



“THE ROAD FROM EMELLE”

[text-only version]

by William Arnett

Published in *Thornton Dial in the 21st Century*
Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2005, pages 10–37

[Page numbers in this document do not correspond to the original book pages.]

Drive along any country road in the rural South, from Virginia to East Texas, through any area populated primarily by African Americans, and if you look carefully you will see evidence of a highly evolved, very complex system of outdoor art. You will have to look closely, or you will not see it. It is as if a secret language has been inscribed on the landscape. The origins of this art can be traced to America's first slaves.

In 1700, or 1800, 1900, or perhaps a lot more recently, in rural Alabama or Georgia or Mississippi—or even, say, within twenty miles of where *you* live—a black man creates a sculpture next to his front door. The sculpture is made of a wheel, a mirror, a shoe, a tree branch, a rope, a milk bottle, a piece of barbed wire, a broken kerosene lantern, and the skull of a farm animal. A white man comes to the door at midnight with a shotgun and says, “What’s that thing you made out here?” The black man answers, “Oh, that’s just some junk I put together to bless the bones of my dead mama.” The white man responds, “O.K., I don’t have a problem with that.” And the black man goes back to bed.

But what if the black man says this: “Well, you see, the wheel represents the eternal cycle of the human soul, but it is also a subtle reference to the fact that we are a poor and enslaved population that has had to survive by recycling materials cast off, just like we have been cast off, by a dominant culture; and the mirror, though some people believe it’s a relic of an old superstition having to do with the scaring away of wandering souls—maybe you’ve heard them referred to in folklore as ‘haints’—actually the mirror harkens to my Kongo ancestry and funerary rituals way too complicated for me to explain to you at this late hour; and the shoe, which is used by many sculptors like me to hint at various concepts of movement and journeys, for me it is nothing more than remembering my grandfather’s wisdom; he once passed along to me something said to him by his own grandfather, a full-blooded Choctaw Indian, that if you want to understand a man’s pain . . . Oh, by the way, that piece of barbed wire stuck in the sculpture is a hidden reference to not only the pain that my ancestors suffered at the hands of your ancestors, but also the pain of our Indian foreparents, but I digress, ‘A man’s pain can be felt only if you walk a mile in his moccasins. . . .’”

Of course, the black man may not have lived this far to finish the sentence. Secrecy has always been essential to survival in the Black South.

WHAT THORNTON DIAL SAW

Emelle, Alabama, was a sprightly little agricultural center when Thornton Dial was born there in 1928. Emelle is out in the flatlands on the edge of western Alabama, and seems to belong more to Mississippi, which is a few abandoned cornfields away. Dial describes it as “a nice place, where white folks claimed they treated the Negroes real good, and they treated them so good that the Negroes all left, and when the Negroes had left, the white folks couldn’t make it by themselves so they had to go, too.” There is not much left in Emelle. One store, to be exact, and it is for sale. The official population of Emelle when I started to write this was forty-four; when I recently checked again, it was thirty-one. By the time you read this, the population will be in the twenties, if that. Like so many other southern farm hamlets, Emelle verges on extinction and soon will probably lose its identity forever. Surviving residents will be given an impersonal address like “Route 1, Highway 17, Sumter County.” Nothing much gets planted there anymore, nor is it likely to, given the ages of the remaining farmers and the town’s proximity to a federal toxic-waste dump.

During the late 1920s, the nation was poised on the eve of the Great Depression, but for black people like Thornton Dial, a great depression had always been their reality. Dial’s mother, an unmarried teenaged sharecropper named Mattie Bell, gave birth to him in a crude wood shack in an Emelle cornfield. On a small farm nearby lived Buddy Jake Dial, Mattie Bell’s older cousin. When he was barely past toddling, young Thornton was turned over to Buddy Jake. At that point, Dial was

just called “Buck,” without a last name. Dial says that cousin Buddy Jake “was one of them bright-skinned people with that long straight kind of Indian hair.” He put Dial to work, gave him a place to stay, food to eat, clothes to wear, and the last name of Dial. By the time Dial was five years old, he was entrusted with the farm’s mules and cows, and he worked a full shift in the fields and around the barn.

