

[FindArticles](#) > [Art in America](#) > [May, 1997](#) > [Article](#) > Print friendly

The missing tradition - African American art, Atlanta City Hall; Thornton Dial, Michael C. Carlos Museum, Atlanta, Georgia

Thomas McEvelley

Responding to a pair of related exhibitions in Atlanta, one devoted to the recent work of Alabama artist Thornton Dial, the other surveying vernacular African-American artists of the South, the author detects the emergence of a long-overlooked force in American art.

Last summer, as part of the Cultural Olympiad of the 1996 Olympics, the city of Atlanta hosted two exhibitions which brought some of the repressed material of the American visual psyche into the light with extraordinary clarity. "Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art of the South," containing more than 300 art works (virtually all from the extensive holdings of Atlanta collector William Arnett) by over 40 contemporary African-American artists of the Southeast, was installed at City Hall East, a venue which, in this case, served as an extension of the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University. Meanwhile, at the Carlos itself, an exhibition titled "Thornton Dial: Remembering the Road" included 75 relief paintings, works on paper and sculptures by self-taught Alabama artist Thornton Dial, who also had work in "Souls Grown Deep." In addition to their shared Olympiad associations, both shows were curated by Robert Hobbs.

For many viewers there was an aura of special importance clinging to these exhibitions, an importance which derives, in part, from how they underscore our incomplete understanding of African-American culture. The sense of occasion was given voice by congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis who writes, apropos of "Souls Grown Deep," that it "should be viewed as a reflection of the on-going struggle for freedom." [1] Indeed, more than being just a pair of art shows, these events are part of the historic emergence of a vigorous but long-overlooked tradition in American visual art. They offered viewers an introduction to the visual-art component of a broad, highly developed tradition that exists among the descendants of slaves in the American South. Large areas of this tradition, which combines aspects of West African culture that survived through slavery with elements arising out of the African-American experience, are familiar to most Americans and have had an enormous impact on culture around the globe. Yet, while African-American music (including blues, gospel, jazz, rhythm and blues) has won widespread recognition, the corresponding visual-art tradition has been under-appreciated and little seen. It may well be that our fragmented and disjointed sense of African-American culture is the result of our imperfect awareness of its total sweep. These exhibitions, and some others of recent years, have demonstrated that the emerging visual component of this tradition is as compelling and significant as the other, more familiar, parts.

At the present moment, Thornton Dial, now in his late 60s, is clearly central to this tradition. Many familiar with his work regard Dial as one of the country's premier painters, and yet his paintings remain unknown to much of the mainstream art world. This has to do with, among other factors, Dial's ambiguous cultural location, his position between worlds. The difficulty in categorizing Dial is reflected in the unusual combination of venues for his 1993

show in New York (which I had the good fortune to curate). Titled "Thornton Dial Image of the Tiger," the exhibition appeared simultaneously at two institutions, one of which, the Museum of American Folk Art, signaled Dial's "self-taught" origins, while the other, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, reflected his relevance to mainstream art practice.

As the Atlanta show revealed, Dial's recent oeuvre involves heavily textured canvases that verge on the sculptural--relief painting, it has been called, or painted construction. In these works, human and animal figures appear to be tightly stretched by collaged-on ropes which themselves seem to reveal forces within the canvas. Across the pictorial membrane, which can attain a thickness of 4 to 6 inches, the images, usually referring to some aspect of African-American history, seem to dissolve into and reemerge from the industrial sealing compound the artist uses to build up his surfaces. While Dial's earlier works such as *The Tiger That Flew Over New York City* (1990) of ten involved a humorous, even comedic edge, the recent work has taken on, as Robert Hobbs puts it, a tragic quality.

A massive brooding blackness (like Goya's or Kiefer's) holds the straining elements of these pictures in a tense confinement. But while the composition seems stable, the wracked and stretched figures suggest a pervasive pain. These works also show Dial's highly developed sense of history merging with the West African-derived conjuring tradition. This connection is made explicit in the title of *Graveyard Traveller/Selma Bridge* (1992), a painting in which images of a tiger and a dragon symbolically portray a historic moment in the Civil Rights movement. Heavily brooding works such as *Outside the Coal Mine*, *Trouble Blues* and *The Creation of Our World*, in which an almost Stygian blackness envelopes figures and environment, similarly show Dial revisiting the torments of the past--and discovering, therein, portents of the future, further victories in the "struggle for freedom" of which John Lewis speaks.

