

Milford Graves, *Collage of Healing Herbs and Bodily Systems* (1994). Mixed media collage.
Image courtesy of Artist Space, ICA LA,
and the Estate of Milford Graves.

Another Kind of Freedom

Milford Graves and the Art of Interconnectivity

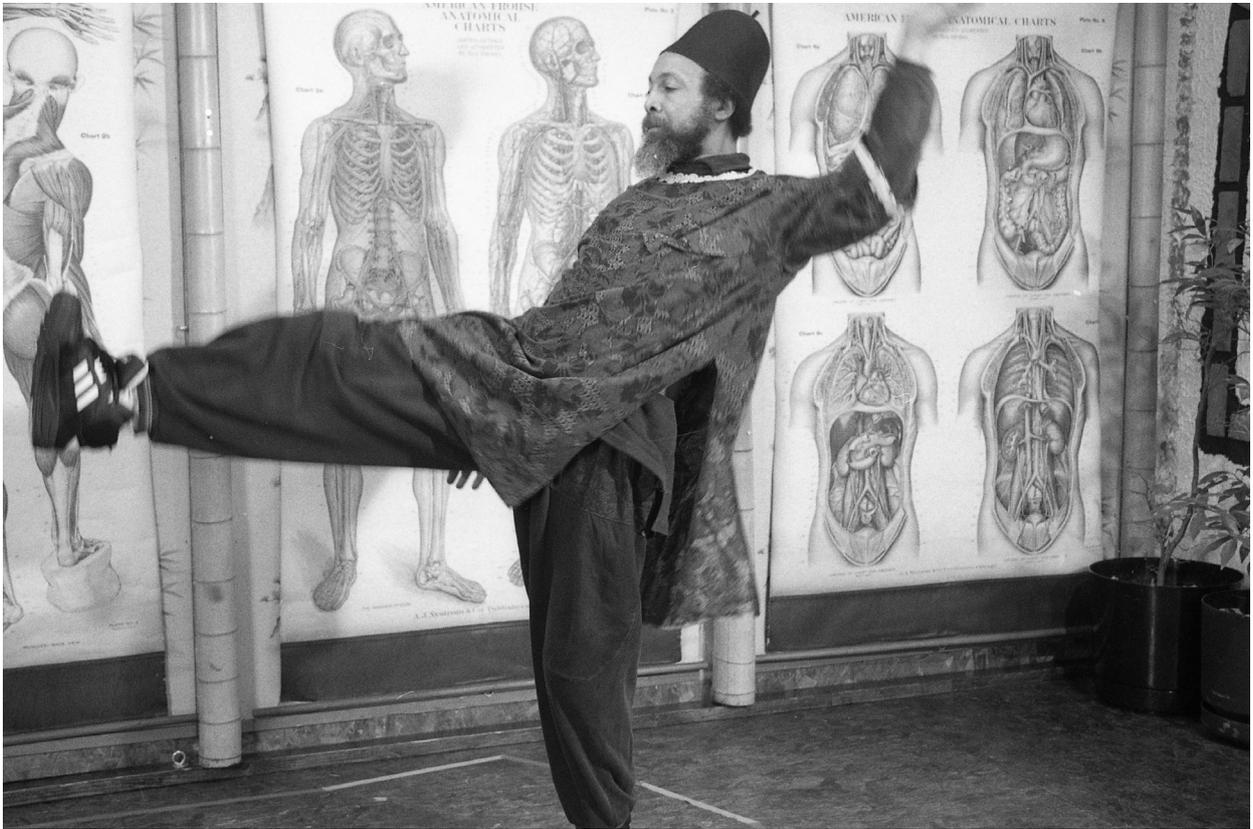
In 2017, the polymath Milford Graves (1941–2021) made a series of sculptural assemblages for the following year’s Queens International exhibition. Though Graves had produced aesthetic objects since the 1960s, this was the first significant presentation of his visual art within a museum context.¹ One of these works, *Pathways of Infinite Possibilities: Skeleton*, comprises a real human skeleton adorned with various electronic components. Captivating, visceral, and even revolting, the construction is a bizarre amalgam of both scientific and aesthetic concerns. From the skull a web of wires cascades to the feet, while a small monitor bolted to the rib cage plays a video of a beating heart. Lower down, something of a cardiac trio resides: A plastic-wrapped human heart is accompanied by a laminated sign that reads “heart tono-rhythmology” and a small drum with the text “drum listens to heart” written on its skin. What are we to make of Graves’ radical fusion of art and science here? And what might it reveal about the assumed divisions between the two fields? Though recent writing on Graves has often centered his decades-long investigation into the connections between percussive and cardiac rhythms,² much less attention has been given to how he used visual art to explore the interconnectivity of art and science—namely, the productive tension between scientific analysis and artistic idiosyncrasy and how it might yield new ways of elevating the human condition.