Like most small farmers, Buddy Jake Dial built for himself the structures he needed. He built a barn, a tool shed, a storage bin, and when cars and motor-driven equipment became a part of rural agrarian life, he built a large wood garage. These buildings were not generic. Each was a carefully constructed, unpredictable, and elaborate combination of materials, forms, colors, and architectural innovations intended to give visibility (and probably meaning) to Buddy Jake’s artistic skills. He also made sculptures of old farm implements, machine elements, and automobile parts, some of them vaguely zoomorphic. They gave the place a personality that was animated, whimsical, and ominous.

Early in the century, when he was a young man, Buddy Jake would watch horses pull wagons down the dirt road while he and his mule plowed the land (see page 95). Cars and trucks eventually replaced horses and wagons, tractors replaced plows and mules, and asphalt replaced dirt. On the property not far from the road, between the house and the barn, Buddy Jake built a sculpture: a hitching post with a white wagon wheel attached near the top and an automobile wheel at the bottom. Across from Buddy Jake’s wagon-wheel sculpture stands another assemblage: a hoop attached to a post, around which a rose vine is entwined. At the bottom is a stack of axle casings. “They come from an antique wagon,” Mattie, Buddy Jake’s daughter, informed me.

“And who made that?” I asked.

“I made it,” she replied. “I made it after Daddy died. I made it to honor him.”

Buddy Jake has been dead for many years. Mattie is over ninety. Buddy Jake had watched as the world changed before his eyes, and perhaps he intended to leave a visual reminder that while old things may go—old customs, old relationships, old technologies—they are not forgotten. And new ones, the replacements, may not necessarily improve upon the old ones. Or perhaps his sculpture testifies to his philosophy or theology, foreshadowing that of his younger cousin Thornton Dial: “New life replace old life. Something go, something come; the recycling of life.”

“Little wheel turns by faith, / Big wheel turns by the grace of God.” These lines come from the old spiritual “Ezekiel Saw the Wheel.” Maybe Buddy Jake sang those words in church and understood some hidden metaphysical truth in them that he turned into a visual record: the little wheel of faith sat on the ground with the grace of God towering above it.

Perhaps Buddy Jake had seen a similar construction earlier in his life in a nearby yard. And perhaps that construction’s maker had previously seen something similar made by someone else, and perhaps the *meaning* of such objects was passed along from one generation to the next, or perhaps only the aesthetic imagery was passed along, and the meaning was changed. One meaning is in the mind of the maker; a different one can be in the eyes of the beholder.

The wheel may be the retention of an African antecedent, and some people may interpret it thus: “The wheel relates to the Kongo cosmogram: time is circular, not linear,” or, expressed in a more modern fashion: “What goes around comes around.”

Buddy Jake’s daughter Mattie contributed her own touches to the yard. Leading to the porch of her mobile home is a walkway of carpet scraps and old bricks, clearly evidencing her familiarity with improvisational strip quilts. Throughout the yard are tools and implements that have been overturned, repainted, modified, or converted into planters and other yard decorations. And there are rows of related sculptures made from discarded tires, roots, and tree trunks in which unusual combinations of plants and flowers are growing.

Mattie Dial's sculptures echo the imagery of her father's earlier ones. The precise meanings of all the works in the yard are limited to the daughter's testimony, which is simply that her own assemblages are homages to her father. But as we will see, wheels, tires, hubcaps, barrel staves, can lids, plastic reflectors, fans, and so many other circular objects play and have always played a very important role in African American yard decoration.

