

THE Nation.

A History of Salvage

The Met's "History Refused to Die" exhibition rewrites the art history of the American South through a group of self-taught practitioners.

by Barry Schwabsky
October 18, 2018



Thornton Dial's *Victory in Iraq* (2004) (Estate of Thornton Dial / Stephen Pitkin / Pitkin Studio)

"History Refused to Die" proved to be a striking title for a memorable exhibition. On view at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art through late September, it marked a gift to the museum of 57 works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation in Atlanta, an organization whose name derives from a poem by Langston Hughes. The foundation was started by William S. Arnett, a collector of African art who became fascinated in the 1980s by the work of self-taught black artists in the American South. Convinced that their art was part of a coherent tradition reflecting "the rich, symbolic world of the black rural South through highly charged works that address a wide range of revelatory social and political subjects," Arnett has sponsored research, publications, and exhibitions on the subject. He has found himself dogged by controversy at times: In 1993, the arch-philistine Morley Safer aired a segment on *60 Minutes* suggesting that Arnett was exploiting the artists whose work he promoted. (A full quarter-century later, Safer's charges remain unsubstantiated.) And the gift to the Met testifies not only to the generosity of Arnett's intentions but also to the abundant riches of the world he dedicated so much of his life to helping preserve.

A great way to approach "History Refused to Die"—though not the most obvious one—was from the back, taking

the stairway up from the Levine Court on the mezzanine of the Met's Wallace Wing, where you could pause and give some time to a set of fine contemporary paintings by the likes of Jennifer Bartlett, Anselm Kiefer, Kerry James Marshall, and Terry Winters (to name just a few). Heading upstairs from there, you soon found yourself on the second floor, in a room containing a couple of almost-too-typically-midcentury modern abstract sculptures by Barbara Hepworth and Isamu Noguchi, along with two very grand pieces by Clyfford Still, both dominated by insistent fields of blood-red, as well as an unusually tough Robert Motherwell, *The Homely Protestant* (1948)—which he retrospectively decided was a self-portrait—and one of the absolute masterworks of Willem de Kooning's early abstract period, *Attic* (1949). Emerging from this array of classic modernists, you then came face to face with one of the best works in the show: Thornton Dial's *Victory in Iraq* (2004), which hung outside the two rooms housing the rest of "History Refused to Die." It's a powerful assemblage painting whose incredibly heterogeneous materials—steel, clothing, tin, wheels, barbed wire, electrical wire, stuffed animals, and a mannequin's head, among many others—have been tightly woven into a gorgeously tangled, optically pulsing battlefield that's as beautiful as it is ominous. What was immediately clear is that this work can more than hold its own in the company of the best contemporary painters, even the great protagonists of Abstract Expressionism—for, if you looked to your left as you walked toward it, you might almost have been tempted to head toward another of the Met's proudest modern possessions, Jackson Pollock's massive *Autumn Rhythm* (1950).

Walking through the exhibition itself, you could see the sculptures of Lonnie Holley, Ronald Lockett, and Joe Minter, or the quilts by Loretta Pettway, Lola Pettway, and Annie Mae Young, all working in Alabama—all of which leave one wondering why some people are called, simply and without further qualification, "artists," while others (the aesthetic qualifications of whose work are equivalent and in no need of allowances) earn that title only with the proviso "self-taught," "folk," or "outsider"?

In the book that accompanied the Met exhibition—confusingly, with a different title: *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art From the American South*—Darryl Pinckney observes that "history still tells us that the sheer existence of this art was not predicted, and maybe that is the most important thing history can tell us about it." And, in a way, Pinckney is right. Whether or not it's really the best way of appreciating painting and sculpture, we are schooled to see the history of art as part of an ongoing story in which the baton of innovation and quality is picked up very consciously by a few highly self-aware individuals from their chosen precursors, and in which the meaning of a particular work lies not only in its form, style, and subject matter, but also in the way it implicitly reflects back on art history and seems to envisage some fresh potential for the art to come. As Harold Rosenberg once observed, "The density of meaning in a modern painting is always to some degree an effect of the artist's engagement with the history of art, including ideas about it." A painting like *Victory in Iraq* is nothing if not dense with meaning, and reflects the fresh potential of art—yet the history it is responding to is not the art of museums.

However striking the formal parallels between the art of Dial, Holley, Lockett, and Minter and that of assemblage artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Jim Dine, or painters such as Kiefer (all illustrated in the catalog), and whatever the resemblance between a geometrically patterned quilt—when mounted on a wall rather than spread across a bed—and an abstract painting, the artists' sources and intentions are distinct. Matisse, in his moments of doubt, could say to himself, "If Cézanne is right, then I am right." I don't suppose Dial ever thought something similar—"If Rauschenberg is right, then I am right"—or that, in making their quilts, any of the extended Pettway family of then-Gee's Bend, Alabama, looked to the examples of Piet Mondrian or Barnett Newman (whose works, again, appear as comparative illustrations in the catalog).

