

Ted Joans

Black
Flower

9.10.2026–
28.2.2027

Exhibition
Guide

ENNASUAL
STRA-XUAEB SED
LANONTNAC EÉSUSZ

A poet, artist, and tireless traveller, Ted Joans (1928–2003) produced a body of work that includes poetry, drawing, collage, film, and performance. From New York and Paris to Tangier and Timbuktu,* his travels and encounters forged connections between Black America, Europe, and Africa.

‘Jazz* is my religion, and Surrealism* is my point of view’, he proclaimed, and these two forces run throughout his work, as does his commitment to Black Power* and Pan-Africanism.* Joans refused to be pigeonholed in one identity, movement, or discipline. He freely drew on different traditions and legacies and played with his personal story. He gave the name ‘poem-life’* to this manner of transforming artmaking into a way of life and life into material for art.

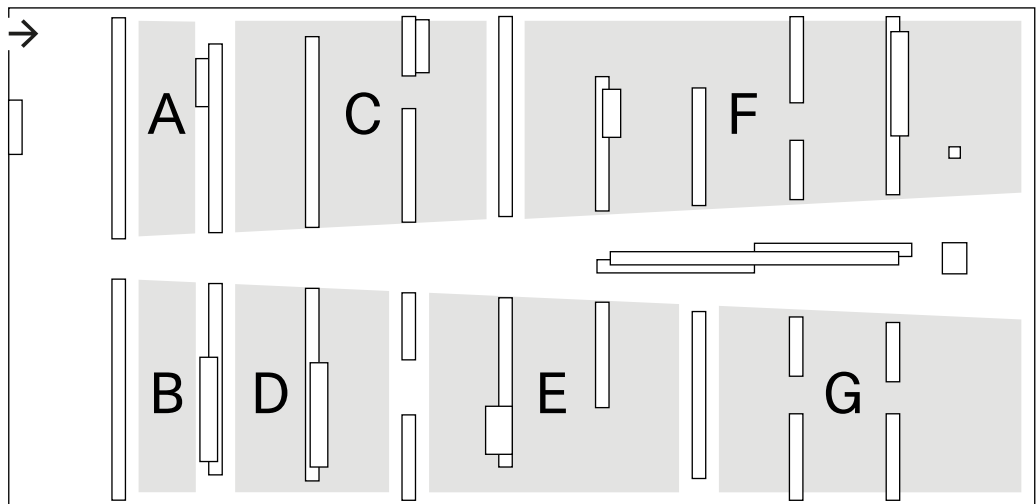
Rather than presenting Joans’ life and work chronologically, the exhibition unfolds through juxtapositions. Its title, *Black Flower*, comes from a phrase Joans used to describe himself. As he put it, he was a “black flower” rooted in the Black American experience, yet drawn to sow seeds and bloom elsewhere. An image of affirmation, resistance, and freedom.

The exhibition begins on the 2nd floor and continues on the 1st.

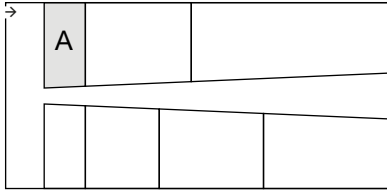
Words marked with an asterisk are explained at the end of this guide.

Plan

2nd Floor



A



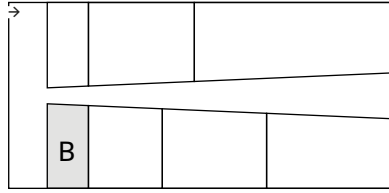
From bebop to the Beat Generation:
the invention of Ted Joans

As a teenager in segregated Kentucky,* Ted Joans played the trumpet and became a devotee of the bebop* of Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk. He drew particular inspiration from the style's improvisation and spontaneity, which he soon carried over into his poetry and painting.