The first work one encountered upon entering "Souls Grown Deep" was an overwhelming mixed-medium installation by Alabama sculptor Lonnie Holley [see "Front Page"]. Living on an acre of land near the Birmingham airport, Holley has spent years surrounding his home with an ever-expanding array of found, made and altered objects. This outdoor installation is an impressive example of a long-established Southern phenomenon, the "yard show." In a text for the forthcoming book inspired by "Souls Grown Deep," one writer has describes how, during a car trip through the South, he occasionally noticed "objects made of old tires, tractor parts, metal, glass, or painted pieces of oddly shaped wood in black folks' yards." [2] Commenting, in his contribution to the same book, on the pervasiveness of the yard show in black areas of the South, William Arnett observes that "all around the Southern countryside there were and continue to be countless small, carefully arranged rock piles, bundles of scrap metal attached to fences, strings of bottles hanging from trees, symbolic abstractions painted on walls of buildings both rural and urban." [3] In "Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas," a 1993 exhibition Robert Farris Thompson curated at The Museum for African Art in New York, the noted scholar traced the yard show to West African customs that had survived through 400 years of New World oppression [see A.i.A., Dec. '94]. [4] Yard shows also have distinctively American layers of meaning. Many evoke the themes of slavery and of being an outcast; in sad and wise reverie, they seem naturally to relate a life among abandoned things with the sense of being abandoned by society. Yet in the process of recycling or reusing society's detritus, there is also a sense of tenacious survival, of dogged faith in the possibility of rebirth.

Many of the Black Belt[5] artists featured in "Souls Grown Deep" live in the midst of yard shows of their own devising, including, in Atlanta itself, Nellie Mae Rowe and Eldren M. Bailey; in rural South Carolina, Sam Doyle; in rural North Carolina, Vernon Burwell; in Gainesville, Florida, Jesse Aaron; in Miami, Purvis Young; in Memphis, Joe Light; in rural Mississippi, Ralph Griffin; in rural Alabama, Charlie Lucas. To this list one should add the late Mary T. Smith (1904-1995) of rural Georgia. These and many other, mostly anonymous artists from the South have transformed their environments according to their sensibilities, refusing to live in a space that was not "theirs" in some deeper sense than is offered by bank documents or rent receipts.

A yard show is something that is ever-forming and ever-dissolving. As Holley walks around his acre, for instance, he will move an object from one place to another, use a knife to alter something, take wire and bind two things together. His process is reminiscent of Joseph Beuys's long performances during which seeming junk was combined and recombined, except that for Holley the creation of his yard show is not a performance--it's just everyday life. The elements in Holley's yard show are not only subjected to the artist's continual alterations, they are also exposed to the weather and are constantly decomposing, returning to the earth. In their acceptance of organic processes, yard shows manifest a balance between the interventions of culture and the cycles of nature.

Despite the apparent randomness, there is a rationale to Holley's yard. At first, one might perceive only things such as "old shoes, tires, sneakers and coffee pots, old slop pails, broken chairs and discarded garbage cans" (to cite Vincent Harding's partial catalogue of Holley's yard).[6] But with prolonged experience, the viewer can see patterns and connections emerge. William Arnett's description benefits from the collector's repeated visits over many years:

Two guardian effigies are attached to trees flanking the entryway.... Nearby is an abstracted ten-foot-tall female figure made of wood and metal. From her drum-shaped midsection at certain times crawl living children, symbolizing the emergence of the human race from the belly of a primordial earth mother. Visitors discover hundreds of artworks--stone statuary, wood figurines, paintings, and abstract constellations constructed from any available material. Arranged in a seemingly haphazard manner, these objects form a carefully conceived arrangement representing in symbols the complicated world view of the environment's creator.... One totemic sculpture consists of stacked, variously colored stone abstractions, each symbolizing the womb of a different race.... In another area of the compound there is a large construction of monolithic pillars, now lying in ruins....[7]

Arnett rightly understands Holley's yard installation as an encyclopedic environment, not unlike the ancient symbolic constructions at Borobodur in Java. Holley himself says as much when he asserts: "My yard deals with everything from the cradle to the grave." [8]

For "Souls Grown Deep," Holley moved a portion of this massive environment into the City Hall East building, where it served as a grottolike entrance to an under-world of neglected cultural treasure. In this installation, the light was dim, a path curved between two earthy slopes and overhead, things were hanging everywhere. So extensive and fascinating was this array that the visitor got a sense that he or she might not get through to the rest of the show.