Less than a mile away from Buddy Jake's farm lived Irma Wrenn Hutchins Foy, or Cousin Irma. She was married to James Hutchins, who, though he never acknowledged paternity, was later revealed to be Thornton Dial's biological father. Their farm was large; the Wrenns were prominent black landowners when Irma Wrenn married Hutchins. This particular piece of the Wrenns' holdings was then elaborately transformed. Hutchins, like his neighbor Buddy Jake Dial, devoted his ambitious creative energies to turning ordinarily mundane buildings and landscapes into unexpectedly lyrical environments. On Hutchins's land, patterns found in wood constructions of barn walls, porches, sheds, and fences would ricochet off each other like a diversity of themes performed simultaneously by members of a jazz quartet. Hutchins color-coordinated all of it in yellow and green, with other things he had made—whirligigs, abstract sculptures, porch ornaments, and furniture—and color-coordinated with the flowers and corn that grew around them. A fence built by Hutchins of twisted and gnarled wood posts and barbed wire that enclosed most of the surrounding pastureland looks like a collaboration between the avant-garde earthwork artist Christo and African American root sculptor Bessie Harvey.

The buildings of Hutchins and Buddy Jake Dial engage themselves in a dialogue with their counterparts on every neighboring farm. They compose a subliminal community aesthetic with the other "artworks" found in and around virtually every African American property and home: fences, mailboxes, planters, porch décor, window trimmings, an endless variety of yard sculptures, and the most prevalent of all African American art forms, strip quilts. There is enough hard evidence and testimony now to conclude that indeed in the African American South there is a sophisticated and esoteric system of communication, built around found objects and materials with consistent symbolism and concealed meanings, for the recording, preservation, and dissemination of ideas and information. That system, that process, fermented, mutated, and evolved, over centuries, into a widespread *tradition* that in the twentieth century spawned some of the greatest visual arts produced by any culture.

Out of that southern African American vernacular artistic tradition came Thornton Dial. Also came hundreds of other southern black people who are artists in every sense except vocation—who one day may be accepted alongside other American artists considered "important." Also came hundreds of thousands of other important artists whose names and works will never be known. Regrettably America has overlooked, neglected, in many cases systematically excluded, and in some cases intentionally destroyed artists and art that make up one of the most precious components of our cultural heritage.

When black Africans debarked from slave ships, they were immediately stripped of every aspect of personal and cultural identity. They were often separated from their ethnic groups, their families, their religions, their philosophies, their history and heritage, their language, their personal possessions, and even their names. Every means of retaining cultural identity was forbidden. Separated from everything they knew and believed, from everything that could give them pride in themselves or loyalty to anyone other than their slave masters, New World blacks began to create a new heritage, a new identity, a new culture, as personalized and individualized as is possible among an enslaved civilization.

For the signposts of this new cultural identity to endure and survive, they had to avoid detection. A private language of philosophical and theological concepts had to be woven into an array of art, music, and oral literature. The music was safe. It was sung in privacy, and lyrics could be altered ac-

ording to who was present. Even if white people heard them, they probably did not understand the words, much less the meaning. Folk tales and other forms of oral literature were similarly secure. But art had a physical presence. Abstraction and esoteric explanations could safeguard it but could not totally conceal it. To be protected it needed to be put where it would not likely be seen. So the cultural heritage contained within the visual arts survived by being put in the graveyard. White people, either out of respect for the dead, or more likely fear, generally stayed away from black cemeteries.

Two essential elements of secrecy are improvisation and misdirection. Those qualities infused the arts with some necessary survival features: inscrutability, opacity, unpredictability, and the facility to exist in the open in the presence of a potentially dangerous adversary who could not be allowed to understand what he was really hearing and seeing.

As art gradually made its way from the cemeteries to the woods to the backyards and ultimately to the front yards, it became larger and more overt, but maintained its secrecy by seeming to be unstructured, being composed of innocuous materials, and characterized by a repellent aesthetic—at least for its time. It was not until expressionism, which was largely based on adaptations of African aesthetics, became Americanized and abstracted that the Euro-American aesthetic started to catch up, and the African American aesthetic became not only less repellent but extremely influential.

