Letting His Life’s Work Do the Talking

By CAROL KINO

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THORNTON DIAL has never been one for talking much about his work.

Ask him what inspires his monument-al assemblages, made from twisted metal, tree branches, cloth, plastic toys, animal bones and all manner of found materials, and he is likely to respond tersely, as he did while showing me around his studio here one bone-chilling day last month.

“I mostly pick up stuff,” he said. “I start on a picture when I get a whole lot of stuff together. And then I look at the piece and think about life.”

Now 82, Mr. Dial has had a lot of life to think about—especially over the last year, during which he endured hernia surgery, pneumonia, a stroke and heart problems. Only recently did he return to making art in his cold and cavernous space at the back of Dial Metal Patterns, a fabrication shop run by his children. As he huddled in a chair, looking frail and slightly wary, his three sons hovered about him protectively.

For one painting-like piece, made on canvas-covered plywood, Mr. Dial had used branches, metal, clothing, paint and a pair of work boots to create a lean figure fording through a tall jungle. “That’s Obama,” he said. “I show the struggle he got through without getting bit.”

Another, saturated with powdery white pigment, presented a baby doll nested in a field of cotton-covered twigs and twisted steel. A rope encircled the doll’s neck, suggesting a noose or an umbilical cord. “That’s the way they come,” Mr. Dial said, chuckling when asked about the rope’s significance. “You probably see many things in my art if you’re looking at it right.”

Because Mr. Dial is self-taught and illiterate, he has generally been classified as a folk or outsider artist. But that pigeonhole has long rankled his admirers, because his work’s look, ambition, and obvious intellectual reach seemed so close to that of many other modern and contemporary masters, from Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg to Jean-Michel Basquiat. “If anybody else had created a major opus of this scope,” said Joanne Coblis, an adjunct curator at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, “he or she would be recognized as a major force in the art world. Instead Dial struggles at the margins.”


But his marginalization may not last much longer. Mr. Dial’s first career retrospective, “Hard Truths,” open at the museum in Indianapolis on Friday. And on March 19 the Andrew Edlin Gallery in Chelsea will open Mr. Dial’s first solo gallery show in New York in 11 years. “This feels like the moment when the cultural world is ready to understand Mr. Dial and perhaps to embrace him,” said Ms. Coblis, who organized the museum survey.

That exhibition, which runs through Sept. 18 before traveling to New Orleans, Charlotte, N.C., and Atlanta, includes examples from many different periods, starting with the pictures that made Mr. Dial’s name in the early ’90s, when he used the tiger to symbolize the struggles and triumphs of African-American life. He has continued to invoke the specter of slavery, in pieces like “High and Wide (Carrying the Kats to the Nain),” a large 2002 construction in which a running Mickey Mouse toy is chained to the hull of a ship.

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Thornton Dial

Mr. Dial's first museum exhibition, "Image of the Tiger," organized by the critic Thomas McEvilley, opened at two New York institutions, the Museum of American Folk Art and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, in November 1993. The show seemed poised to "break down the border between outside and inside," Mr. McEvilley said. Critically it was successful: "He has a genuine talent that he brands fiercely," Roberta Smith wrote in The New York Times. But soon after the opening "60 Minutes" ran a segment that suggested Mr. Arnett was exploiting the folk artists whose work he had championed, particularly Mr. Dial. Suddenly "my show died on the vine," Mr. McEvilley said. And so did several other major exhibitions of Mr. Dial's art in the works.

Since then, although Mr. Dial has exhibited in galleries and been included in many group outsider art shows, as well as the 2000 Whitney Biennial, he has had only one other major museum solo exhibition, "Thornton Dial in the 21st Century," at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston in 2005. (Mr. Dial, who remains close to Mr. Arnett, memorialized the debacle with the 2005 self-portrait assemblage "Strange Fruit Channel 42": it involves an eyless scarecrow-like creature wearing a bloody tie strung up from a television antenna.) Yet the event had one positive effect on Mr. Dial, Ms. Cubbs said: "It made him re-evaluate what the relationship would be between his art and its audience, and his work became more complex and powerful."

How did he do that? Mr. Dial isn't telling. "I remember all of my art," he said, "but I can't talk about all of it, because I did it 20 or 30 years ago. You ain't goin' to think about all you done did in life either."

But pressed to explain why he makes art in the first place, he finally found an answer: "It makes art for people to love."