After moving to New York City in the early 1950s, Joans began exhibiting his art, giving poetry readings in cafés, and spending time with the writers and artists of the Beat Generation.* Very much taken by Salvador Dalí's painting initially, he developed a practice that increasingly drew on jazz. His 'jazz action painting' was intended as a translation of the music's energy into the pictorial gesture.

In Greenwich Village,* that creative energy carried over into the costume parties Joans hosted, bringing together poetry, music, and dance. These gatherings made him a familiar presence in the neighborhood's cultural scene.

B

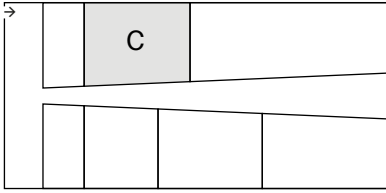


An elective genealogy:
Langston Hughes & André Breton

Ted Joans chose two figures to be his guiding lights, the African-American poet Langston Hughes and the French Surrealist writer André Breton. He called them his 'February fathers' because they were both born in that month.

A well-known figure of the Harlem Renaissance,* Hughes embodied for him a poetry that rooted in blues, jazz, and spoken English. Joans met Breton in Paris in 1960 and the Frenchman represented Surrealism and its embrace of fantasy, chance, and unexpected associations. Joans chose neither legacy over the other. He brought them into dialogue to forge his own artistic lineage.

C



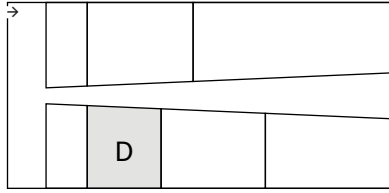
Jazz is my religion

Ted Joans filled his world with jazz musicians he admired. They figure in his work and some of them shared the stage with him during his recitals and performances.

Saxophonist Charlie Parker, known as “Bird,” held a special place for Joans. After Parker’s untimely death in 1955, Joans wrote “Bird Lives” on walls across New York. The phrase became a rallying cry for him, it appears alongside Parker’s profile throughout his work.

Starting in the 1960s, Joans was very active in Europe’s music scene in clubs and festivals there, gravitating to free jazz.* He saw jazz as ‘Black classical music’, a living tradition whose avant-garde movements were part and parcel of the struggle for Black liberation in those years. In contemporary jazz Joans found a community where creativity, freedom, and political commitment converged.

D



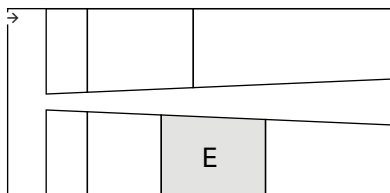
Reworking images

Museums were a second home to Joans. He observed, studied, and admired the Old Masters, but the artist also questioned the space allotted to Blacks and people of colour in art history. He liked to combine different traditions and periods to fashion his own artistic lineages.

Joans also borrowed existing images in order to rework them, fragmenting, repurposing and freely associating them. This is how reproductions of pictures, photographs, and banknotes figure in new compositions. His gesture of reappropriation both shifts meaning and upends the established hierarchies. He also put the artists he admired in dialogue with both anonymous and historical figures.

Collage became a way then of thinking via the image. Playful and critical, this approach enabled Joans to place images with no prior connection in a visual coexistence whilst coaxing out new relationships.

E



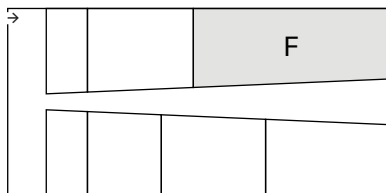
Africa on the horizon

In the 1960s, Africa became an essential destination in Joans' life. From Tangier through the Sahara to Timbuktu, the artist travelled all over the Continent exploring its diversity and gaining an in-depth understanding of its artistic traditions and political realities.

He called it the 'most surreal continent'. As he saw it, Surrealism was not an exclusively European invention. He recognised surrealist forms in African cultures. Far from viewing Africa as the place for 'returning to one's roots', he was continually interested in the multiple connections that developed between the continent and its diaspora.*

His commitment to Pan-Africanism is yet another expression of this interest. In 1969 at the Pan-African Festival of Algiers,* he gave readings of his poems alongside the American jazz saxophonist Archie Shepp and a number of Tuareg musicians. Africa was indeed for him a place to live and create as well as a space for solidarity and political engagement.