It is impossible to offer a pithy summary of the profound, exhilarating,

and often overwhelming output of Graves. His hunger for knowledge earned him many designations throughout his life, including free jazz percussionist, heart rhythm specialist, visual artist, music professor, herbalist, acupuncturist, and martial arts inventor. A lifelong drummer, Graves gained notoriety in the 1960s for his improvisational free jazz percussion, which radically unhinged drumming from its normative time-keeping function.³ Yet it soon became apparent that music alone could not satisfy his kinetic curiosity. Around 1967, Graves invented Yara, a form of martial arts inspired by the bodily movements of African ritual dance, the praying mantis, and a swing dance called Lindy Hop that originated in Harlem. Yara utilized these movements within improvised, nonviolent sparring where practitioners found physical and mental freedom within the continual flow of action.

Later, Graves fostered this interest in the body by examining the relationship between percussive rhythms and heartbeats, at first studying his own heart and eventually those of willing volunteers. He found that the heart’s rhythms, like those in free jazz drumming, do not always adhere to metronomic time and felt that the medical and musical fields would do well to educate one another. Graves possessed a deep understanding of the link between music and human endurance, stating, “Anybody that is going to study music healing that does not study noncommercial, unadulterated Black music is making a tremendous mistake. Black music in this country, during the time of slavery...it was music that played an integral part in their survival.”⁴ Far from being interested only in the relation between natural and percussive rhythms at the sonic level, Graves viewed his overall project as a means of gaining bodily freedom and cultural liberation alike.⁵

As Graves continued to research the connections between the body, rhythm, and nature, his interests landed on the intersections between science



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Top: Yara in the Dojo (1992).
Image courtesy of the Estate
of Milford Graves.

Bottom: Photo: Ryan Collard.

and art; he did all he could to further his knowledge in both fields and harness the potential of their interconnection. Graves trained to become a medical technician and eventually built a laboratory in his Queens home. There, he used the latest computer technologies to study the parallels between heartbeats and drumbeats and to research the intricacies of the heart's rhythms to improve cardiac treatment.⁶ This research directly informed his visual art, leading to the fluent, thrilling interactivity between aesthetics and method-based inquiry that particularly define his collages and assemblages.

A productive tension between scientific objectivity and artistic subjectivity defines these works, and Graves often vacillated between the two ends of this logic spectrum, making works that embraced objectivity and then producing others that problematized this very notion. On the more objective side of things is the work on paper, *Collage of Healing Herbs and Bodily Systems* (1994), which, like all the works mentioned in this text, was on view in a recently-closed retrospective of Graves' work at the Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles (ICA LA). Anchoring the collage is a black triangle that houses reproduced illustrations of a wide-open eye and leafy greens. Thick black lines extend outward from this hub, burrowing through forests of pasted images; each trail begins with diverse plant life and ends with human organs. Graves' origin-to-destination logic makes palpable the connection between certain plants and the organs that benefit most from their consumption. One path contains images of witch hazel and Culver's root that leads to the intestines; on another, hops and skunk cabbage lead to the brain, and so on, instructing us on the direct impact of these herbs on healing the body.⁷

Other collage works at ICA LA complicate *Collage's* didacticism by foregrounding broader ideas about identity and race. In the small collage *Untitled* (2020), for example, the artist

pits appropriated imagery against his meandering scrawls. Appearing at center-left is a map of the constellations most visible on the southern horizon at different times of the year, the geometry of which Graves countered with loose doodles and scribbled text. In the upper right, he penned the word "physiognomy," under which a diagram of a face appears. On one hand, the inclusion of the constellation map suggests that the human chemical makeup is the same as that of the universe, and as such, we, like constellations, are interconnected beings—a message of essential unity. On the other, by calling our attention to physiognomy—the assessment of an individual's character based upon their ethnic facial features—Graves underscores how the scientific field has historically used facial characteristics to marginalize and surveil nonwhite people.⁸ In this sense, the viewer is left with the impression that Graves' imbrication of scientific study and artistic expression includes a profound understanding of the history of oppressive and abusive conduct performed in the name of science.

