In The Forest of The Night
by Robert Farris Thompson
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THE ART OF THORNTON DIAL, a remarkable black artist of Alabama, recently challenged New York at the New Museum on Broadway downtown and at the Museum of American Folk Art off Broadway uptown. One message was, or seemed to be, Abandon your theoreticism and get on down to line, form, and color, and to social criticism in vernacular terms. Randall Morris argues that academic discourse is inadequate when aimed at visionary artists like Dial.1 I would agree: black artists who preach and signify in an abiding idiom of the spirit elude the agnostic nets of Modernism, deconstruction, post-Modernism, and other analytic trends. The vein of the vernacular, predating the Modernist and postdating the post, is, to paraphrase Amiri Baraka, a changing forever.

Hence Image of the Tiger, the book on Dial published alongside the recent exhibitions, mixes savor with the problematic: how can the instruments of Western History deal with a person working beyond the West yet within the West, and despite it? Critic and polemist Thomas McEvilley and playwright/poet/activist Baraka accept the challenge of Dial’s complexity; gracing Image of the Tiger, their essays recognize the black nationality, real and fundamental, that generates and names his work.

McEvilley starts with this: Dial translates info sculpture and into paint “a culture within a culture that has its own dynamic reality.” How to recognize that dynamic when we see it? When it is self-revealed as part of a linked universe of recurring forms. Cultural repetitions bind Dial to the black South, and both, ultimately, to the mother continent. With an artist like the Cuban José Bedia, now resident in Miami, resemblances to African cultures are deliberate and specific. In Kongo, priests make secret sheds in the woods, and call on the moon for permission to cut branches of power for insertion as items of spiritual militance in the sacred charms (minkisi) they keep there—and so does Bedia, in his ritualizing art. Dial’s contacts, though, are not so much with Africa as with the Old Time Religion, its shouts and ecstasies blending Christianity and traces of the spirit in African terms. He refers to this source in the title Sanctified Dancing—dancing in the spirit of Jesus.

In a painting of this name from 1992, a maelstrom of revolving faces dissolves the Old Time Religion practice of worship in a circle, which may echo the ring-shout structure of Kongo.2 But in another work with the same title, also from 1992, women raising their hands in ecstasy cite the transatlantic gesture of felicity that Bakongo term yángalala and relate to the coming of the spirit. Yángalala is generic. It can turn up with a victory on a football field or at a track meet as well as in church. For the sacred and the profane are tightly intermingled in the black Atlantic world; what happens amidst the pews can turn up in the blues or in slang or in rap.

Such continuities help explain the theme of the tiger in Dial’s painting. The tiger is a cat; in many West and Central African civilizations, particularly those that most influenced the Americas (Yoruba, Ejegham, Kongo), the cat is a sign of sovereignty. To McEvilley, Dial’s tiger is shorthand for one man’s struggle, one man’s relation to the diaspora. If so, under this sign Dial compounds culture with identity.

Over 80 paintings reproduced in Image of the Tiger spotlight tigers, and bear titles like The Freedom Cat and the Hard Tin Men, The Tiger Who Flew over New York City, and Peace Tiger for the World (Honoring Ralph Bunche). The settings are modern; some works, as in the allusion to black diplomat and Nobelist Bunche, are overtly political. But praising persons by reference to the feline is a longtime riff for the people. We did not praise King
Oliver or John Coltrane by any animal image other than the cat. Under black tutelage, white America came to hear of “cats,” hip, hep, and otherwise, in the days of swing, bop, and boogie-woogie. Cat is a person, beloved and wise. This history dovetails with the theme of the royal feline in classical African art—with the whiskers on the cheek of the Olokun Walode head from medieval Nigeria, and with the superb leopard statuary that suggested beauty and intimidation at the court of Benin City in the 1550s. In ancient Kongo, the theme of the feline equally underscored powers of confidence and mastery, as in the phrase Ngó ka ye nkanda?, Is there a leopard within the clan?, meaning, Do we not have a king to rule over us, seated in glory on the skin of a great cat? A painted stone from the Apollo 11 cave in Namibia, radiocarbon-dated to 26,300 years B.C., depicts an evident feline with human legs. The existential leap of the great cat extends, then, from paleolithic southern Africa to the international urban parlance of today, in a persistence invisible to those obsessed with change and obsolescence.

If praise via felinization is Africanizing, Dial’s usage is personal, inventive, and protean. In Bowlegged John, 1990, a strong, virile artist is set in a sea of responding faces. Rendered in powerful strokes of green and blue and white, these faces come alive: sparks of red surround their mouths, surround their eyes, for the vision of the artist has excited their blood. Hidden in the sea of faces are three small felines. Their paws and faces burn with the tints of spiritual rapture. Did Dial mean that these were lovers, persons he cared for, whom he hoped would take his gifts and make matters happen, taking the leap? Such handling of the metaphor is unprecedented in Africa. Dial owns his own feelings. He blends them with the past.

Considering the complexity of Dial’s voice, it is good that the volume offers the perspective of another writer, Baraka, who translates Dial’s power as a “fearful symmetry” expressing “social motion” and intensity. Deriding “primitive art,” whatever that was, Baraka straightforwardly links Dial to sub-Saharan Africa and the American South, “land base of the Afro-American nation.” With a dramatist’s eye, he casts Dial as a blend of Romare Bearden and John Henry; yesterday Dial had nothing “to sell but the muscle in his arm”; today, increasingly famous, he remains “the black worker. His hands look like worker’s hands.” Baraka translates the equation “feline equals black person” in his own stark terms: “Nigger-beast-self.” Yet shock is a cover for inner affection. Dial needs this strength, Baraka argues, because he represents the creativity of the whole Deep South. And Baraka also notes Dial’s celebration of perception, and his gestures of a “black preacher praying against all odds.”

Finally Baraka drops a clue to Dial that future studies will complete: “Inside the picture all the images are bound together speaking.” In their stylized interlocking, multiple voices announce a universe of cultural difference. Future critics may distinguish Jackson Pollock’s cyclings from the nebulae of Dial by linking Pollock to the heating up of abstraction under the pressures of Thomas Hart Benton (his sexy lines), bop, Navaho sandpainting, Pablo Picasso, and others, linking Dial to the ring shout, hocketing fusions of voice and face and tiger. Dial’s “parlometrics,” to borrow from Alan Lomax, lead from the Ituri via Kongo and New Orleans to rap’s esthetic interruptions—all performers talking at once, yet leaving spaces for one another.

Image of the Tiger is an excellent beginning. The next book, let us hope, will rank Dial’s works (his sculptures seem stronger than his paintings, his paintings stronger than his drawings) and place them more firmly in context and temporal perspective. The flash and array of the Deep South yard show, for example, haunts Dial. There are plate trees in Kongo and bottle trees in Arkansas, and Dial once mirrored them in a painting with a memorable theme of spiritual embottlement. Lengths of garden hose, Jordans in miniature, grace black graves and tombstones; Dial incorporates this strange medium of the spirit in one of his paintings. Above all, African images are palisades, they guard, they filter, they watch—as does Dial’s masterpiece sculpture of a cat surmounted by fowls and surmounting skeletal persons, perhaps warning, like Kongo boneyards: Mess with us and go to death. Comparisons with black music are even more telling. And so Dial continues, fixing and crystallizing the moments of his life in terms of his culture, radiant and transcendent.