Thornton Dial

Mr. Dial’s America

Press
If spontaneous, self-taught genius in step with the times exists, surely Thornton Dial’s unrelenting art is proof. Dial (1928–2016) came from a region of Alabama where African-Americans, including an uncle of his, frequently made sculpture, screens and fences from metal junk welded together. By 1981, when he could make art full time, he had flattened his assemblages into thick, painting-like rectangles, adding softer materials, especially hooked rugs and clothing, as well as paint. The result is fiercely formal in ways that connect to Jackson Pollock’s allover fields of dripped paint and the object paintings of Anselm Kiefer and Julian Schnabel. Dial was an untrained Neo-Expressionist, drawing emotional energy from his life and times, which spanned Jim Crow and the struggle for civil rights.

With three works from the 1990s and five from the first decade of the 21st century, this exhibition samples the amazing range of Dial’s work in his final decades, when he became more cognizant of mainstream art styles without losing touch with either his roots or the historical events that often fueled his art.

In “Setting the Table” (2003), the colors become so bright and the surfaces so thick with toys and logos that a refreshed Pop Art emerges. “Art and Nature” (2011) is relatively pared down: Dried twigs and flowers in one-half of a bifurcated ceramic vase rest on two tables improvised from scraps of wood and metal. They alternate with big gushes of pink, blue or white, pouring from squashed paint cans (a favorite Dial device), forming the “art” of the work’s title, but also suggesting figures, ghosts or drapes. It’s a haunted Matisse.

In “Black Walk” (2003), big chunks of corrugated metal painted black on a black-and-lavender ground resemble figures in a protest march, while also remaining implacably severe and abstract. And from the fiery red surface of “Ground Zero: Decorating the Eye” (2002) rises a large orb shrouded in ruffles, suggesting some kind of guardian or redemptive presence. Dial’s ability to commandeer any material into a painting has never been as canny or varied as it is in this show. It highlights the need for a full-scale account of his restless, dynamic achievement.

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Thornton Dial

March 5, 2018

Dial, who died in Alabama in 2016, at the age of eighty-seven, was, like Robert Rauschenberg, an American master
of the assemblage, affixing found objects to canvas and slathering them in layers of paint. Crushed black cans
attached to the top of an eight-foot-high piece titled “Art and Nature,” from 2011 (the latest work in this twenty-
year survey), release streams of pink, white, and green enamel over two halves of a white ceramic vase, each holding
a branch. The result is a sardonic still-life and, perhaps, a wry commentary on his position as a so-called outsider
artist. “The Color of Money: The Jungle of Justice,” made while the artist was watching the O.J. Simpson trial, is a
morass of plastic fauna (plus a shoe, gloves, jigsaw-puzzle pieces, rope, and more), painted dollar-bill-green.
In the art of the late Southern painter Thornton Dial, the notion of “relief” leads in several directions. Along one path, it was the word used in his lifetime (he died in 2016 at the age of eighty-seven) to describe his wild assemblages on canvas and wood, which were so heavily piled with found objects, oils, paints, enamels, and other compounds that they reach out several inches from the wall. In another sense—for an artist who was dealing with some of the more abject horrors of the world and described his approach to history in terms of tilling the soil—“relief” also suggests a kind of reprieve. Dial busied his hands to find, for himself and his viewers, a way to be freed from violence, cruelty, injustice, and tragedy. His way was to give those things shape, color, texture, and depth.

In the last thirty years of his life, Dial touched on the US-led invasion of Iraq, wildfires in California, the destruction of the World Trade Center, O. J. Simpson, and the legacy of the civil-rights movement epitomized by the 1965 protest marches in Selma, Alabama. This show, featuring seven paintings and one stand-alone sculpture, delves into the last three, most strikingly in *Ground Zero: Decorating the Eye*, 2002, which translates the smoldering site of mangled steel and charred remains into a lurid, almost sickly orange broken up by flower patterns and a little girl’s tutu. Even more brilliant, however, is the decision to match the seriousness of Dial’s “history painting” with his teasing of art history. In *Art and Nature*, 2011, a handful of paint cans appear to have been dumped over a pair of delicate ceramic vases, smashing one while leaving the other intact. Everything together signals art’s utter fragility but also its fighting spirit.
Thornton Dial: Mr. Dial’s America