The secret language still exists today, and along the sides of southern roads are big piles of “junk,” built with surprisingly consistent ingredients: nonworking appliances, bottles, broken furniture (especially chairs), stones, bricks, pans, and so on. These junk piles are created, carefully and meticulously, by, for instance, farmers, factory workers, preachers, tradespersons, schoolteachers, and (these days) old people collecting government subsidies; in short, anyone. The junk piles have been there for centuries. They are intended to be stationary and permanent, and they generally last the lifetime of the artist. A junk pile’s formal qualities of size and shape and materials will change periodically according to the maker’s shifting intentions, much like any artist altering a work in progress. Unlike most traditional mainstream art, however, a junk pile is never meant to be completed. Though the message or philosophy contained within the junk pile may be interpreted fully only by the maker, the vocabulary is a widely shared one.

These are African American vernacular monuments. African Americans in the rural South do not have bronze generals on horseback, nor obelisks, plaques, or commissioned commemorative sculptures. But a system emerged out of slavery that served black people the way white people were served by their own art, music, and literature.

Michael Kimmelman, writing in the *New York Times* about the African American quilts of Gee’s Bend, Alabama, shown at the Whitney Museum, called the quilts “some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced.” My purpose for bringing it up is this: yes, the quilts of Gee’s Bend are indeed miraculous, for a multitude of reasons. Gee’s Bend, however, is a remote community of a few hundred scattered residents, and the quilts shown at the Whitney are but a *tiny* fraction of what has been produced in Gee’s Bend over the past two centuries, and Gee’s Bend is a *tiny* piece of a huge puzzle consisting of painting, sculpture, assemblage, drawing, textiles, music, dance, oral literature, “theater,” linguistics, hairstyle, clothing design, culinary arts, and on and on, that stretches across the southern portion of the United States like, well, a giant spectacular patchwork quilt.

Alongside the back roads of the South there have been thousands of junk piles that are also some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced; and in rural yards, and plenty of urban ones, there have been *millions* of assemblages—freestanding, hanging from trees, attached to fences and houses—that are some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced; and inside menial dwellings have been many millions of assemblages, charms, home-made utilitarian objects, shrines, *arrangements* (of *things*), and of course quilts, that are some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced. Go explore the southern countryside:

don't just look for junk piles or found-object sculptures. Examine the graves, churches, animal pens, chicken coops, doghouses, birdhouses, mailboxes, refuse containers, gates, piles of stones, walkways, scarecrows, signs, fences, window dressing, playhouses, gazebos, graffiti (the rural southern kind), clotheslines and the arrangement of clothes hanging from them, bundles of sticks and branches, clusters of bottles, property lines defined by painted half-buried automobile tires, flowers and plants juxtaposed to create color-field vistas, an incongruous object—a kitchen utensil, a toy, a shoe, an empty picture frame—placed or hanging in an entirely unexpected setting, a nonfunctioning light bulb, or fan, or pump, equally incongruous in its hidden placement. . . .

Every improvisational quilt, every barn, every piece of yard sculpture is a potential Rosetta Stone. They are among the components of one of the most highly evolved systems of preserving information (without revealing it openly) that exists anywhere. Every combination of colors, materials, and forms can (and often does) contain data that can be imparted in some form or another to everyone, according to his or her ability to comprehend.

Drive through the South when quilts are being given their “spring cleaning” and are being hung to dry on fences and clotheslines, and you can see a wonderful thing happening out in the open: quilts and barns in a visual call-and-response, like a cultural conversation between the genders.

The African American men and women who made all of that art knew exactly what they were making and why they were making it. They understood the role their contributions would play in the spectrum of their culture's artistic language. They can and should be identified as *traditional artists*, just as Leonardo and Rembrandt are so identified. And there were millions of them, millions of artists about whom we know almost nothing, but who were crucial to the preservation of American cultural knowledge and information.