F



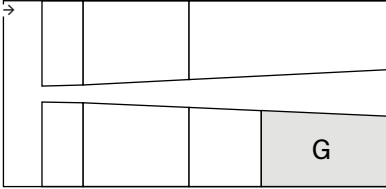
Kindred spirits

Poets, artists, musicians, and friends played an essential role in Joans' life. Some were close associates and intimates with whom he made art; others were well-known figures he admired and paid homage to. He also invented artistic kinships, for example when he gathered around the Uruguay-born French poet Lautréamont an imaginary family of artists with ties to South America and the Caribbean.

This community also took shape through artistic collaboration. Joans often worked with other artists and was especially drawn to the exquisite corpse,* a game invented by the Surrealists. Begun in 1976, *Long Distance* passed from hand to hand for nearly thirty years, bringing together in a single drawing the women and men he called his "dream people."

In his later years, Joans used portraiture to revisit the encounters that shaped his life. Through outlines and silhouettes, he sought to capture their presence rather than simply their likeness.

G



Love, desire, and freedom

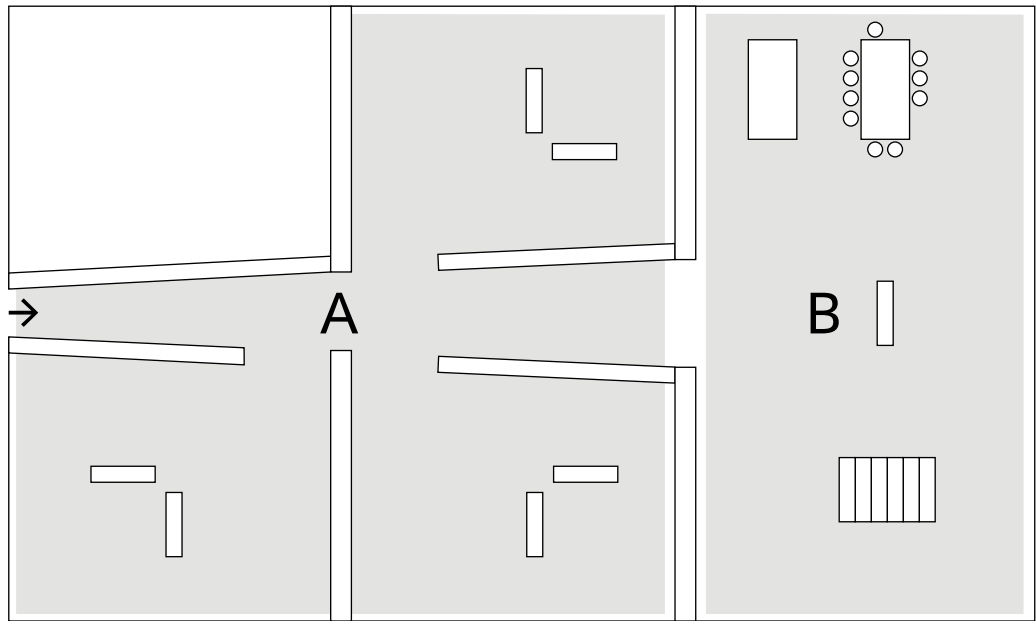
In the segregationist America where Joans grew up, freedom also played out in private life. As early as 1949 he depicted desire between a Black woman and a White man challenging the racial boundaries and social norms of his time.

In Surrealism's wake, desire also became a place for artistic experimentation. Joans fragments bodies, has genitals springing out of unexpected places, and sexualises familiar images. The Statue of Liberty itself becomes the subject of erotic transformations.

