

ARTFORUM

Thornton Dial

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In the art of the late Southern painter Thornton Dial, the notion of “relief” leads in several directions. Along one path, it was the word used in his lifetime (he died in 2016 at the age of eighty-seven) to describe his wild assemblages on canvas and wood, which were so heavily piled with found objects, oils, paints, enamels, and other compounds that they reach out several inches from the wall. In another sense—for an artist who was dealing with some of the more abject horrors of the world and described his approach to history in terms of tilling the soil—“relief” also suggests a kind of reprieve. Dial busied his hands to find, for himself and his viewers, a way to be freed from violence, cruelty, injustice, and tragedy. His way was to give those things shape, color, texture, and depth.

In the last thirty years of his life, Dial touched on the US-led invasion of Iraq, wildfires in California, the destruction of the World Trade Center, O. J. Simpson, and the legacy of the civil-rights movement epitomized by the 1965 protest marches in Selma, Alabama. This show, featuring seven paintings and one stand-alone sculpture, delves into the last three, most strikingly in *Ground Zero: Decorating the Eye*, 2002, which translates the smoldering site of mangled steel and charred remains into a lurid, almost sickly orange broken up by flower patterns and a little girl’s tutu. Even more brilliant, however, is the decision to match the seriousness of Dial’s “history painting” with his teasing of art history. In *Art and Nature*, 2011, a handful of paint cans appear to have been dumped over a pair of delicate ceramic vases, smashing one while leaving the other intact. Everything together signals art’s utter fragility but also its fighting spirit.



Thornton Dial, *Ground Zero: Decorating the Eye*, 2002, clothing, enamel, spray paint, Splash Zone compound, canvas, wood, 76 1/2 x 108 x 4”.