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'History Refused to Die' Review: A Visual Equivalent of Jazz

The Met is exhibiting donations from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation—which preserves the legacy of self-taught contemporary African-American artists—including works by Thornton Dial and Gee's Bend quilts.

by Karen Wilkin
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In the mid-1980s, William S. Arnett, a writer, curator, entrepreneur, Georgia native, and collector of African art, turned his attention closer to home—the efforts of self-taught African-American artists of the rural South. Mr. Arnett became a passionate collector and advocate of this work, characterizing it as the visual counterpart of jazz, a uniquely American, improvisational art form forged from African roots and the troubled history of American black experience: slavery, the Civil War, emancipation, reconstruction, Jim Crow segregation, lynchings, the civil-rights movement. In 2010, Mr. Arnett created the Souls Grown Deep Foundation—the name comes from a Langston Hughes poem—which, among other things, has supported artists in the collection, organized exhibitions, and published handsome volumes. Recently, the foundation has made donations to museums across the U.S., including, in 2014, 57 works to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"History Refused to Die," a sharply focused, elegantly installed selection of 29 stellar works, celebrates this important gift. Organized by Randall R. Griffey, curator in the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Amelia Peck, a textile expert, curator of American Decorative Arts, the show was originated by the former Met curator Marla Prather. The title comes from Thornton Dial's spectacular, tall, freestanding 2004 assemblage, a layered, ambiguous accumulation, at once seductive and disquieting, of unlikely found materials (okra stalks and roots, tin, wire, Masonite, steel chain, clothing, collaged drawings, enamel, and spray paint) modulated by rich, unexpected, broken color that creates counter-rhythms to the aggressively irregular surface.



Thornton Dial's 'History Refused to Die' (2004) PHOTO: © ESTATE OF THORNTON DIAL/ARS, NY

Dial (1928-2016), a powerful and deservedly celebrated artist whose work resists categorization and needs no qualifying labels, is the star of the show, represented by six major collage-paintings and three large drawings, spanning 1998 to 2013. He has competition from a fierce 1995 sculpture by Joe Minter (born 1943), in which worn, rusted shovels are transformed by placement and the artist's will into confrontational, accusatory figures. Three works by the musician, artist and theorist Lonnie Holley (born 1950), made between 1982 and 2003, demonstrate his range, from a tall, linear assembly of found materials to a blocky seated couple carved in discarded casting material from a foundry. And there's a gritty, geometric assemblage by Ronald Lockett (1965-1998), who was inspired and mentored by Dial, his older cousin.

While most of the works first read as abstractions, they are, in fact, commemorative, symbolic, or triggered by specific events, and often animated by coded references. Witness Dial's haunting "The End of November: The Birds That Didn't Learn How to Fly" (2007), a flickering expanse of dull ocher and gray on a puckered fabric ground with a row of dead black birds suspended against it. The "birds" prove to be clusters of tattered fabric and work gloves. Dial, typically, presents us with a complex, purely visual metaphor with his cryptic imagery and scavenged materials, here one that provokes associations with the brutality of poverty and hard labor, as well as the horror of lynching.

Despite their playful energy, the crisp, brilliantly colored paintings of Nellie Mae Rowe (1900-1982), with their stylized figures, ambiguous creatures, and mutable scale, prove to have been similarly triggered by specific, sometimes uncomfortable allusions, from horrific child murders to her own impending death. Other obsessions are embodied by a visionary 1972 image by Purvis Young (1943-2010), a vernacular icon, with rows of figures and angels against a lush red ground, and two enormous white horses, symbols, for Young, of power and freedom.

Ten stunning quilts made between 1935 and 1976 by women, many of them related, from Gee's Bend (now Boykin), Ala., may be the best known inclusions, thanks to an earlier traveling exhibition seen at the Whitney and other museums across the U.S. They range from intensely colored demonstrations of wonky geometry to subtly orchestrated, severe arrangements of blocks and bars of faded denim—worn-out work clothes, repurposed, out of necessity, as bedcovers and sometimes as intimate memorials to the people who wore them. Like Dial's reverberant works, the quilts are first-rate works of art, testimony to their makers' creativity and inventiveness, but they are also poignant reminders of the demands of poverty and domesticity. Far from being modernist abstract paintings manqués, they are utilitarian objects designed by gifted women with exacting eyes. An excellent catalog essay by Ms. Peck rehearses the vexed history of the Gee's Bend quilts, their reception and reputation. (There are also informative essays by Mr. Griffey, Cornell University Prof. Cheryl Finley, and the writer Darryl Pinckney.)

At one entrance, "History Refused to Die" is announced by a radiant, engagingly asymmetrical quilt made around 1960 by Loretta Pettway (born 1942). Beside the opposite entrance, there's a terrific, angry Dial, installed near paintings by Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell, among others. Dial looks right at home, as good as any of his fellow artists and better than most. As I said, no special qualifying label needed.