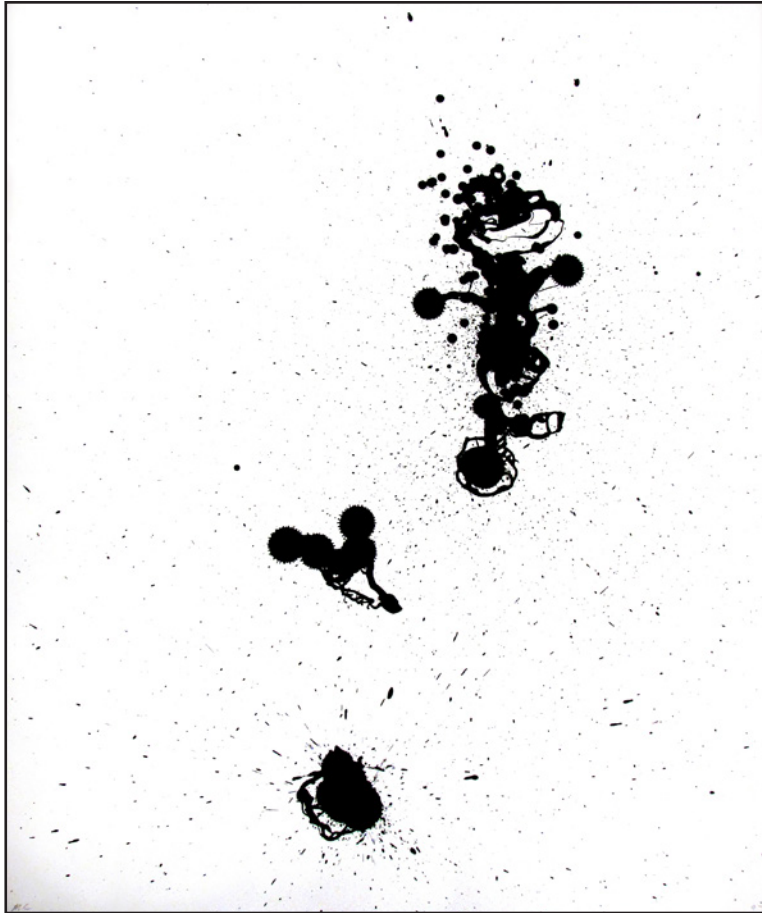
When Mike Cockrill squeezed the bulb of his ink dropper in 1996, spurting random blobs of oozing blackness all over the white sheets stacked before him, he was scandalized by the drawing that finally emerged on the page. It was an effort he undertook to discover a new approach to drawing the clowns he is so well-known for, a perverse configuration of Red Skelton's clown portraits glue-trapped in the humiliation of Robert Crumb's libidinous narratives. Mike, a child of the Howdy-Doody fifties, wanted to expunge from his work the aura of mythic nostalgia and false security Norman Rockwell had masterfully evoked on the covers of the *Saturday Evening Post* (which Mike so ably lampooned). So he puddled black fluid on white paper.

He worked the puddle with the stem of his dropper, studying the amorphous blobs and black speckles and their relationship to the dictates of white space, with absolutely no idea where he might be headed. The last thing he expected, however, were the troublesome cousins of an anachronistic trademark for an all-purpose washing detergent of the late eighteenth hundreds two sooty, half-naked black children with wide-mouth grins called "The Gold-Dust Twins." There were gremlins in the inkwell.

*Where did THAT come from?!!* Mike was mortified. These were images that sprang from the likes of the "Amos 'n Andy" show, or *Stormfront's* editorial cartoons, but not from the bristles of his brush (even if he was a white baby born in Washington, DC, and raised in Virginia, the gateway to the South). He was raised in a good home with a Pentagon dad and was schooled by the good brothers and sisters of the Catholic Church. He had also experienced the shock of segregation and the trauma of the J.F.K. assassination. This assortment of blobs went against his instincts, his education, his



Ladies Night, 1997



The Audition, 1997

training as an artist and his social experience in Manhattan's long-gone bohemia. He was a satirist but a *morally responsible* one, not like these sociopathic 'joke' mongers shilling for your loose shekels nowadays.

Mike stored the drawings in his studio with no intention of ever placing them on display in a gallery exhibition. He had delved into the Jungian shadow of his being, conjured some American demons and learned a sobering lesson: no matter how keenly one criticizes the society and culture into which one is born, one can never truly escape its more pernicious influences.