His life was not unusual, given who he was and where he came from. He worked on a farm as a child, migrated to an industrial area before his thirteenth birthday, and did what others like him did. He hauled ice, and bricks, and things that were even heavier, and when he was allowed to, he built things. He built highways, houses, boxcars, and in his spare time he built things that had no names. They were just *things* and he enjoyed building them, though he didn't know what to call them for forty more years. White people, he would learn, call them art.

People like Dial, however, usually didn't make that kind of art, not officially anyway. He did it, nonetheless, because it gave him enormous satisfaction. Dial was a man of ideas, big ideas, and lots of them, but what could he do with them? He couldn't write them down because he had never learned to write. He couldn't talk about them because he had never learned the proper words, and anyway, whom would he talk to? So he built them. And in those things he built, Dial was able to create a language, understood only by him, a language through which he could record his observations, opinions, and convictions.

For people like Dial, it was not safe to leave artworks lying around. He always had a fear, perhaps a valid fear, that an artwork might betray an opinion or attitude that the white world would resent. If he couldn't hide his works, he destroyed them, often shortly after their completion. And even though his materials were free—he only had to find them laying on the ground—certain unusual metaphorical objects were not easily found, so he maintained his materials for future artistic recycling, and likewise he maintained in his mind his artistic images, also for future recycling.

Thornton Dial is one of them. Dial had an additional constraint: someone had convinced him early on that if he were going to make art, he'd probably have to buy a license (!). One of his first constructions on four-by-eight-foot plywood depicted a crowd of red, white, and blue human figures and animals, and suggestions of firearms, gathered around something that looked like a man in a tollbooth. When I first saw it and asked him what it was, he replied, “It's telling you that you can't kill nothing and you can't kill nobody in the United States. . . .” While I was writing down his words there

was a long pause, and then he added, “Unless you buy a license.”

When I first met Dial and looked at his art, it was clear that there was significant information contained within it, and yet he not only wouldn't talk about it, he steadfastly refused even to give titles to the pieces. His first obviously disingenuous answer to my comment that clearly his work had meaning beyond his insistence that “it ain't nothing” was, “Mr. Arnett, everybody know old Dial too dumb to mean something.” Later, as I tried to extract information about his work from him, I explained that if he would give the pieces titles, it would help me understand his mind, which I needed to do if I were to write about him as I was writing about other artists. His response was, “Mr. Arnett, if I tell you what I know and you put it with what you know, you going to be smarter than me.” Twenty years later I can assure Mr. Dial that he need not have worried.

A friend of mine was with me on that occasion, and said to me as we were driving home, “He was listening to you a lot closer than you probably thought he was.” And when I returned a few weeks later, Dial had a number of pieces displayed around the yard waiting for me. Previously, he had left his pieces untitled, or given them simple titles, like *Deer* or *Beaver's Dam* or *Factory*, but now the titles started to get more elaborate, and continued that way for several years: *Ford Done Advertised So Long That the Dog Got a Chance to Ride*; and *If You Want to Get Along in the United States You Got to Get in Line . . . Like the Flowers*; and *The Beavers Dam the River and the Tigers Go Across*; and *If the Tiger Had Knew He'd Be the Star in the Circus, He Wouldn't Have Hid So Long in the Jungle*; and *We Know Where the Blood Go, We Know Where the Bones Go, But We Don't Know Where the Soul Go*; and *The Cat That Told the Other Cat, "I Done Seen Them Flat Like That"*; and *Don't Care How Beautiful Something Is, You Still Got to Die Off and Leave It*.

In a serious moment during one of my first conversations with him, Dial had said to me, almost apologetically and with obvious embarrassment, “See, man, I just don't know enough words.” But with this newfound confidence to create not only lengthy titles but ones that were intelligent, profound, and witty, he made me realize that I had met one of those rare people who believes that finally there is nothing he cannot do and no obstacle he cannot, *will* not, overcome. Add that quality to great talent, intelligence, physical strength, and focus, and you get an artist like Dial.

