

ARTFORUM

Thornton Dial

by Barry Schwabsky
April 2018

“Mr. Dial’s America,” the second gallery exhibition of Thornton Dial’s work since his death in 2016 at the age of eighty-seven, included seven paintings dated between 1990 and 2011, as well as a freestanding sculpture, *The Top of the World*, 1998. Dial is often referred to as an outsider, or self-taught artist, and while it is understandably why commentators resort to such handy but potentially misleading labels, this exhibition made the best possible case for seeing Dial as, simply, an artist of his time, with no need for further qualification. Like most artists, Dial considered art itself as his teacher, “a guide for every person who is looking for something. That’s how I can describe myself; Mr. Dial is a man looking for something.”

Dial’s search took him far. His stylistic reach was unusual; he did not repeat himself. He came to art—already in his fifties — with significant manual skills, perhaps the result of three decades’ labor as a metalworker, and an eye for color that was very much his own. But more than anything, perhaps, the secret to his art was his attentiveness to the unexpected capacities of everyday materials. As he himself put it, “I like to use the stuff that I know about, stuff that I know the feel of I’m talking about tin, steel, copper, and aluminum, and also old wood, carpet, rope, old clothes, sand, rocks, wire, screen, toys, tree limbs, and roots. You could say, ‘If Dial see it, he know what to do with it.’” Most of those things were present in the paintings in this show, and others besides: artificial flowers, jigsaw puzzle pieces, plastic film canisters, cooking utensils, and more. For this reason, one might be tempted to refer to Dial’s oeuvre using Robert Rauschenberg’s coinage for works that juxtapose various materials in ways that ignore distinctions between painting and sculpture: “combines.” But in the end, Dial was more the painter than Rauschenberg, because his emphasis was not on the distinct identities of the things combined—for Rauschenberg, a bedspread remains a bedspread, and a stuffed eagle is still very definitely a stuffed eagle, even when they are attached to a canvas. Dial, however, always submits his heterogeneous “stuff” to a pictorial unity, whether this is essentially that of an all-over field, such as that of the mysteriously murky *The Color of Money: The Jungle of Justice*, 1996, or a more overtly



Thornton Dial, *Ground Zero: Decorating the Eye*, 2002, clothing, enamel, spray paint, and epoxy on canvas, 76½ x 108 x 4”.

representational configuration, as in the still life *Setting the Table*, 2003, where some fringed bedding is more than a ready-made image of bedding and a beaded car-seat cover isn’t anything other than a pattern of blue and purple elements. Even where Dial does use objects to represent themselves—the ceramic vases of *Art and Nature*, 2011, for instance—they are deployed pictorially (and also perhaps allegorically, as the title of that work suggests), rather than as stray examples of quotidian, artistically untransmuted matter employed as such. Rauschenberg thought of his Combines as “painting playing the game of sculpture” whereas Dial was making sculptural moves in the game of painting.

The redoubtable formal conviction conveyed by Dial’s art bespeaks a spiritual strength: His works are heavy with history, yet never lose the spark of freedom, the faith in transcendence. In *The Color of Money: The Jungle of Justice*, we seem to witness a world reduced to ashes, but the warm colors of life emerge here and there amid the vestiges. *Ground Zero: Decorating the Eye*, 2002, is evidently a meditation on the site of the former World Trade Center; its burning-hot palette evokes the intensity of the conflagration, yet it is scattered with sprigs of foliage and flowers promising rebirth.

—Barry Schwabsky