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What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

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Thornton Dial's
"Setting the
Table," 2003, an
assemblage of
paint and objects.
Credit David
Lewis, New York

If spontaneous, self-taught genius in step with the times exists, surely Thornton Dial's unrelenting art is proof. Dial (1928–2016) came from a region of Alabama where African-Americans, including an uncle of his, frequently made sculpture, screens and fences from metal junk welded together. By 1981, when he could make art full time, he had flattened his assemblages into thick, painting-like rectangles, adding softer materials, especially hooked rugs and clothing, as well as paint. The result is fiercely formal in ways that connect to Jackson Pollock's all-over fields of dripped paint and the object paintings of Anselm Kiefer and Julian Schnabel. Dial was an untrained Neo-Expressionist, drawing emotional energy from his life and times, which spanned Jim Crow and the struggle for civil rights.

With three works from the 1990s and five from the first decade of the 21st century, this exhibition samples the amazing range of Dial's work in his final decades, when he became more cognizant of mainstream art styles without losing touch with either his roots or the historical events that often fueled his art.

In "Setting the Table" (2003), the colors become so bright and the surfaces so thick with toys and logos that a refreshed Pop Art emerges. "Art and Nature" (2011) is relatively pared down: Dried twigs and flowers in one-half of a bifurcated ceramic vase rest on two tables improvised from scraps of wood and metal. They alternate with big gushes of pink, blue or white, pouring from squashed paint cans (a favorite Dial device), forming the "art" of the work's title, but also suggesting figures, ghosts or drapes. It's a haunted Matisse.

In "Black Walk" (2003), big chunks of corrugated metal painted black on a black-and-lavender ground resemble figures in a protest march, while also remaining implacably severe and abstract. And from the fiery red surface of "Ground Zero: Decorating the Eye" (2002) rises a large orb shrouded in ruffles, suggesting some kind of guardian or redemptive presence. Dial's ability to commandeer any material into a painting has never been as canny or varied as it is in this show. It highlights the need for a full-scale account of his restless, dynamic achievement.