Passing, eventually, through the quasi-ritualistic entrance way of Holley's work, one moved into more

conventionally installed galleries where spaces were delineated for individual artists. One walked among the demonic root fetishes of Bessie Harvey, the ceramic heads of Son Thomas, the blunt, muscular assemblages of the blind Hawkins golden, the flowing sinuous sculptures of Eldren Bailey, the dense "spirit writing" drawings and assemblages of J.B. Murray, who died in 1988. These and other participants were treated generously, represented not by one or two works but by 10 or more. This allowed visitors to gain a sense of the extraordinary variety and power of the artists' different visions and how each has arrived at a mature signature style.

The practice, common among these artists, of using and reusing found objects, both natural and manmade, may be rooted in early conjuring practices that have their origin in Africa. Much traditional conjuring practice is based on the belief that the dead influence the living from beyond the grave. In the forthcoming book on "Souls Grown Deep," Jack L. Lindsey discusses how in many African-American communities, objects associated with the deceased are placed on graves as propitiatory gifts.[9] His list of such offerings reads uncannily like a catalogue of the objects one might find in a yard show "cups, saucers, bowls, clocks, salt and pepper shakers, medicine bottles, spoons, pitchers, oyster shells, conch shells, white pebbles, toys, dolls' heads, bric-a-brac statues, light bulbs, tureens, flashlights, soap dishes, false teeth, syrup jugs, spectacles, cigar boxes, piggy banks, gun locks, razors, knives, tomato cans, flower pots, marbles, bits of plaster, toilet tanks." [10]

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the vocabulary of objects used in conjuring rituals was still connected with remembered West African customs, but following Emancipation, and even more after the Great Migration of blacks from south to north, the situation changed. The West African conjuring references were partially forgotten and replaced by new meanings derived from the dramatic, often tragic, experiences of the Americas. Yet the ancestral linkage with conjuring of ancestors was not obliterated, any more than the religious content of European art disappeared after the Enlightenment.

The historic connection between West African-derived religion and the art under discussion here shows itself in the occupations of some of the artists in "Souls Grown Deep." Harvey and Holley, for instance, have functioned as healers and diviners in their communities; Holley started as a tombstone maker and gravedigger; Eldren Bailey and the older self-taught artist William Edmondson (not in the show) also worked as gravediggers.

Continuities such as these contributed to the picture in "Souls Grown Deep" of an artistic environment reflecting African roots, extended growing-pains on the plantation and a continuing trajectory through modern American history. This multilayered content was evident in such diverse work as Charles Williams's otherworldly assemblage-furniture, Ronald Lockett's collages made from accumulations of rust, Mary T. Smith's paintings showing ghostly rows of staring figures; and Purvis Young's lithe and powerful paintings of slave ships, fraught with a blueslike interpenetration of grief and hope.

During my visit to "Souls Grown Deep," I ran into an art historian who marveled not only at the magnificence of the show but at what a complete surprise it was to her. "It's a parallel universe," she observed, seeking an explanation for the virtual obscurity of the participating artists. The fact that apart from a coterie of collectors and scholars, these artists have remained unknown outside their own communities, invites not only astonishment but also

interpretation.

While traveling in South Africa several years ago, I encountered a group of mostly illiterate artists in an area north of Pretoria known as Venda. These artists, not unlike the African-American artists in "Souls Grown Deep," create carved-wood sculpture, assemblages of found objects and materials, and yard shows. (There may be a historical connection between the roots of their work and those of the work of the Black Belt artists in the United States, but it would have to be a distant one since the slaves taken to America came from western and not southern Africa.) But despite such esthetic similarities, their public positions as artists are strikingly different. In South Africa, for some years the works of rural black artists have been exhibited, without excuse or explanation, alongside those of white, art-school-trained conceptualists from Johannesburg and elsewhere. The Venda artists, I learned, are not set apart in a special category, as if their work had nothing to do with the works of urban artists. Many of them are as widely known as any white South African artist and tend to be highly valued, in some cases even revered, by the white art community. On witnessing this situation, I had to reflect, somewhat ruefully, on the unlikelihood of such things happening in the United States. The art-school tradition here seems determined to be exclusive, still tacitly invoking the modernist theory which holds that such mixtures of "avant-gardes" and "outsiders" risk tainting the traditions involved. (Hence the insistence, in MOMA's "Primitivism" show, for example, on "spiritual affinities" to explain the adoption of African and Oceanic motifs and stylistic traits by European artists in the 20th century: we were not really borrowing from another tradition, we were merely bringing out additional nuances of our own.).

