Summer 2016
Vol. 30, No. 2

American Art

published by the University of Chicago Press
in association with the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Appreciation

Thornton Dial (1928–2016)

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The American artist Thornton Dial died on January 25, 2016, at the age of eighty-seven (fig. 1). In large-scale painted assemblages and mixed-media sculptures that were simultaneously mellifluous and arresting, Dial channeled his perspectives on black life in America. He used colors, compositions, and material combinations that appeared bold and contemporary, and seemed to contrast with a lifetime of oppression and hardship in segregated Alabama. In spite of his scant formal education, his paintings speak allegorically about African American history and culture with an overriding theme of struggle and the will to overcome. Dial's extraordinary artistic sophistication contested the boundaries of the mainstream art world and any number of assumptions about art made by an untrained African American from the rural South. His impact has already been enormous, and it is only just beginning to be fully gauged.

Dial was born into the Great Depression and lived through the rise and fall of institutionalized segregation and the civil rights movement in a region where daily life was perilous for blacks. The professor and civil rights activist Vincent Harding, in a 1994 interview, asked Dial if he could recall his thoughts and feelings when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Freedom Movement were hard at work across the South. The artist told him, "I always wanted to be free."[1]

Dial's mother, the daughter of sharecroppers, was a sharecropper herself, and he was raised primarily by his grandmother and great-aunt. "I was born in Sumter County, Alabama. A midwife delivered me to my mama in a little country house in the field, one of them kind you can lay down and look up through the ceiling and see the sunshine," Dial recounted.[2] The backdrop of his childhood was that of intense poverty. He started working in the fields about as soon as he learned to walk. At thirteen Dial moved to Bessemer, near Birmingham, to live with extended family in a region abundant with the raw materials for producing iron. He had jobs in an ice house, a sawmill, a foundry, a brickyard, and the city's waterworks before he married and became an employee of the Pullman-Standard Car Manufacturing Company. He remained there for thirty years, learning every aspect of fabricating and assembling rail cars.[3]

Dial's art would increasingly become a rumination on the challenges of life's journey and the politics of race. As he stated,

It is exactly the truth that the Negro has been mistreated in the United States, that he been used. But we got to look at what we have had to use, what he have built, after what he

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been through. I come through it myself, and I know what life was like at that time, and I can respect myself and the Negro for what we have did.

We was captured and brought over here to the United States. That was the Negro family, captured to do work on the farms. We had to work, and we had also to pay attention. We had to learn surviving. We had to learn that everything you want to do, you got to struggle for it.[4]

It had always been Dial's nature to make things, and coming from a family of little means, using available materials to fabricate items such as toys and fishing lures was the only option. Working at Pullman, Dial witnessed designs on paper being transformed into large-scale steel objects. In 1983 the company closed down, and Dial and his sons were out of work.[5] They started their own business, Dial Metal Patterns, where they crafted metal lawn furniture and other products. It was a natural fit for Dial, who had always made drawings and sculptural objects for himself. But when his personal creations grew increasingly large and inventive, he hid them, fearing that he was breaking some unspecified law by expressing his personal views on race and politics.[6]

By the early 1970s the writer and collector William Arnett of Atlanta had begun to shift his attention to the art of his own region—the American South—and specifically works made by rural African Americans. When Africans brought to America as slaves were stripped of everything but their memories, a new culture began to take root. To survive, budding cultural expressions had to be covert.

1 Thornton Dial Sr., 2001. Photo by Vanessa Vadim

Arnett notes that music was reasonably safe. Songs could be sung in private, employ ambiguous or changeable lyrics, or rely solely on rhythms. Folktales and other forms of oral culture had a similar flexibility. "But art had a physical presence." He explains:

Abstraction and disingenuous explanations could safeguard it but could not totally conceal it. To be protected it needed to be placed where it would not likely be seen. So the cultural heritage contained within the visual arts survived by being put in the graveyard. . . .

As art gradually made its way from the cemeteries to the woods to the backyards and ultimately to the front yards, it became larger and more overt, but maintained its secrecy by seeming to be unstructured, being composed of unattractive materials, and being characterized by a strange aesthetic, at least, strange for its time and place.[7]

Arnett met in Dial in 1987; he was introduced by another Alabama artist, Lonnie Holley.[8] The insightful collector understood that Dial's paintings, drawings, and

2 Thornton Dial Sr., *African Jungle Picture: If the Ladies Had Knew the Snakes Wouldn't Bite Them They Wouldn't Have Hurt the Snakes; If the Snakes Had Knew the Ladies Wouldn't Hurt Them They Wouldn't Have Bit the Ladies*, 1989. Enamel, industrial sealing compound, and wire on wood, 48¾ x 96 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of William Arnett. Permission courtesy Souls Grown Deep © Thornton Dial Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS) N.Y.

sculptures constituted a torrential eyewitness account of the struggle of African Americans in a white-dominated society. Together, he and Holley convinced Dial that his expressions were not only valid but extraordinarily meaningful and important.

