Prior to his simultaneous solo museum shows in 1993, at the New Museum and the Museum of American Folk Art, few outside the relatively insular folk-art world were familiar with the work of Thornton Dial. By the late ’80s, Dial had gained a respectable following for his unique brand of funk assemblage—a homegrown art form that came to be celebrated as emblematic of a Southern, African-American sculptural vernacular. To the horror of folk purists, consistent patronage has allowed Dial to explore media not generally available to a self-taught artist in rural Alabama. Since 1990, he has moved from the backyard to the studio wall, developing a pictorial oeuvre in two complementary arenas: large-scale, ambitious, and powerfully allegorical mixed-media canvases that were the primary focus of his 1993 museum exhibitions, and lyrical works on paper that were featured in his most recent gallery show.

Dial’s drawings are, with a few exceptions, loose meditations on the female nude. While in his larger social allegories the artist addressed women’s struggle for equal rights with remarkable insight, his works on paper are decidedly more intimate. Charged with a dynamic eroticism, these images celebrate the female form without objectifying it. Dial’s versatile shorthand for the nude—in which all elements are flattened, elongated, dismembered, and then freely reconfigured—is a highly realized language capable of poetic brilliance, and one that, with each utterance, reveals a strong connection to lived experience. A Comment on the Miniskirts, 1994, a clever pencil sketch that depicts a lively conversation between two women, is an eloquent statement on the allure of women’s fashion. In Looking Around I and II (both 1994), studies of the nude in motion, the artist has deftly captured the profoundly erotic essence of an otherwise mundane action. Unlike the traditional Western nude—posed, static, passive—Dial’s subjects, varying in type from the athletic to the matronly to the voluptuous, are always defined by their actions, animated by both a narrative and a formal dynamism. Curiously compelling, the artist’s multiple-figure works show two or more women restlessly occupying the same shallow, claustrophobic space. Sticking Together, 1994, a wildly orgiastic female foursome rendered in pencil and bright pastels, provides a glimpse into the artist’s vision of unfettered libidinous energy.

Although the male figure almost never appears as such in Dial’s drawings, male desire pops up quite often in the form of crouching or leaping animals, especially tigers. While elsewhere in Dial’s oeuvre the tiger symbolizes African-American social struggle, here it becomes highly eroticized. In drawings such as A Sexual Lady and a Sexual Cat, 1993, the cat engages a human partner in an acrobatic pas de deux that, for all its frankness, remains more poetic than pornographic. Several fine, nearly abstract pencil drawings punctuated the group shown here but ultimately seemed out of place in the erotically charged atmosphere of this show.

Dial’s presence in the contemporary art world remains problematic. Since he cannot be successfully grafted onto any identifiable group or trend, past or present, he continues to inhabit several margins at once. The sophisticated nature of Dial’s works on paper seems far removed from the rawness of material and image usually associated with the work of self-taught artists. Yet the closer he comes to achieving mainstream currency, the more problematic his presence on the contemporary scene. Dial’s reception has been characterized by two opposing critical points of view: some champion him as a rural folk genius; others reject him outright as a precocious dabbler. Neither of these positions do much to advance our understanding of his work, and both are inherently racist in their consideration of biography at the expense of the work itself. Certainly Dial’s output, like that of every artist, is uneven—there were a number of unrealized studies that could easily have been left out of this show—but his successes, including the majority of works presented here, are never accidental.

—Jenifer P. Borum