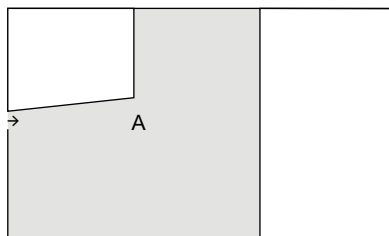
This urge to transgress taboos did have limits all the same. Desire remains largely viewed from a male point of view and women sometimes appear as mere objects of his fantasies. His erotic work reveals a tension: it seeks to free desire from social norms without always questioning the relations between men and women.

Plan

1st Floor



A



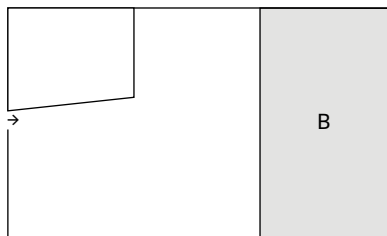
Teduction Films: silent poems

In the early 1980s, Joans used a Super 8 camera to make *Teduction Films*, a series of shorts shot during his travels.

With no predetermined story, Joans filmed chance encounters, everyday gestures, and ordinary scenes, finding slapstick humor tinged with a Surrealist sensibility in daily life. He edited some of the footage in the camera. Shifts in film speed and abrupt cuts echoed his use of collage, bringing disparate images together.

The films are silent but were screened with an instrumental jazz accompaniment that the artist deliberately did not synchronise with the film. The eye and ear are free to make their own correspondences.

B



Teduction Room

The Teduction Room offers visitors of all ages resources and activities to extend their experience of the exhibition. A glossary explains ideas that recur throughout the show, while information about selected works offers further insight into Joans and his art. At a listening station, visitors can hear his voice in recorded interviews, readings, and other sound works.

Visitors can also try techniques Joans used, including frottage, or making rubbings.* Whether listening, reading, or making art, they can explore the exhibition in their own way and at their own pace.

Some key terms

*Terms marked with an asterisk in the guide are explained here.

Black culture and american avant-garde movements

Jim Crow/segregation

The term 'Jim Crow' refers to a set of laws and practices that enforced racial segregation in the South of the United States from the late 19th century through the 1960s. Jim Crow separated Black and White people in many areas of daily life and perpetuated deep inequalities. Joans grew up under this system in Louisville, Kentucky.

Harlem Renaissance

This Black cultural and intellectual movement flourished in the 1920s and 1930s, mainly in Harlem, a neighbourhood in the north of Manhattan, New York. Black writers, artists, and musicians produced a collective body of work that made clear the depth and variety of Black culture whilst renewing the representation of the African-American experience. The poet Langston Hughes (1901–1967), a seminal figure for Joans, was one of the leading representatives of this historic moment.

Jazz

Born at the turn of the 20th century within Black communities in the United States, jazz became one of the major forms of expression of African-American culture. Rooted in improvisation and rhythm, jazz underwent profound changes over the course of the century. For Joans, it represented a culture, a community, and a model for making art.

Bebop

A novel form of jazz took shape in the 1940s called bebop, the work of a new generation of Black musicians that included the saxophonist Charlie Parker (1920–1955) and the trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie (1917–1993). Fast, complex, and virtuosic, bebop put improvisation at the very heart of the music whilst breaking with the conventions of commercial jazz. Joans discovered the style in his teenage years and took it as a model for creative expression.

Free Jazz

This style of jazz appeared in the late 1950s and developed over the course of the following decade. It challenged jazz's established conventions in favour of more open forms. Within the context of the era's struggle for civil rights and Black emancipation, this musical quest for freeing up form also took on a political dimension amongst some musicians. Joans became a part of this scene starting in the 1960s.

Beat generation

This literary and cultural movement flourished in the United States in the 1950s. It saw itself as breaking with the post-war conformism that reigned throughout the decade. Beat writers experimented with new forms of writing and new ways of leading their lives, notably drawing on jazz as well. Joans was friends with several figures of the Beat Generation whilst carving out a singular place for himself in the movement.