If Graves' collages produce exchanges between the oneness of the human race and the social construct of racial difference, his assemblages problematize these corporeal notions even further. In *Pathways of Infinite Possibilities: Yara* (2017), Graves leans into the potency of juxtaposition in manners far more ambiguous and enthralling than he did with *Skeleton*. Roughly the size of a person, *Yara* comprises a small base from which two wooden planks shoot upward, each supporting several shelves. On the right plank, an anatomical model of the male body stands on a shelf accompanied by a sign that reads "Yara Magnetic Field"—all enveloped in a cloud of copper wire. On the left plank, another medical model demonstrates the pathways between the kidneys and major arteries. While this medical model color codes organs for easy identification, Graves contrasts such legibility

with a pair of uncannily gray human hearts in formaldehyde-filled jars on higher-up shelves. Graves adds to this tension between the real and its representation by uniting the universality of the anatomical model—which strips the body of identity markers like race and gender—with objects laden with subjecthood: a miniature model of hands praying, a carved African mask, and the sign that mentions Graves’ form of martial art. *Yara*’s entangling of objective (medical, scientific) and subjective (racial, theological) approaches to the body proposes that without the uniqueness of our individual perspectives and experiences, we cannot propel humanity forward. In so doing, Graves offers a visualization of jazz musician Melvin Gibbs’ assertion that “cultural and scientific evolution requires multiple viewpoints, multiple vectors of thought and conceptualization, to yield optimum results.”⁹

When asked what he wanted his lasting legacy to be, Graves responded that he hoped to “inspire people to be as flexible as possible, less controlled as possible, so that you can get the maximum of how the planet vibrates as a whole. You owe it to yourself to reach another kind of freedom that’s been given to us by nature.”¹⁰ As we survey Graves’ art of interconnectivity—from his fusion of percussive and scientific experimentation to his assemblage of medical models and African masks—we can appreciate how he reached new kinds of freedom by melding seemingly unrelated fields. Just as Graves bridged supposed divisions to yield productive dialogues, he also imbued his work with iconography that resisted white hegemony and the limits of medical biases. Graves’ revolutionary oeuvre, therefore, asks us to question the coherence and stability of all boundaries. We owe it to ourselves to follow his lead.

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1. *Queens International 2018: Volumes* was on view at the Queens Museum in 2018–19 and was curated by Sophia Marisa Lucas and Baseera Khan. Graves has more recently been the subject of a traveling retrospective, which first appeared at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania (2020–21) and was curated by Mark Christman. The show later appeared at Artists Space in New York (2021–22), where it was curated by Danielle A. Jackson, and finally, at the Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles (ICA LA) (2023), where it was curated by Amanda Sroka.

2. See Mark Christman, Celeste DiNucci, and Anthony Elms, eds., *Milford Graves: A Mind-Body Deal* (Los Angeles: Inventory Press and Ars Nova Workshop, 2022). Produced on the occasion of the artist’s recent traveling retrospective, it is the first major publication dedicated to Graves’ career.

3. See Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., “Free Jazz and the Price of Black Musical Abstraction,” in *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 355. Ramsey argues that free jazz, as a form of Black musical abstraction, contained its own political charge: “Did free jazz—this radical experiment in sound—merely reflect the politically charged moment, or did it fuel it? Both.”

4. Milford Graves, quoted in Melvin Gibbs, “Making Contact,” in Christman, DiNucci, and Elms, *Milford Graves*, 189.

5. “Healed by the Beat: Milford Graves, Jean-Daniel Lafontant, and Jake Nussbaum in Conversation,” in Christman, DiNucci, and Elms, *Milford Graves*, 71–81.

6. *Exhibition Guide for Milford Graves: Fundamental Frequency* (Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2023), 2; see also *Heartbeat Drummer*, color video, 2004, viewable at <https://sites.artistspace.org/milford-graves-fundamental-frequency/module/heart-music/>.

7. Joel T. Fry, “A Map of Herbal Healing,” in Christman, DiNucci, and Elms, *Milford Graves*, 109–10. Here, Fry, the late archaeologist and curator of Philadelphia’s Bartram’s Garden, identifies and confirms the health benefits of the plants in Graves’ collage.

8. For an excellent assessment of these pursuits, see Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

9. Gibbs, “Making Contact,” 187.

10. Milford Graves, quoted in Mark Christman, “Introduction,” in Christman, DiNucci, and Elms, *Milford Graves*, 26.



Milford Graves, *Pathways of Infinite Possibilities: Skeleton* (2017).
Human skeleton, steel pipe, wires, stickers, medical ear, model,
dundun (talking drum), preserved heart, stethoscope, video monitor,
transducer, amplifier, wood, metal, printed labels, marker, and casters,
dimensions variable. Image courtesy of Artist Space, ICA LA,
and the Estate of Milford Graves. Photo: Filip Wolak.