

# **BROOKLYN RAIL**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

## Thornton Dial: Mr. Dial's America

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Thornton Dial, *The Color of Money: The Jungle of Justice*, 1996. Fabric, shoe, gloves, jigsaw puzzle pieces, artificial flowers and plants, dolls, stuffed animals, rope carpet, toys, cotton, found metal, other found materials, oil, enamel, spray paint, industrial sealing compound, on canvas mounted on wood. 77 × 86 × 12 inches. © Estate of Thornton Dial. Collection of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Courtesy David Lewis, New York.

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 painter 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



Thornton Dial, *Two Coats*, 2003. Bedding, coats, found metal, oil, enamel, and spray paint on canvas, 81 × 71 × 9 inches. © Estate of Thornton Dial. Collection of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Courtesy David Lewis, New York.

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.



Thornton Dial, *Setting the Table*, 2003. Shoes, gloves, bedding, beaded car-seat cover, cloth carpet, artificial flowers, crushed paint cans, found metal, frying pan, cooking utensils, chain, wood, Splash Zone compound, oil, and enamel on canvas on wood, 75 × 74.5 × 8 inches. Courtesy David Lewis, New York.