Greenwich village

This Manhattan neighbourhood was a hub of avant-garde art, bohemian living, and counterculture activism over the course of the 20th century. In the 1950s, artists, writers, and musicians gathered in the Village's cafés, clubs, and galleries. Joans settled there and was very active in interracial circles, which were still quite rare at the time in an America where segregation was the law in many States and overwhelmingly the norm everywhere else.

Black Power

This political and cultural movement emerged in the United States in the 1960s, extending and sometimes finding fault in the Civil Rights Movement. In 1966, the militant Stokely Carmichael (1941–1998), who later adopted the name Kwame Ture, helped to popularise the 'Black Power' rallying cry, which asserted Blacks' self-determination, pride, and power to act in the face of racism. This political and cultural affirmation resonates deeply in Joans' work.

Surrealism and art practices

Surrealism

An artistic and literary movement that took shape in the 1920s around the writer André Breton (1896–1966), Surrealism used dreams, chance, and unexpected associations as ways to free the imagination and transform existence. Joans joined the Surrealist group in Paris and developed an approach that tapped into his experience as a Black man in America and his connections with Africa.

Exquisite corpse

Originally called *cadavre exquis* by its Surrealist inventors this collaborative game involves several participants contributing to a group work of art (or piece of writing), one after the other and each without seeing what comes before. Joans adopted the principle in several collaborative pieces, in particular *Long Distance*.

Poem-life

This term was used by Joans to describe the close continuity between his life and his artmaking. Travels, the encounters and connections made with others along the way, lived experiences, all became grist for his artistic mill.

Frottage

The technique of frottage, or rubbing, involves placing a sheet of paper over a surface that has raised areas (said to be 'in relief') and rubbing the sheet with a pencil or other medium to reveal the surface's texture.

Africa, Diasporas, and Pan-africanism

African independence

Starting in the 1950s but especially around 1960, many African countries under European colonial rule achieved independence. Sparking new political and cultural aspirations, this period of decolonisation was the backdrop for Joans's travels in Africa and his commitment to Pan-Africanism.

Négritude

A literary and political movement took shape in the 1930s called Négritude, or Blackness, developed by French-speaking Black intellectuals reacting to colonialism and racism. The movement affirmed the value of Black cultures and identities. Joans, however, took issue with what he saw as its overly essentialist thinking, its belief that humans have a fixed set of core properties that make them what they are, and refused to take part in the 1966 World Festival of Black Arts.

Diaspora/Black Diasporas

The term Black diaspora applies to peoples of African descent living outside the African Continent, and more broadly to the political ties connecting them to one another and Africa.

The Black Atlantic

Developed by Paul Gilroy in his book *The Black Atlantic* (1993), the concept of a 'Black Atlantic' refers to the cultural, political and intellectual exchanges and influences that travelled between Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe, shaping the history of slavery and Black diasporas. It encourages us to see these worlds through their exchanges rather than as fixed identities.

Panafricanism and Panafrican Festivals

Pan-Africanism brought together ideas and movements that assert the ties and solidarity of African peoples and Black diasporas. Starting in the 1960s, major festivals became key venues for connection, creative expression, and political debate. Joans took part in the 1969 Pan-African Festival in Algiers and the 1977 FESTAC that was held in Lagos, Nigeria, defending a vision rooted in the concepts of circulation and exchange rather than a unique Black identity.

Timbuktu

Located at the gateway to the Sahara, the historic Malian city of Timbuktu was for centuries an important crossroads for trade and knowledge between different regions of Africa. Following Mali's independence in 1960, the city became one of Joans' key bases in Africa.



To learn more, scan here
for the glossary

Ted Joans in 10 dates

1928 – Birth

Ted Joans was born on 20 July in Cairo, Illinois. He would later change the date to 4 July, Independence Day in the United States, one of the ways he contributed to his own mythology. He grew up in an America where racial segregation was law in the traditional Southern States and tacitly condoned almost everywhere else.

