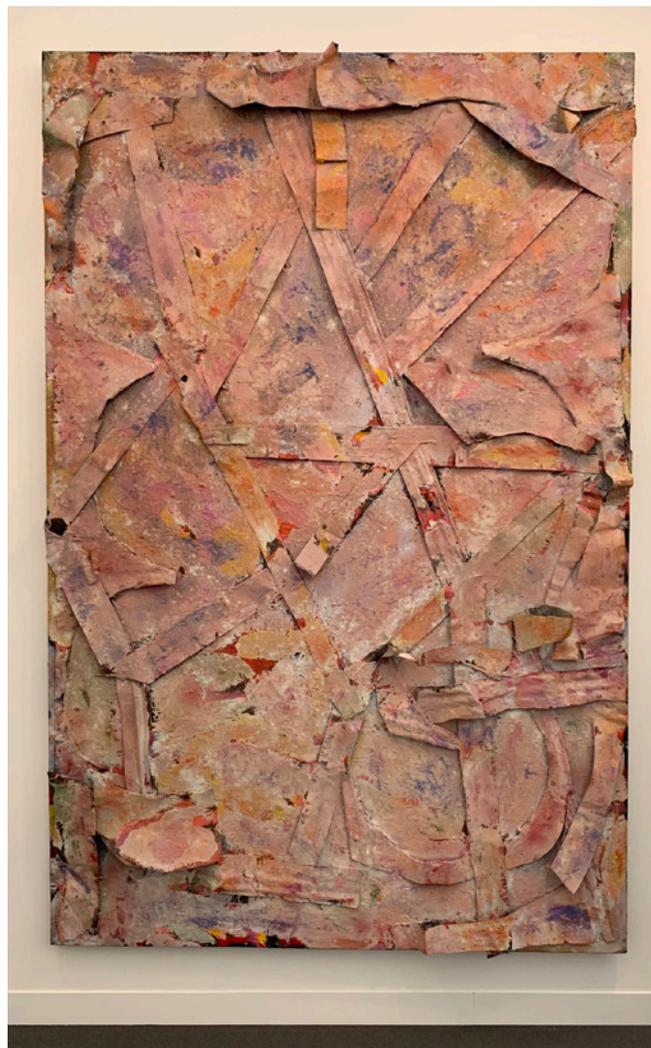


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## 5 Outstanding Works at Frieze London, From a Gripping Painting by Thornton Dial to Some Unsettling Photos by Cindy Sherman

by Andrew Goldstein  
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Thornton Dial  
*A Piece of Art* (2004)  
David Lewis Gallery, New York



Thornton Dial, *A Piece of Art* (2004).

In the art world, context is key, and moving an artist from one context to another can be as effortful a process as breaking down and then reconstructing a home.

Such is the process underway with the late African American artist Thornton Dial. A towering self-taught talent who grew up illiterate in Alabama, and whose jobs included picking cotton and doing metalwork, he found a voice in his later years as an “outsider artist,” and was championed and grouped alongside artists such as Henry Darger and

Adolf Wölfli, who worked in their own worlds, divorced from society, often making their art in mental institutions. (His *New York Times* obituary, when he died at 87 in 2016, labeled him an “Outsider Artist Whose Work Told of Black Life.”)

But Dial was hardly an outsider artist, says David Lewis, the young Lower East Side art dealer who has been working with the artist’s family for about two years. Instead, he was keenly aware of art history, making work that was consciously in dialogue with other art—something that is reflected in such paintings as the surpassingly delicate-looking painting of sculpted tin, gypsum powder, and enamel Lewis brought to Frieze, which he said was inspired by a Joan Mitchell painting.



Lucy Dodd’s *Sun Dial* (2019) next to the Thornton Dial painting.

Recently this view of Dial as an artist actively involved in the art of his time has been embraced by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which, since receiving the gift of dozens of his paintings from Will Arnett’s Souls Grown Deep Foundation in 2014, has been displaying his work side-by-side with Rauschenbergs and Jasper Johnses.

Now, however, Lewis wants to shift Dial’s context even further, framing him as a lively contemporary artist. In the fair, Dial’s painting is displayed together with brand-new Lucy Dodd canvas, *Sun Dial* (2019), that was made deliberately in response to the late artist’s work, and also incorporates elements of Mitchell’s style. The dealer also notes, with approval, that a recent buyer of a Dial work took down an Elizabeth Peyton painting to make room for the canvas, which now hangs opposite a John Currin.

These context changes are happening amid broader transformations in the art landscape as large, which have led to a restructuring of art history to make its past and future more inclusive. “The first step was to get his work into the canon,” Lewis says of Dial. “Now a new generation is saying that, not only is Dial in the canon, but he’s the bedrock of what the canon will become.”