Dial had an ability to weave visual elements together in ways that were keen and incisive. In the 1989 painting *African Jungle Picture: If the Ladies Had Knew the Snakes Wouldn't Bite Them They Wouldn't Have Hurt the Snakes; If the Snakes Had Knew the Ladies Wouldn't Hurt Them They Wouldn't Have Bit the Ladies*, Dial ruminated on the complexities of trust, using a subtle, fable-like depiction to speak deftly about the larger issue of race relations in the United States (fig. 2). Instead of hair, the women have snakes atop their heads and wrapped around their faces and wear strained expressions. Together, the snakes and the women are enmeshed in a dense jungle, suggesting both occluded vision and an environment of survival. The image does not suggest an overt threat but, rather, an uneasy and unending integration—they are inseparable yet uncomfortable. Dial's narrative poses a hard question: How can our culture ever move beyond a centuries-old cycle of mistrust?

Fourteen years later, Dial explored the jungle metaphor again in a vibrant and commanding painted assemblage titled *The Beginning of Life in the Yellow Jungle* (fig. 3). In this work, Dial addressed the ephemeral nature of all beings. Yet this is the beginning, a golden dawn with a child standing amid a lush world of flowers. The colors seem warm and optimistic; with yellow, Dial creates surroundings that are neither black nor white. However, the tangled composition and the work's title suggest the unending complexities of navigating and surviving in a world that is both beautiful and difficult.

It is not easy to measure the significance of an artist like Thornton Dial. I was fortunate enough to be among those who met him in the mid-1990s. I was introduced by Bill Arnett, who was already hard at work making sure that the world would know about Dial, and ensuring that the artist would see himself as a part of something

vital. Dial made a great impression on me and had an inestimable impact on my own path. But I can't say I knew him. As Matt Arnett, Bill's son, stated:

Mr. Dial was a private man. He had learned that the best way to survive was to keep his ideas and intentions to himself. It's hard to explain how uncomfortable he was, at first, with all the attention. He spent the first half of his life having very little interaction with white people. He'd rarely eaten at integrated restaurants and never outside of the small town he lived in. He'd rarely had conversations with white people who weren't his boss, and this was in tough, factory settings in the Jim Crow South.[9]

3 Thornton Dial Sr., *The Beginning of Life in the Yellow Jungle*, 2003. Plastic soda bottles, doll, clothing, bedding, wire, found metal, rubber glove, turtle shell, artificial flowers, Splash Zone compound, enamel, and spray paint on canvas on wood, 75 x 112 x 13 in. Private collection. Image courtesy Pitkin Studio/Art Resource, N.Y. Permission courtesy Souls Grown Deep

Dial kept making art regardless of who supported him and who didn't; year after year he faced challenges, just as he had his entire life. But he lived to see his work acquired by some of the most notable institutions in the country: the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the High Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery of Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Reflecting on his journey, Dial said, "My art is the evidence of my freedom."[10]

Notes

1 Vincent Harding, "I Always Wanted to Be Free," in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*, vol. 1, *The Tree Gave the Dove a Leaf*, ed. William Arnett and Paul Arnett (Atlanta: Tinwood Books in association with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, 2000), 16.

2 Thornton Dial, "Mr. Dial Is a Man Looking for Something," in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*, vol. 2, *Once That River Starts to Flow*, ed. William Arnett and Paul Arnett (Atlanta: Tinwood Books in association with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, 2001), 194. This account was given in oral form to William Arnett in 1995 and 1996.

3 General information on Dial's life is drawn from John Beardsley, "His Story/History: Thornton Dial in the Twentieth Century," in *Thornton Dial in the 21st Century*, by Joanne Cubbs et al. (Atlanta: Tinwood Books in association with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2005), 274–92; and Joanne Cubbs and Eugene W. Metcalf, eds., *Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art; Munich and New York: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2011). See also Bobby M. Wilson, *Race and Place in Birmingham: The Civil Rights and Neighborhood Movements* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 30–31.

4 Thornton Dial, oral history, Souls Grown Deep Foundation, Atlanta, Ga. Taken from interviews by William Arnett, 1995 and 1996, at http://soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/thornton-dial (accessed February 8, 2016).

5 Beardsley, "His Story/History," 284–85.

6 Thorton Dial, interview by the author, February 21, 1998. Leslie Umberger, "Thornton Dial: Race, Class, and the Politics of Authenticity" (M.A. thesis, Univ. of Colorado, Boulder, 1998), 21. William Arnett has also described Dial's early fears of "needing a license" for making art and fear of running afoul of either the law or popular opinion in Alabama. William Arnett, "The Road from Emelle," in Cubbs et al., *Thornton Dial in the 21st Century*, 20–21.

7 William Arnett, "The Tradition," http://soulsgrowndeep.org/tradition, 2012. In 2010 Arnett formed Souls Grown Deep Foundation, which is dedicated to documenting, researching, preserving, and exhibiting the work of self-taught African American artists of the American South.

8 Dial, interview. Umberger, "Thornton Dial: Race, Class, and the Politics of Authenticity," 21.

9 Matt Arnett, email message to author, February 2, 2016.

10 Dial, oral history.