Years later in 1995, during an interview with art historian Maude Wahlman, Dial likened his art and his creative process to the growth of a tree in the earth's soil. He said:

A tree is a network of ideas, a plan, a design. A man got to pick up the pieces before he can start. He got to get organized. Any time you come up with one idea you get another one. One mind lead to another one. That's how the world go on. You designing a piece of art, you got a record of what your life is all about. A man's inventions is his life. Inventions is the knowledge of man telling you something about life, processed and made, and the man that make it. I want you to look at it as it is. You know yourself what you see. But somebody else see it another way. That's another creation, another mind. You looking at the way life goes, the way of life. All things is like art. Everything in the world is art. That's true. Everything in the world done did somebody some good. All this is what it was, in the beginning of the world. Roots symbolize the oldest things, all those things that come to be a part of a man's life. I don't care what fall, what stand up, life still going to go on. You going to find out how to use the things created in the world for man. The Lord laid out that kind of example for man to go by. That's the soil after the roots. Soil is the soul of the earth. Soil is roots rotting. That goes for you, me, everybody. We ain't nothing but dirt ourselves. It's just the soul in the body that lives on. Your body ain't nothing but dirt. That's the way the Lord built the earth. When they presents your body back to the earth, it's just like the ground the Lord created. And the world will never be destroyed as long as people be put back in the ground. One pass, one come. Like Eve and Adam, like when Noah built the Ark, it's the way life is. They got one of everything in the world and a mate

for every one of them into the Ark and destroyed the world. What was in the Ark survived. Everything was here. The water covered everything up. Then a dove went out and found a leaf. That meant dry land. The tree gave the dove a leaf. You get your fruit from the tree. Everything come from the tree, the tree of life.

Thornton Dial spent his very first years on a small piece of land that sat by a little dirt road that is now Highway 17. As it heads south from Emelle to Mobile, the road goes through one big town, Citronelle (population about thirty-five hundred), and a lot of crossroads communities like Churchula, Toxey, Jachin, and Healing Springs. Northward it slices through the oddly named Reform, eventually crossing the Tennessee River above Muscle Shoals, and lands in Florence about two hundred miles from Emelle. A big city by rural Alabama standards, Florence (population thirty-five thousand) is the birthplace of W. C. Handy, nicknamed “the Father of the Blues.” Around the turn of the twentieth-century, Handy recognized, documented, and helped to preserve the great southern African American blues tradition, a tradition that later enabled the birth of jazz, rock ‘n’ roll, and other noteworthy genres of American music. In the early 1890s, Handy had left Florence and migrated to Bessemer near Birmingham in the central Alabama industrial region, where he went to work for a pipe factory. Some fifty years later, Thornton Dial left Emelle and migrated as well to Bessemer, where he settled into a neighborhood that provided the principal housing for the pipe factory’s workers.

When Dial moved to Bessemer in 1940 at age twelve, it is possible that he had already seen as much great art along the rural roads of Alabama as a privileged white child of that age might have seen in Paris, London, or New York. For almost fifty years thereafter, he worked at a variety of jobs throughout the town, always walking to and from his places of employment. During his thirty-year stint at the Pullman-Standard plant, Dial walked to work and back daily from his house in the Pipe Shop neighborhood four miles away. The route served the artist in him well. Though the houses and other buildings in the black working-class neighborhoods were cheaply erected and humbly furnished, they were not lacking in artistic merit. On every block were objects and arrangements of objects that could be called, with no exaggeration, “museum quality.” Some were in yards, some were attached to houses, some were inside. Dial studied them all. He visited with the people who created them, discussed their intentions and techniques with them, and often explained his own artistic vision.