However, a year passed, and Mike returned to his original experiment. He used the same procedure as before: ink bottle with black ink and ink dropper on white paper. And, lo and behold, the results yielded grotesqueries one was likely to find under the glass bell jars lining the walls of Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory¾the grafted cadavers of stock coonshow caricatures. Or, to be more specific,

sausage-lipped Sambos with the official ears of the Mickey Mouse Club stitched to their skulls, shot through with nuclear radiation. What this image suggests, of course, is that stereotypes are dead. What remains are graveyard scavengings to satisfy the ghoulish hungers of mindless necrophagists.

This is *not* to say that Mike's experiments were failures of a magnitude that actually posed a threat to the inviolability of bible-belt virgins: quite the contrary. His drawings are really quite a delight. They exude a vibrancy characterized by musicality, motion and, uh, *edibility*. It's this vibrancy that makes his drawings unique. *Edible* because some of these drawings remind me of cream-filled cakes sold in German pastry shops. The bulbous, chocolate-covered marshmallow confection *Negerkuss* for instance (it actually looks like the head of an erect, circumcised penis). But I digress...

More than the silhouettes of Kara Walker, again black narratives wrestling the dictates of white space (all the more interesting as

Walker is also discussed in context with German leftie silhouette-animator, Lotte Reiniger, who, in escaping the restrictions of her own white space, told her tales on the run) or Robert Colescott's gleeful historical disruptions or the grotesque sideshow figures of Michael Ray Charles, Mike's ink spots suggest a practice adherents of Buddhism call "no-mind" painting. The best of these brush paintings encapsulate a principle of the mind in a state of deep meditation: "motion in stillness/stillness in motion."

Mike's drawings, because of his patience, focus and centeredness, are closer to one-character calligraphist Yuichi Inoue than to the randomness of "drip" or "action" painting. It is this quality of "motion in stillness/stillness in motion" that gives these drawings life. There is movement and flight in these ink spots that defy the static nature of dried ink on paper. How else to describe single-page drawings that suggest whole sequences of a traditionally animated movement? Important, too, given Mike's approach (again suggesting Yuichi Inoue), the abstract is elevated to levels of concrete meaning



and personalized struggle. The dripped drawings reveal character, impish characters: under the mask of Maya, the Cosmic Clown unveiled him-herself in the aspect of the dark trickster a playful prankster in blackface. Mike got what he wished for.

*Hands Out*, in its ironic use of white space, owes far more to jazz-era black vaudeville of the Apollo stage than it does to traditional clowning acrobatics or blackface minstrelsy of the eighteen hundreds. The figure in *Hands Out* suggests the movements of an eccentric dancer like '30s entertainer Jigsaw Jackson the Human Corkscrew<sup>1</sup> rather than the cruel and buffoonish frog-like movements of the crippled stable boy in minstrelsy popular dance "Jump Jim Crow." George Herriman's "Krazy Kat" also shows this quality of motion on the page. Study Mike's ink spots while listening to a jazz album of the thirties and you will understand exactly what I mean.

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall Winslow Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), p. 231. "The lights go down, the curtain parts, Duke Ellington and the Jungle Band swing into 'Rockin' into Rhythm' at Harlem's Cotton Club, and a lurid spotlight picks out Jigsaw Jackson the Human Corkscrew. The audience gasps: Jackson has his face on the floor center stage, while the rest of his body seems to be running around with his feet tapping in rhythm . . . Jigsaw Jackson was a contortionist, an eccentric dancer par excellence."