by Jessica Holmes
March 5, 2018

History is made up of layers. The present, like a creeping vine, overtakes the past and without studied remembrance it becomes easy to forget that times now are not always what times once were. Thornton Dial, the great American artist who passed away in 2016 at the age of 87, always had a penetrating eye cast upon the nation’s history, his work layered with the strata of time. “Mr. Dial’s America,” the small but far-reaching survey at David Lewis Gallery brings together eight of the artist’s masterful works. Spanning across twenty-one years, close to the entirety of Dial’s professional artistic career, they provide an accounting of American stories from an artist with a uniquely American perspective.
The exhibition opens with a showstopper, *The Color of Money: The Jungle of Justice* (1996), the final in a series of works that Dial completed while watching the murder trial of O.J. Simpson unfold on television. On a large, densely packed canvas, he has arrayed a cornucopia of found objects, many which allude to the licentious details of the case, including a red high heel shoe, a Ford Bronco toy car, a glove, and a “wife-beater” t-shirt. Perhaps most eerie is the inclusion of two dolls: a blonde doll fully intact near the upper right of the canvas, and only the head of another, its eyes blackened and broken and a stethoscope trailing from its ears, deeply embedded near the center of the work. Synthetic plants and flowers unwind across the mass of detritus, like the flora that eventually covers an untended grave. For Dial, who was born to a sharecropping family in Alabama, and remained in the Deep South his entire life, this trial of a black man who was once exalted (largely by white citizens) as an American hero and then subsequently brought down in the public eye and in spectacular fashion for allegedly killing his white wife brought to light a morass of problematic race relations which the United States had chosen to ignore by the mid-1990s. Racism at that moment was widely viewed as a problem of the past, though of course tension roiled just beneath the cultural surface. *The Color of Money: The Jungle of Justice* not only unfolds the Simpson saga but also alludes to the ongoing racial afflictions that have continued to poison America despite its attempts at camouflage.

In *Two Coats* (2003) Dial has arranged two ladies’ jackets on a canvas in mirror image to each other, the garments formally fixed in an elegant *pas de deux*. A large drapery, supported by a metal frame encircles the two coats and further contributes to the impression that what’s being witnessed is performative. The jacket above is made of sumptuous, pale lavender material while the one beneath it is composed of tawdry faux fur. Both coats—the high and the low—locked in their dance, are grubby with paint, suggesting the interconnectedness that binds them despite their outward disparity. The paint on the clothing also highlights the witty pun of the title: not only does it refer to the two objects that are the focus of the work, but also the layers that must be applied when painting a house, a wall, or other mundane surfaces. As an artist who made work all his life but was only acknowledged at age fifty-nine by the codified art world—and after working as a metalworker for a Pullman plant (that made railroad cars) for more than thirty years—Dial was uniquely positioned to discern the subtleties of class which, like race and its markers, pervade the shiny veneer of American life.

In *Setting the Table* (2003) Dial perhaps most eloquently links these contrasts and dualities. Riffing on *Still Life with Watermelon* (1869), a painting he once saw at the Birmingham Museum of Art by American academic paint William Merritt Chase, Dial has imagined a table of his own. While Chase’s painting is done in the classical style—an artful selection of fruits, a vase, and a bottle of wine, formally arranged—Dial’s
painting is raucous and bright, a jubilant refutation of an art world that continues to label him an “outsider” despite his obvious and well-established place in its chronicle. A wild range of objects are embedded into the kaleidoscope of impasto paint: frying pans and kitchen utensils, but also cans of paint, shoes, and a swatch of carpet. Dial has painted in a bowl of peaches and eggs in the frying pan. The watermelon, a fruit that is unfortunately marked as an antiquated symbol of virulent racism, is also present on Dial’s table. But nonetheless, the painting hums on its own frequency, a euphoric joy that exists despite the darkness. “People in the United States do not hate one another,” Dial once said in a series of interviews with the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. “No. But they be scared of one another. The way life have been taught is to make black peoples and white peoples be against one another in fear. I don’t believe there is any natural hate in people. I believe there is natural love.” With his work, Dial asks everyone to the table, and implores them to sort with each other through the morass.
9 Art Events to Attend in New York City This Week