On his journeys through the neighborhood, Dial paid particular attention to the houses, the most prominent of which is the “shotgun” house. This architectural form, an heirloom with origins in Africa, is probably the most visible and enduring symbol of the black South. Except when Dial traveled away from Alabama, it is likely that there has not been a day in which he failed to see a shotgun house or a hundred of them. Thus, the image of the shotgun house is a significant one in Dial’s art, and often signifies autobiography, cultural heritage, or industry. (Curiously, the shotgun style was used extensively for the company housing provided by factories to their workers. Sometimes the factories even resembled rows of shotgun houses.)

Dial has quite literally been unable to get away from the shotgun house. When late in life he moved to a secluded estate outside Bessemer, the house was an expanded contemporary version of the shotgun house. With this fact in mind, Dial created the assemblage *You Can’t Get Away from the Shotgun House*. The bottom half of the assemblage represents the group of small shotgun houses in Dial’s old neighborhood. At the top stands Dial’s new and larger house. A King Kong–like primate (Dial) is climbing up and in.

To call an artist like Dial “self-taught” is to ignore the influences and shared knowledge of factory workers like Arthur Johnson and Franklin Roberts, steelworkers like the Flanagan brothers, or Essie Williams, who would not let her neighbors outdecorate her. And the influences of the collaged signs of the stores, the colorful geometries and imagery of nightclub façades, the graffiti on walls

and fences, and the hand-painted stained glass of the windows of simple little churches along Dial's route. And the homes of people like Marie Bryant, widow of one of Dial's fellow factory workers and mother of another one. Mrs. Bryant started with a few rocks fifty years ago and, throughout the years, her yard grew into a botanical garden and museum for her collection of concrete and plaster sculptures. The backdrop for her garden was the ornamental ironwork made for her by her neighbor Joseph Flanagan. Inside her house, which Dial visited often, shrine like assemblages filled every corner, every wall, and stood atop every piece of furniture.

Closer to home, in the Pipe Shop neighborhood, were several accomplished artists in Dial's own family: brother Arthur, two years younger; sons Thornton Jr., Richard, and Dan; and cousin Ronald Lockett, forty years Dial's junior, who died in 1998. An extremely unusual aspect of the Dial family is that no two members make art that resembles the art of another one. In addition, each member of the family, especially Ronald Lockett, has had a discernible effect on Dial's art, while Dial's effect on them has been negligible.

After Dial officially became an artist, rather than "a black factory worker who makes things behind his house," he met, became friendly with, and was influenced by other artists nearby in central Alabama. There was Lonnie Holley, a black Disney World cook, migrant laborer, and scavenger of things to keep him and his family alive in Birmingham. And disabled black factory worker Joe Minter, also in Birmingham. And a reverend in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, George Kornegay, in Bibb County. And Dinah Young, a catering-service employee now living in Hale County. And a domestic servant and cook, Emmer Sewell, in Perry County. And over in Georgia, radio evangelist and peripatetic jack-of-all-trades Jessie Marshall, now dispensing personal and medical advice under the names Prophet Jessie and Doctor Buzzard. And Betty Avery, who started with a broken mirror and a pile of rocks and turned her yard into a showcase for her unique funerary-like cairns.

Dial occasionally visited the yard of his good friend Holley, about whom I wrote in 1988, "Lonnie Holley, in Birmingham, created possibly the most brilliant conceptual art environment in the world." I will stick to that assessment, though you will have to enjoy it now through photographic documentation, as it was destroyed in 1997 with much malice aforethought.

Dial also visited Joe Minter, whose amazing outdoor sculpture park representing the history of four hundred years of Africa in America was threatened with, but barely avoided, destruction by the same forces that claimed Holley's work.

With Holley and Minter, Dial visited and encouraged Reverend Kornegay, whose extraordinary hillside sculpture installation, with its religious and historical observations, would fill everyone who sees it with awe and exaltation, except that nobody will see it now because it is gone.

The 1990s were not kind to this field of art. A phenomenon that had survived unnoticed but healthy for centuries suddenly emerged, stood up, began to speak, and was almost obliterated. Connect the dots, and there is a story that begs to be told.

