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At the Met, a Riveting Testament to Those Once Neglected

by Roberta Smith
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Thornton Dial's two-sided relief-painting-assemblage, "History Refused to Die" (2004), also gives this Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition its title. His work is in conversation with quilts by, from left, Lola Pettway ("Housetop," circa 1975); Lucy T. Pettway ("Housetop" and "Bricklayer" blocks with bars, circa 1955); and Annie Mae Young ("Work-clothes quilt with center medallion of strips," from 1976).
Credit 2018 Estate of Thornton Dial/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Agaton Strom for The New York Times

American art from the 20th and 21st centuries is broader, and better than previously acknowledged, especially by museums. As these institutions struggle to become more inclusive than before, and give new prominence to neglected works, they rarely act alone. Essential help has come from people like William Arnett and his exemplary Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Their focus is the important achievement of black self-taught artists of the American South, born of extreme deprivation and social cruelty, raw talent and fragments of lost African cultures.

The foundation is in the process of dispersing the entirety of its considerable holdings – some 1,200 works by more than 160 artists – to museums across the country. When it is finished, it may well have an impact not unlike that of the Kress Foundation, which from 1927 to 1961 gave more than 3,000 artworks to 90 museums and study collections.

The Met was the first of the foundation's beneficiaries, receiving a gift of 57 artworks by 30 artists in 2014. Now, the museum celebrates its fortune with "History Refused to Die: Highlights From the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift." A selection of 29 pieces, many of them rarely if ever shown, it is suffused by an electrifying sense of change.

The Met's curators (and conservators) took nearly two years and several trips to Atlanta to finalize their selection, and they chose astutely. The show seems nearly perfect in art, installation and irrefutability of greatness. It has been organized by Randall R. Griffey and Amelia Peck, curators, respectively in the Met's modern and contemporary department and its American Wing.



Lonnie Holley's 1982 sculpture "Ruling for the Child," at left, and Thornton Dial's "The End of November: The Birds That Didn't Learn How to Fly," 2007. Credit 2018 Lonnie Holley/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; 2018 Estate of Thornton Dial/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Agaton Strom for The New York Times

The effect is majestic. The show validates the art's stature, but even more it transforms the Met's encyclopedic footprint while also being of a piece of its longtime efforts to collect African art and American folk art.

Nine of Thornton Dial's characteristically fierce, self-aware works are here, mostly his rangy relief paintings as well as three extraordinary drawings that in wildly different ways commemorate Sept. 11, Florence Griffith Joyner and Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration. A dozen of the 18 geometric quilts in the gift are here. Both muted and boisterous, they challenge the conventional history of abstraction and reflect the talents of the Gee's Bend collective, especially those of the Pettway family. There are also various assemblage reliefs and sculptures by Lonnie Holley and Ronald Lockett. And the most extensive conversation – in their endless intricacies and shared uses of fabrics, textures and the grid – is between the works of Dial, who died in 2016, and the quilters. The Dials start to seem like crazed, dimensionalized quilts, the quilts like flattened, more orderly Dials.

Nearly everything included is made from scavenged objects and materials, scraps redolent of the shameful history of black labor in the South – before 1865, of course, but also in the Jim Crow era – transformed by aesthetic

intelligence and care into forms of eloquence and beauty. One of the most valuable lessons here is the works' inherent formal and material sense of defiance, and of beauty itself as an act of resistance.

The show's two hypnotic galleries have very different emotional and visual tones. After beckoning you from down the corridor with the bright colors and joyful asymmetry of Loretta Pettway's "Medallion" quilt (circa 1960), the exhibition starts with an elegiac room of works nearly devoid of color.

Dial's "Shadows of the Field" (2008) evokes haunted expanses of cotton plants with the help of strips of synthetic cotton batting. Along one wall, the "work-clothes" quilts of Lucy Mingo and four other Gee's Benders reflect lives of hard labor and scrimping; their fabrics are almost exclusively blues and gray denim whose worn textures and faded colors are masterfully played off one another.