True, the 1995 Whitney Biennial included Bessie Harvey among the chic installation artists and conceptualists, but she was the only self-taught artist (and one of the very few African-Americans) in the show. (Unfortunately, Harvey died before the show opened.) By contrast, in the South African exhibitions I saw, rural black artists got as much space and attention as art-school-trained white ones. For Americans who have for so long thought of South Africa as a wicked, cruelly segregated society, it may be hard to admit that our art system may remain more deeply mired in apartheid than South Africa's.

Our unease at dealing with artists such as Dial and the participants of "Souls Grown Deep"--and with white artists of similar background--is epitomized by our inability to find a category in which to place them, a name to give them. Once they were called "primitive" or "naive." (Clement Greenberg actually once wrote that this kind of art was a sign of mental illness.[11]) A more polite term was "folk artist," but it just as effectively created a barrier, relegating this art to the supposedly timeless world of an unchanging peasant class, subtracting it from official art history. Subsequently the term "outsider artist" gained favor. While supposedly more neutral, that term, too, has lately been questioned because of the uncomfortable implications inherent to it. Who's to say what's on the inside? Surely Eldren Bailey and Jimmy Lee Sudduth feel "inside" their worlds.

More recently, the dominant term has been "self-taught." Just as "outsider" was proposed as an enlightened replacement for earlier prejudicial terms, so the phrase "self-taught" seems designed to avoid being judgmental. But this term, too, has pejorative implications. To begin with, it is clear that artists such as Bessie Harvey or Thornton Dial are not strictly self-taught. There is far too much similarity and interrelationship among their oeuvres for them to have developed in isolation. On the contrary, they represent a tradition in which younger artists learn from older

ones and their oeuvres. (We can see this when Mose Tolliver quotes from the work of Bill Traylor.) Our belief that these artists are "self-taught" arises out of our own ignorance. Ill-informed about the tradition they belong to, we find it easier not to acknowledge it exists. In essence, "self-taught" means little more than "not trained in academically recognized art schools."

Still more recently, as exemplified by the subtitle of "Souls Grown Deep," the term "vernacular" has come into play. Once again, the term is problematic insofar as it is based on the classical modernist distinction between high and low arts. It still seems to erect a barrier. The seemingly intractable question of terminology is far from being resolved, and one suspects that it may never be, as long as the inequalities of the society at large have not been addressed.

Not surprisingly, these artists encounter enormous difficulties in getting their work out into the world. But then, they are not particularly concerned with the official art world. Thornton Dial, for example, has never looked at an art book or an art magazine, seeming to feel that such things relate to another universe, not the one he inhabits.[12]

But ignoring institutionalized art history is not the same thing as ignoring history. It's a mistake to conclude that because Dial and artists like him are not schooled in Western art history their work is ahistorical. And yet, in an eerie echo of the old Hegelian dictum that Africa was ahistorical, we tend to see their work as timeless and archetypal. Regarding these artists as being outside of history is a very easy way to mark them as irrelevant.

Several years ago, at a conference on contemporary African art, one participant, an African artist, was asked what makes an art work specifically contemporary. He replied, "Well, that it was made today, I suppose." While that is the obvious answer that consulting a dictionary would yield, it was not the right answer in terms of the Hegelian modernist view as refined by Karl Schnasse, Alois Riegl and others who created the theory that, despite successive challenges in the era of postmodernism, still drives so much Western art history. The right answer would have run something like this: in order for an art work to be contemporary it has to have been born out of a strong awareness of the art historical trends that led up to it, that in a sense made it inevitable; it arises (the argument further runs) out of a fierce determination to add one's own impetus to those developmental trends, and an equally strong awareness of the theoretical issues of the moment and how other artists, one's peers, are dealing with them.

Because artists of the so-called self-taught school do not repeat this formula in a precisely Western way, there is a temptation to dismiss them, to segregate them outside the special, learned sensibility that defines the "modern" and the "contemporary." This is to take a very narrow, even shriveled view of history. In fact, the works of (so-called) vernacular artists arose from the same history as those of the "contemporary," but with a different point of entry and a different relationship to events. The history they struggle with is, ultimately, the same history dealt with by artists such as Anselm Kiefer or Haim Steinbach--the history of 20th-century power struggles and their social and individual consequences.

Dial's complex, heavily layered paintings, in particular, deal with the idea of the advancement of black peoples through such historical phenomena as industrialization and the Civil Rights movement. Hawkins Bolden's assemblages of work trousers and chains refer to ideas of bondage and forced labor. Holley's assemblages of found

materials, usually things discarded by others, may be seen as referring to those who are forced to survive from the detritus of society. Harvey's fetishistic root sculptures metaphorically suggest a desire to return to black cultural roots. Son Thomas's portrait sculptures of black people assert the wholeness of the selfhood of African-Americans.