1951 – New York

After studying art at Indiana University, Joans settled in New York. He immersed himself in jazz and bohemian life in the city, and became part of the Beat Generation's circle of writers and artists.

1955 – 'Bird Lives!'

After the death of the saxophonist Charlie 'Bird' Parker, Joans scrawled 'Bird Lives!' on walls across New York as a tribute to his hero. The phrase became famous and comes up again and again in Joans's work.

1959 – Funky Jazz Poems

With the publication of *Funky Jazz Poems*, Joans asserted the central role of jazz in his poetry. Rhythm, improvisation, and performance became some of the principles that he took from music for his writing.

1960 – André Breton and Surrealism

In Paris, Joans met the writer André Breton (1896–1966) and joined the Surrealist circle. Surrealism became one of the threads that would run throughout his work and thought.

1962 – From Europe to Africa

Joans settled in Morocco, beginning a nomadic life between Europe and Africa. Over time, the African continent became central to his imagination, relationships, and commitments.

1969 – The Pan-African Festival in Algiers

Joans took part in the Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers, a major gathering of artists and intellectuals from all over Africa and its diaspora. At the time, his poetry was deeply rooted in the interplay of Black Power, Pan-Africanism, and the anti-colonial struggles on the continent.

1976 – *Long Distance*

Joans began an ambitious long-term 'exquisite corpse' artwork called *Long Distance* that would eventually involve 132 artists and friends. Taking shape over nearly three decades, this work gave tangible form to the international network of connections Joans forged through his travels.

1983 – Teducation Films

During a residency in Berlin, Joans made his first *Teducation Films*. Shot in Super 8, this series of short films was an extension of a number of things dear to the artist, his love for improvisation, travel, the people he met and friends he made, and the technique of collage.

2003 – Vancouver

Ted Joans dies on 25 April in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Organisation and Publication

Exhibition curator
Pierre-Henri Foulon, Curator of
contemporary art, MCBA
With the assistance of Eleonora
Del Duca, Assistant curator,
contemporary art, MCBA

The exhibition is supported
by the Art Mentor Foundation
Lucerne and the Loterie
Romande.

ART FOUNDATION
MENTOR LUCERNE



Publication

Ted Joans. Black Flower,
published to accompany the
exhibition, with contributions
by Pierre-Henri Foulon (ed.),
Karima Boudou, Valerie Cassel
Olivier, Eleonora Del Duca,
Manthia Diawara and Terri
Geis, Joanna Pawlik, Gregory
Pierrot and Abigail Susik.
Berlin, DISTANZ, FR/EN, 276p.
CHF 39.– available at the
MCBA Book- and Giftshop
→ shop.mcba@plateforme10.ch

The free access activities
are supported by Vaudoise
Insurance.



Events

Reservation required
for all events

→ mcba.ch/agenda

Please note: all tours and
events are in French unless
otherwise specified

Guided tours

Thursdays, 29 October,
19 November, 17 December,
21 January, and 25 February
at 6:30 pm
Every Sunday at 11 am

Guided tours with the curator

Saturday, 10 October at 11 am
One exhibition, two voices:
a dialogue between the
exhibition curator and Laura
Corsiglia, representative
of the Ted Joans estate.
Saturday, 31 October at 11 am
Sunday, 28 February at 3 pm

Guided tour (in English)

Sunday, 22 November at 2 pm

Guided tours for Ami·e·s du MCBA

Tuesday, 24 November
at 12:30 pm
Thursday, 3 December
at 6 pm

Guided tours for teachers

Wednesday, 28 October
at 12:30 pm
Thursday, 29 October
at 5:30 pm

Guided tours for social work professionals

Thursday, 29 October,
10 am–11:30 am

Programme for schools
and private tours

→ mcba.ch

Workshops 0 to 100 years old

Come with family or friends —
or on your own — and stay for
fifteen minutes or three hours.
Free admission/No booking
required

Saturday, 5 December,

2 pm–6 pm

Rubbing gift

Create a notebook to give as
a Christmas gift using rubbing
techniques inspired by Ted
Joans' work.