Thornton Dial's "Shadows of the Field" (2008) evokes haunted expanses of cotton with the help of strips of synthetic cotton batting.
Credit 2018 Estate of Thornton Dial/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Agaton Strom for the New York Times

Emma Lee Pettway Campbell's "Blocks and strips work-clothes quilt" from around 1950 may bring to mind Robert Rauschenberg's "Bed," from 1955, which conspicuously incorporates an old quilt. Joe Minter's 1995 symmetrical arrangement of rusted shovels, rakes, hoes and chains, seems to bless the whole room. Regal and severely gorgeous, it suggests both a group of figures and an altar. Its title pulls no punches: "Four Hundred Years of Free Labor." Yet I also found myself thinking of the beguiling offering stand once called "Billy Goat and Tree," from Sumer around 2600 B.C., one of the first full-page color reproductions in H.W. Janson's "History of Art."

The second gallery erupts in color, delivered foremost by seven Gee's Bend quilts as brilliant in palette as in use of materials, especially Lucy T. Pettway's woozy full-spectrum interplay of the traditional "housetop" and "bricklayer" patterns in a quilt from around 1955. Annie Mae Young's 1976 work brings together the two quilt sensibilities here, surrounding a medallion of burning stripes of contrasting corduroy with a broad denim work-clothes border. It

may evoke, rather fittingly, a small striped abstraction that Robert Motherwell made in 1941-44 and titled “Little Spanish Prison.”

Blessing the artworks here is a jaw-dropping Dial: a two-sided relief-painting-assemblage, and source of the exhibition’s title, “History Refused to Die.” One side shows a couple chained to, yet sheltered, by a white metal structure and surrounded by a turbulent expanse: pieces of fabric deftly knotted that seem to billow and blow like a stormy sea or clouds. The other side is a rough weaving of the straight stalks of the okra plant, which came to the United States from Africa during the slave trade. Its scattered colors are primarily the red, black, green and yellow of the 13-striped Afro-American flag and, at the upper right, the simple silhouette of a white dove of peace or freedom. At the top, a row of short steel angle beams, spray-painted with horizontal dashes of browns and black, flips in suggestion between good and bad, from a crown or headdress, to the top of a tall fence or chain-gang garb.

Several other works here are similarly simply masterpieces. In “Locked Up Their Minds,” Purvis Young offers his own version of James Ensor’s “Christ’s Entry Into Brussels in 1889.” Young’s large painting on wood shows a group of black figures, some with halos, others holding up padlocks signifying their freed minds to flocks of angels, while two immense white possibly rampant horses add to the drama. The show’s coda is Dial’s ironically titled “Victory in Iraq,” a relief-painting from 2004. It hangs just outside the second gallery, its barbed wire and twisted mesh against a field of fabric and detritus defines and holds space as lightly and powerfully as Jackson Pollock’s “Autumn Rhythm,” displayed nearby.



The reverse side of Dial’s relief-painting-assemblage, “History Refused to Die,” is a rough weaving of okra plant stalks, with a white dove of peace or freedom. At left, Purvis Young’s “Locked Up Their Minds,” 1972, and at right, Lola Pettway’s “Housetop.”
Credit 2018 Purvis Young/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; 2018 Estate of Thornton Dial/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Agaton Strom for the New York Times

It is de rigueur when writing on exhibitions of this kind to review the shortcomings of the terms used to allude to the vast body of art, emerging in the 20th century, created by people limited by racial inequities, poor education,

mental or physical challenges, or poverty. “Outsider” was superseded by “self-taught,” which didn’t work since many artists are self-taught in some way. (Quilters, for example, learn their art from their female relatives.) The latest term is the more elastic “outlier” – put in play by an enormous survey seen recently at the National Gallery of Art in Washington that argued for the integration of such work with supposedly “insider” art while also undermining that position – since the outlier works often overwhelmed everything else.

At this point I think of the words of the little boy refusing to eat his vegetables in the famous New Yorker cartoon: “I say it’s spinach, and I say the hell with it.” Let’s just call all of it art and proceed.

Let’s see the rest of the Met’s gift. Let’s see Mr. Arnett’s foundation, now headed by the experienced museum director, Maxwell Anderson, complete its task. So far it has dispersed around 20 percent of its holdings to seven museums, with the most recent gift – 34 works to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond – announced this week. By these numbers, another 40 or so museums should benefit. Every thinking American understands the suffering these artists and their ancestors have endured and should grasp the meaning of Dial’s poem of a title. History has indeed refused to die, and some of its greatest art is also very much alive.