It is precisely such an acute relationship to history that has made "Souls Grown Deep" seem of special value to many viewers, mostly in the black community, but not exclusively. The public responds to the many ways in which Black Belt artists address themes of slavery's legacy and the struggle against colonialism, and to their art's potential of fostering a new awareness of the depth of African-American culture, an awareness that goes beyond heavily Europeanized phenomena such as the Harlem Renaissance and bebop. Like the music of the blues long before it, this unique art is performing the powerful task of revealing hidden forces within the matrix of history.

The particular relationship of these artists to history is also expressed in the specific, personal associations that usually accompany the found objects they use. Once when I was talking to Holley about a big collage of his, I pointed here and there and asked, "What's this? What's that?" He responded, "Well, that's my grandma's old frying pan, and that's a dead chicken that was in my sister's yard. . . ," identifying the personal history of various items. This is meaningfully different from the Duchampian avant-garde tradition of using brand new, store-bought commodities that have no personal imprint, no sense of the past. The intimate relationship between artist and object in work such as Holley's collage helps in the task of bonding an oppressed community around its faith in its own reality--without piety, without artifice, without sentimentalism.

It is in view of this larger significance that prominent figures in the African-American community have contributed forceful statements to the forthcoming book about "Souls Grown Deep." Recognizing that this art work is a part of the historic struggle of African-Americans for freedom and dignity, Andrew Young also argues for its universality, observing that "Victor Hugo could relate to Thornton Dial." Vincent Harding, former director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center, writes of his first experience of this art work:

Though I had not met any of the artists at that time I was sure that they were not strangers, for the life force that inhabited their work was unmistakably related to the creative, brooding spirit I had encountered years before all across their native terrain among the women, men and young people who had shaped--and been shaped by--that southern-based religiously inspired democratic insurgency of the nineteen fifties and nineteen sixties often known as the Civil Rights Movement.[13]

Harding reminds US that both the Freedom Movement and these artists are evidence of how "Black southerners, long considered by many other Americans to be among the most backward and least valuable members of the national community, had rediscovered and reasserted a new value in themselves, a new strength and power, together with a reemerging sense of beauty." He continues, "So it is not surprising that the signs and scent of freedom pervade the work of these transformational `vernacular' artists. They have grasped and molded the freedom to say what they feel about themselves, about their country and their world."

Surely that is one of the things that art is supposed to do. And surely the emergence of this body of work into wider consciousness is a historic element of our time.

[1.] In the forthcoming book, *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*. This three-volume work, to be published by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, will be larger in scope than the exhibition that inspired it.

[2.] *Ibid.*, Howard Dodson, "More Than Previously Imagined."

[3.] *Ibid.*, William Arnett, "Beyond Borobodur."

[4.] See Robert Farris Thompson, *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas*, New York, The Museum for African Art, 1993.

[5.] The phrase has been used by W.E.B. Du Bois to denote that area of the American South which includes Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and parts of other states.

[6.] Statement by Vincent Harding in *Souls Grown Deep*.

[7.] William Arnett, "Beyond Borobodur."

[8.] Quoted by Melinda Shallcross, "The Poetry of Lonnie Holley," *Folk Art Messenger* 6, Spring 1993, p. 1.

[9.] Jack L. Lindsey, "Tradition and Continuum in African American Folk Art," in *Souls Grown Deep*.

[10.] Is this practice so different from one witnessed in Green River Cemetery in East Hampton, New York, when a visitor placed an opera program and ticket stubs on the grave of poet and opera-lover Frank O'Hara?

[11.] See Clement Greenberg, *Art & Culture*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1961, p. 131.

[12.] When I asked Lonnie Holley how, since he too has never seen art books or magazines, he had come to know anything at all about art, he replied, "I watch the Discovery Channel a lot."

[13.] Vincent Harding, in *Souls Grown Deep*.

"*Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art of the South*" appeared at Atlanta City Hall East [June 28-Nov. 4, 1996]. "Thornton Dial: Remembering the Road" was on view at the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta [June 28-Oct. 15, 1996]. A related show, "Bearing Witness: African-American Vernacular Art of the South," that includes works by many of the same artists, was recently on view at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York [Jan 25-Mar. 29].

Author: Thomas McEvilley teaches at Rice University, Houston. His book *Pat Steir* was recently published by Harry N. Abrams.

COPYRIGHT 1997 Brant Publications, Inc.

COPYRIGHT 2004 Gale Group