Saturday, 6 February, 2 pm–6 pm

Surrealist masks

Create a mask inspired by the
Surrealists using recycled
materials and collage — perfect
for Carnival!

Workshops for adults

Saturday, 21 November,

2 pm–5 pm

Untitled

Poetry writing workshop fol-
lowed by Jake Lamar reading
a selection of Ted Joans' poems.
With Nayansaku Mufwankolo,
poet, artist, researcher,
and lecturer at HEAD-Geneva.
Free admission/Workshop
in FR and EN

Saturday, 23 January, 1 pm–5 pm

Black experiences and resistance

Combining research and crea-
tive practice, this workshop
takes its cue from the artist's
example to explore strate-
gies of resistance developed
within Black communities.
Alternating between discus-
sion and guided creative
activities. In collaboration
with L'éprouvette – Laboratoire
Sciences et Société, UNIL.
Free admission

Events

Sunday, 1 November at 3 pm

Soundtrack to a Coup d'État

By Johan Grimonprez, 2024,
Belgium/France/
Netherlands/150 min.

This award-winning documen-
tary explores the ways jazz
became a political tool during
the Cold War against the
backdrop of Patrice Lumumba's
assassination and East–West
rivalries in the Congo. Part of
Festival Jazz Onze +. Screening
at Le Cinématographe.
Free admission

Saturday, 21 November,

5:30 pm–6:30 pm

Reading of Ted Joans' poems by Jake Lamar

The New York-born Paris-based
writer Jake Lamar brings
Ted Joans' exuberant poetry
to life in a reading that captures
its subversive spirit and pro-
foundly oral character.
Free admission/Reading in FR
and EN

Thursday, 28 January,

6:30 pm–7:30 pm

Ted Joans & New Black Poetry

This evening explores the
dialogue between Ted Joans'
poetry and jazz.
With Truckthomas digger,
DJ, producer, and digital
humanities researcher at the
University of Geneva.
Free admission

Free-access activity

A mediation space is located
on the first floor in the show's
final gallery and features a
selection of works by Ted Joans
that are accessible to young au-
diences, along with open-ac-
cess creative activities for all
and listening stations with
recordings.

Information

Hours:
Tuesday–Sunday 10am–6pm
Thursday 10am–8pm
Monday closed

MCBA is closed on 25.12.2026
and 1.1.2027.

Admission and Online Tickets:
→ mcba.ch/billetterie
First Saturday of the month:
free

Access:
SBB Lausanne train station,
3 minutes on foot
Bus: 1, 3, 20, 21, 60,
Gare stop
Bus: 6, Cecil stop
Metro: m2, Gare stop
Car: Montbenon parking,
Reduced fee

Staying connected:
Behind the scenes, a look
at the collection, etc.
@mcbausaanne
@mcba.lausanne

Newsletter:
Events, Museum life,
editorial, etc.
→ mcba.ch/newsletter

Association des Amis·es
du MCBA:
Special tours and visiting
hours, classes and trips, etc.
→ mcba.ch/amis-du-musee

Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts
PLATEFORME 10
Place de la Gare 16
1003 Lausanne
Switzerland

T +41 21 318 44 00
mcba@plateforme10.ch
www.mcba.ch
@mcbausaanne
@mcba.lausanne

Other autumn and
winter exhibitions at the MCBA:

Espace Focus
Charles Blanc-Gatti.
Les couleurs du son
25.9.2026–17.1.2027
Free entrance

Espace Projet
Lucas Erin. La ronde
28.8.2026–14.2.2027
Free entrance

The Collection
Free entrance

Your opinion is important to us



Main partner
Plateforme 10

AUDEMARS PIGUET
Le Brassus

Main partners
MCBA construction



QUARTIER
DES ARTS
LAUSANNE