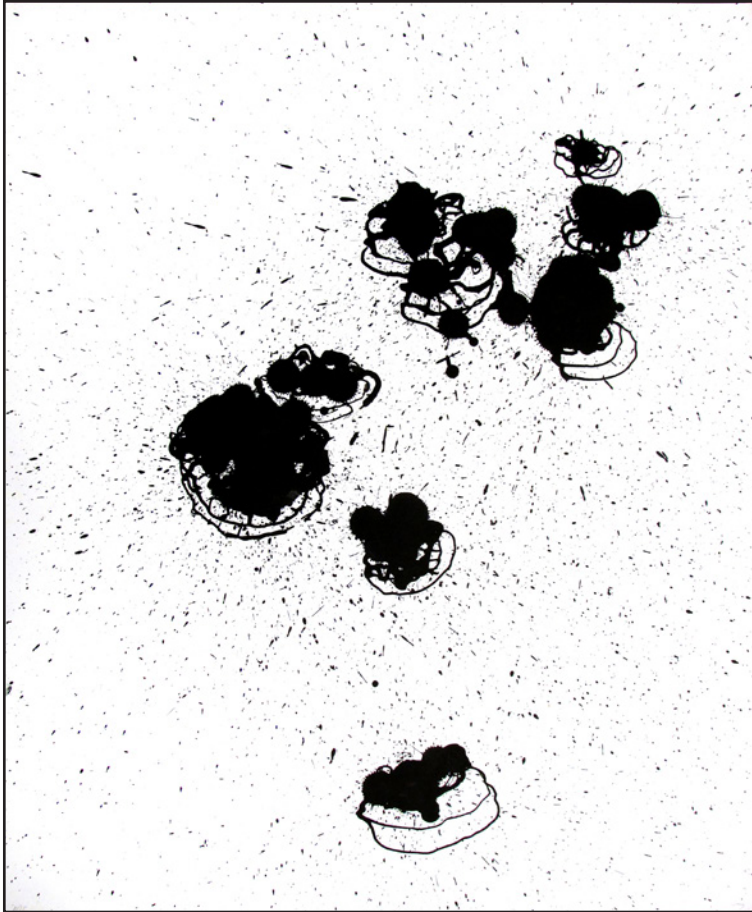
Hands Out, 1996



The Invisible Man, 1996



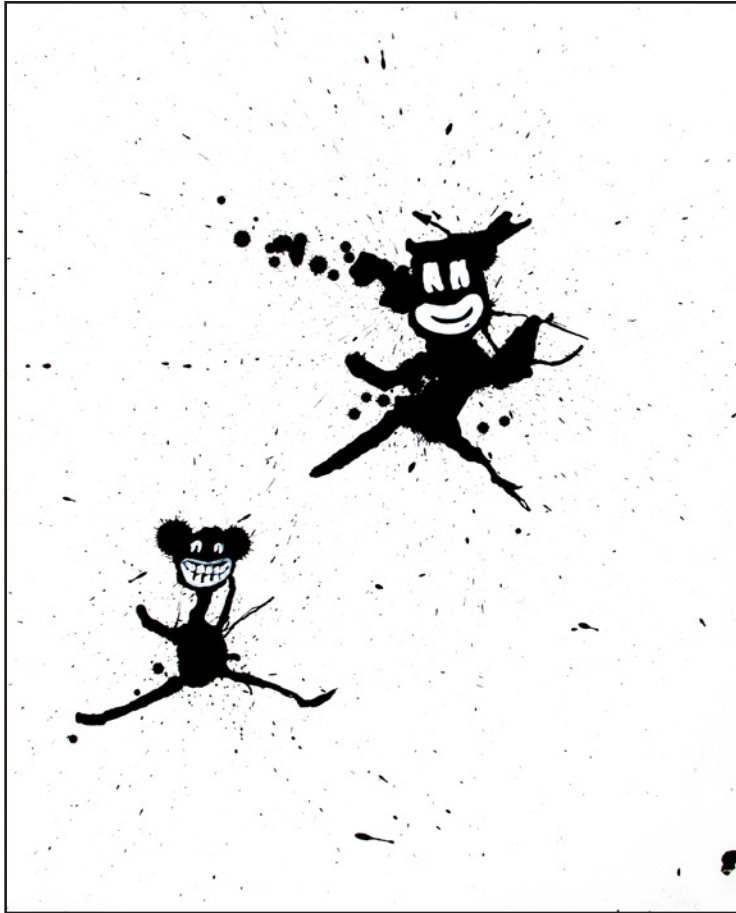
The Event, 1998



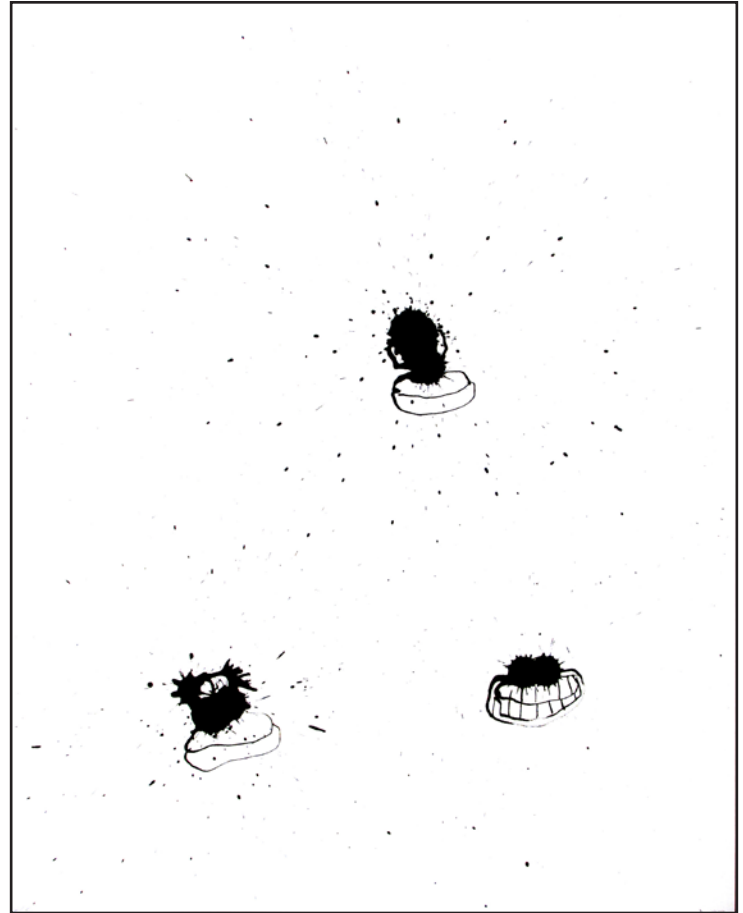
Boogie Woogie, 1997



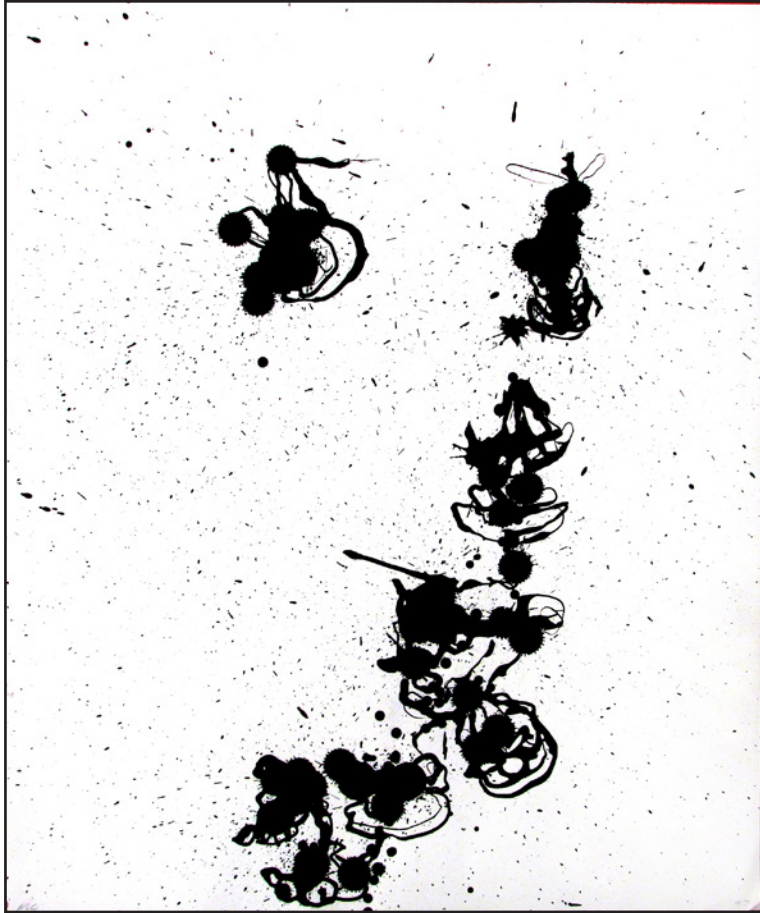
Tree, 1997



Do Over, 1997



Front Man, 1997



Energy Saver, 1997



Quartet, 1997

## List of Plates

The Abyss, 2012  
The Circus, 2013  
The Puzzle, 2012  
The Fall, 2013  
Bike Girl, 2012  
The Clean-Up Guy, 2012  
Loop, 2013  
The Door, 2013  
The Ice Cream Man, 2013  
The Sleepwalker, 2013  
Into Thin Air, 2013  
Clock Face, 2013  
In Box, 2013  
Good Save, 2013  
The Wrecking Ball, 2012

**Mike Cockrill** has been making conceptually engaged, socially challenging work since he first began showing in the East Village in the early 1980s. Cockrill—who grew up in the suburbs of Washington, DC, in the late 50s and early 60s—has a particular affinity with the pop-culture images of postwar America, and their darker subtexts. A classically trained painter, Cockrill also has the skills to understand an idiom and then deftly twist it, literally and conceptually. He has been doing this from his early cartoons, which are hybrids of suburban cheeriness and Indian-miniature eroticism, to his later paintings that adopt the cloying style of 1950s children's book illustrations while exposing their undercurrent of sexually charged fantasy.

**Darius James** is the author of *Negrophobia: An Urban Parable*, and *That's blaxploitation! : roots of the baadasssss 'tude (rated X by an all-whyte jury)*. His documentary, *The United States of Hoodoo* recently aired on ARTE TV–FRANCE.