Dial has paid several visits to Dinah Young, a woman who constructs startling sculptures from dead trees, branches, and other materials in the yard and woods behind her two-room dwelling. The American art world will never know this woman, but if she were doing her thing in a village in the Netherlands, she would have received international acclaim already.

Jessie Marshall's place, once resembling a sprawling, Rauschenberg-looking haunted house, was vacated and has now collapsed; his yard, formerly filled with wonderful assemblage sculptures, has eroded and looks like a strange future archaeological zone.

Betty Avery's beautiful yard met with displeasure from someone, and the City of Atlanta ordered her to remove all artworks from it in the late 1990s. At least they couldn't invade the inside of her house, where she had constructed a long living room wall of mirrors and photographs which she calls "Jesus and people who look like Jesus."

Dial has seen many other great pieces of African American art before they were destroyed, and many as well which, for the moment, still exist. And he continues to travel around the countryside as he has always done. He looks at the junk piles and the various incarnations of funerary sculptures and personalized monuments which can now be found in plain view everywhere black communities still exist and older people still practice and believe in the old customs. Dial often knows the makers and understands their artistic language. It is also his language. It is the language of philosophy, religion, commemoration, political and social commentary; it is the prose and poetry of a creative population that has had illiteracy and silence forced upon it.

IMMOVABLE OBJECTS

The freedom movement of the 1960s did the art world a great service. It gave African Americans for the first time the pride and courage, even the responsibility and sense of obligation, to bring their art of affirmation and identity out of the graveyards and the woods and to make it visible, understandable, and dignified. And to put it proudly in front of the house for the world to pass and admire. The traditional disguises of junk, unattractive materials, and enigmatic and anti-aesthetic compositions remained in the lexicon, but the dirt road was now paved and ready to accommodate the likes of Joe Minter in Alabama, Purvis Young in Florida, David Butler in Louisiana, Joe Light in Tennessee, Robert Howell in Virginia, Mary T. Smith in Mississippi, E. M. Bailey in Georgia, Pearl Fryar in South Carolina, and so many others. The traditional yard decoration didn't disappear, however, and a few older men and women still create daily, diligently. The great Lonnie Holley carries on as a twenty-first-century traditionalist, making assemblages and conceptual sculptures. The language survives; the culture survives. It has not received the widespread recognition and respect that it deserves, but inevitably it will. People who get the opportunity to see it usually become outspoken advocates.

It is a language that you might see, but you might not know you've seen it; that you might hear, but not know you've heard it. It is the language of junk piles and barns and ragged strip quilts that decorate the sides of a dirt farm road. It is the language of hubcaps and fan blades and plastic tri-cycles hanging from branches of the same walnut tree on which the body of somebody's ancestor might have been hanged. It is the language of spirituals and slave chants and blues songs coming from congregations of field workers and chain gangs. It is a language that is encoded in combinations of colors and textures that try to make ramshackle country stores and jook joints attractive to customers.

The language began with the Western Hemisphere's first slaves, deprived by official decree of languages they already knew, which were replaced by the languages of their captors. The private cultural language survived, and remnants of it are out there today. It survived because it had the ability to adorn itself with all manners of disguises, and to hide, mutate, and adapt readily to adverse conditions of time and place. The syntax of the language is found in the way food is prepared, in the way materials for clothing are put together and worn, and in the way hair is fixed. It is the walk, the talk, the attitude, the patterns of rocks along a path and the arrangement of flowers, roots, stones, and broken glass on an unmarked grave in the deep woods. It starts as a murmur or a hum or a single note from a homemade musical instrument and becomes a jazz quartet or a gospel choir or an evening at the Apollo. It starts as a twig wrapped in a vine or a shoe painted pink and green or a milk bottle suspended by a piece of wire over a door, and it becomes Lonnie Holley's brilliant assemblages or Gee's Bend quilts or *Thornton Dial in the 21st Century*.