January 22, 2018

Opening: Thornton Dial at David Lewis

Thornton Dial has been termed an outsider artist, a vernacular artist, and a folk artist—but any of those labels might be a misnomer, since the late painter’s work has been gradually moving into the mainstream art world’s view in the past few years. This week, Dial’s work will be the subject of a survey at David Lewis. Titled “Mr. Dial’s America,” the show focuses on the various ways Dial portrayed historical events in his work, tackling the O.J. Simpson trial as well as more personal struggles. Among the works on view will be a painting of Ground Zero that renders the aftermath of 9/11 in bursts of blood–red and fiery orange.

David Lewis, 88 Eldridge Street, 5th Floor, 6–8 p.m.
Pictures at an Exhibition: Thornton Dial at David Lewis, New York

February 28, 2018


COURTESY DAVID LEWIS, NEW YORK

A foretaste of the Met’s upcoming show of the work of self-taught artist Thornton Dial and his peers, including Nellie Mae Rowe and Lonnie Holley, all from the American South, this well-chosen exhibition draws from Dial’s output of the last two decades. In his politically inflected sculptural assemblages and expressionist relief paintings—dense accretions of paint, wood, cloth, metal, carpeting, bones, and found objects that he began making in the 1980s—Dial, who died in 2016 at age 87, focused on social issues, particularly the African American struggle. In the eight magisterial works here, he addresses such subjects as the O.J. Simpson trial, the destruction of the World Trade Center on 9/11, and—in a sparkling relief painting featuring a real frying pan and other cooking utensils—the ordinary pleasure of a shared meal.

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Editors’ Picks: 14 Things to See in New York This Week

by Sarah Cascone & Caroline Goldstein
January 22, 2018


Excerpt from the article:

“Mr. Dial’s America” at David Lewis Gallery

Thornton Dial managed to simultaneously honor and confront the icons and ideals of America, deftly weaving in current events and historical motifs. The show will feature early self-portraits as well as paintings treating Jim Crow-era America and the struggle for civil rights, the O.J. Simpson trial, and the site of the World Trade Center after the 9/11 attacks.

—Caroline Goldstein

The Outsider Fair Once More Confirms That Art Is Everywhere

by Roberta Smith
January 18, 2018

Excerpt from the article:

The 2018 Outsider Art Fair arrives this weekend at a time when the very concept of outsider art — work made by self-taught or developmentally impaired artists — has never seemed more capacious or in flux. At the moment, “The Beautiful Mind: The Drawings of Santiago Ramón y Cajal,” at Grey Art Gallery presents renderings by a Spanish neuroanatomist that revolutionized understanding of the brain but increasingly hold their own as modernist drawings. And “Murder Is Her Hobby: Frances Glessner Lee and the Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death,” at the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery in Washington, contains tiny dioramas originally used as forensic aids by police, that also presage setup photography of the 1970s and ’80s.

Other changes include the increasing presence of outsider artists in galleries where you’d least expect them. David Lewis, who oversees a large, pristine and hip gallery on the Lower East Side, is working with the Souls Grown Deep Foundation on a show of the work of Thornton Dial, a towering figure among outsiders of the South, known for his startlingly rough-hewed paintings whose surfaces can include basically anything: rugs, tree branches and wire.

On Jan. 25 Mr. Lewis’s gallery will inaugurate its representation of the artist with a show intriguingly titled “Mr. Dial’s America.” Until Sunday, there’s a big Dial front and center at the fair: “A Bird Will Always Try to Fly” (1991), an avian creature with the markings of a tiger pursued by two figures, at Fred Giampietro.

Two major museum exhibitions signal greater inclusion in the art historical scheme. On Jan. 28, the National Gallery of Art in Washington will unveil “Outliers and American Vanguard Art,” an exhibition of some 300 works by about 90 artists trained and self-taught. It will examine how attention to folk and outsider art — from artists, collectors and museums — has ebbed and flowed through the 20th century. And in May the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which has a large collection of mostly 19th-century American folk art will take the plunge with a show centering on the 57 works by black Southern outsiders — including Dial — it recently received from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. It’s inspiring title: “History Refused to Die.” That refusal rings loud and clear in this year’s Outsider Art Fair.