ART VIEW; A Young Style for an Old Story

by Roberta Smith
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THORNTON DIAL, A 65-YEAR-old self-taught artist from Bessemer, Ala., has come a long way in a short time. Seven years after making his first painting and two years after his New York gallery debut, this former steelworker is the subject of simultaneous museum shows and an accompanying coffee-table catalogue published by Abrams. His big, unforgiving relief-paintings, heavy with found wood, metal, wire and rope but lightened by energetic strokes of color or zaps of spray paint, glower from the walls of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo (through Jan. 2) and the Museum of American Folk Art near Lincoln Center (through Jan. 30).

Dial’s paintings are like patches of rough seas in which the faces and figures of living things rise and sink among waves of detritus and color. Their sometimes harsh carnival-like rawness can be both strange and familiar: their swirling colors and brutal topographies can make you think of Jackson Pollock, Julian Schnabel and Anselm Kiefer, as well as Joe Zucker and Red Grooms. A tiger, usually of shag rug painted beyond the point of easy recognition, is the dominant form in many of these paintings: rampant, on the prowl, under attack or merely passing through, it is intended as a symbol of Dial himself, and of black men in general.

The quality of Dial’s art is not easy to judge. He has a genuine talent that he brandishes fearlessly. He’s completely at ease with the large scale that continues to be associated with “major” art. But his sensibility is still very much in formation, especially in the New Museum exhibition; for every painting that bridges the gap between painting and sculpture and between material and story line, there are two or three that are incoherent and flimsily thrown together.

Dial began experimenting with welded metal in the early 1980’s after he and his sons started a small business producing metal garden furniture in his backyard. He shifted to painting with encouragement from William Arnett, the Atlanta lawyer and folk art collector who first discovered his work and has relentlessly promoted it ever since. Arnett may have worked too hard on Dial’s behalf. This show reveals an astoundingly rapid development over the past three years, but it also feels slightly premature. If it had taken place three years from now, it would probably have been more consistent.

The best work in the two exhibitions introduces an artist who may at first seem freakish. Working on society’s margins he has arrived, by his own path, at a style as mainstream as any in today’s fragmented art scene. And he uses this startlingly contemporary, implicitly youthful style to tell a story whose urgency reflects a long and difficult life.

It is a tale told with historical specificity in paintings like “The Last Day of Martin Luther King,” in which a great white tiger is watched over by a black Christ, or the charred expanse of “The New Birmingham and the Old Birmingham,” where wire and chunks of two-by-fours form a fence that seems to divide a populace implied by masks, tree-root figures and scores of tiny faces painted on rocks. It assumes the richness of gospel in the dark turbulence of “When I Lay My Burdens Down,” in which a flying figure looking over its shoulder at the world is the cousin of a Renaissance angel or a Chagall dreamer.

In “Veteran’s Day,” Dial abandons his seas of chaos in favor of sparseness, ordering the surface with a grid of wooden crosses interspersed with faces, shoes, bits of tin canvas, coils of cloth. Highlighting this barren mourning ground with bits of red, blue and white paint, he evokes the difficult lives of those who return from war as much as the loss of those who don’t. In these works, Dial’s uneven talent is something to reckon with, both on its own and for the issues it raises.

Primary among these issues is the growing uselessness of the distinction between outsider artists -- the catch-all term for non-art-world art makers -- and the presumably trained, inside variety. The boundary between these
categories has been eroding for most of this century, and the history of this erosion is well known.

Some highlights include the attention that artists like Paul Klee and André Breton paid to the art of the insane in the years after World War I and Jean Dubuffet's collection of Art Brut. Especially important are the singular achievements, preserved largely by chance and now widely admired, of Adolf Wölfl, who spent most of his life in an asylum in Switzerland; Martin Ramirez, inmate of a state hospital in California and Bill Traylor, a former slave.

The boundary was further obscured during the last decade. In the 1980's Schnabel, Michael Tracy, Jean-Michel Basquiat, A. R. Penck and Donald Baechler were directly influenced by outsider art or incorporated elements of it into their own work. In recent years artists like David Hammons, Nari Ward and Nancy Rubins have turned increasingly to discarded materials as a way of commenting on, among other things, social inequality.

Dial's art is not the first to imply that the inside-outside boundary is obsolete, but it emphatically serves notice that the traffic across it can move both ways. It's gratifying to see the blue-chip style of Neo-Expressionism infused with the make-the-most-of-everything inventiveness endemic to Southern folk art -- a skill honed by poverty. In Dial's art visual richness is never equated with the more material kind. But his work is more than an outsider's revenge on the New York art world. The black experience so crucial to the formation of this country's music and, as Toni Morrison has eloquently argued, so central to its literature, is belatedly a growing presence in its contemporary art. Thornton Dial's work is just one more sign of things to come, and of things already here.