Yet I also wonder whether the coincidence should be so easily dismissed. Coincidence is something that artists use to make their work, and that's equally true of artists working inside and outside the self-appointed mainstream. Artists of all sorts are adept at finding commonalities across the boundaries of culture, class, and race. One of the exhibition's organizers, Randall R. Griffey, reminds us not to forget that many of these self-taught artists were drawn to using found objects because of their poverty, not because they rejected traditional art materials out of some high-minded ideal. And more than a few artists who eventually became successful have known poverty. At the Met Breuer, by coincidence, you can now see the striking exhibition "Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture, 1963–2017" On view through December 2, it showcases an African-American artist from Bessemer, Alabama—like some of those in "History Refused to Die." Unlike his colleagues who stayed close to home, Whitten attended art school

and made his way to New York, where he placed himself at the center of an international conversation. His recently published journals, *Notes From the Woodshed* (Hauser & Wirth, 2018), show that his art was produced in an often-contentious dialogue with the whole history of Western and African art, as well as the musical innovations of John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman and modern philosophy from Heidegger to Žižek. And yet his idiom of assemblage in both painting and sculpture remains profoundly entangled with that of artists like Dial and Holley.

All but five of the 29 works in the “History Refused to Die” exhibition belonged to two geographically specific groups of artists. There were 10 quilts made in Gee’s Bend, mostly between the 1950s and ’70s, and 11 assemblages (or paintings incorporating assemblage) by artists from Birmingham or nearby Bessemer, Alabama, between the 1980s and as recently as 2013, along with three drawings by Dial, the most prominent of these artists. Between them, the two groupings presented almost too blatant a dichotomy of styles and attitudes, but they helped to clarify how each could be viewed loosely as a school.

The quilts—which, by definition, are utilitarian objects despite being displayed on the wall like paintings—presented, to all appearances, purely abstract patterns or arrangements of colored areas. Their makers were all women, and the context in which they were made was rural. Most of the quilts in “History Refused to Die” were in fact made by members of a single extended family, and there was a strong sense of tradition here: The quilters’ considerable formal inventiveness expressed itself within the limits of shared conventions. Their works were given not really titles but descriptions, mostly based on common motifs: *Work-clothes quilt with center medallion of strips* (1976), by Annie Mae Young; *“Housetop”—eight-block variation* (circa 1975), by Lola Pettway; and *Housetop-nine-block “Log Cabin” variation* (circa 1935), by Mary Elizabeth Kennedy, the oldest piece in the show.

It’s not surprising that among the earliest admirers from the North of Gee’s Bend quilts was the painter Lee Krasner, the daughter of a poor immigrant family in Brooklyn, who learned of them when she visited Alabama for an exhibition of her own work in 1967. Or that the designer Ray Eames, who started out as a painter and had been, like Krasner, a student of Hans Hofmann, was also a fan. Undoubtedly, the quilts’ use of geometry and the grid, which were equally important to modernist painting, formed a part of their appeal. But what distinguishes them from the kinds of modernist paintings to which they are often compared is their free way with shape: Unlike a canvas mounted on wooden stretcher bars—which imposes a rectilinear geometry and a preexistent plane before the painter has even made the first mark, and from which, therefore, the squares and stripes of a Mondrian or a Newman were always conceptually derived—the geometry of a quilt is generated from the inside out, from the part to the whole. The result is never a perfect rectangle, but a shape that treats geometry as fluid and variable. In this way, the quilter working her variations on a pattern that’s been handed down ends up making something that feels freer than the work of a painter like Newman, who aspired “to start from scratch, to paint as if painting never existed before.”

The works from the Birmingham-Bessemer area, by contrast, were all made by male artists who used a quasi-abstract idiom to create pieces that overtly assume a rich symbolic content—war, slavery, faith, identity, labor, and so on. Their titles insist on that content, and not without a prophetic tone: *Grown Together in the Midst of the Foundation* (1994), by Holley; *Four Hundred Years of Free Labor* (1995), by Minter; and, of course, Dial’s *History Refused to Die* (2004), the great freestanding, wall-like planar sculpture that lent its name to the exhibition as a whole. This art emerged from an urban rather than a rural context—though the countryside must always have been close at hand—and a rather unusual urban context for the South, at that: With an economy based on steel production and other heavy industries, the Birmingham area in this era—as its nickname, the “Pittsburgh of the South,” suggests—must have had as much in common with the northern cities to which southern blacks were moving in droves as part of the Great Migration as it did with southern capitals like Atlanta.

Yet despite these differences, there was also a central commonality: What these two very different art forms share is that they are arts of salvage. Emerging from what Griffey calls “an economically disadvantaged culture of creative scavenging, reuse, and repurpose,” they thrive on finding resources where others might see things essentially worn out and used up—junk. The worn and faded character of the fabric used in Emma Lee Pettway Campbell’s *Blocks and Strips work-clothes quilt* (ca. 1950) sings in chorus with the old and rusty shovels, pitchforks, chains, and other

metal implements that form a pair of totemic human presences in Minter's *Four Hundred Years of Free Labor*. One tells of the domestic warmth and comfort that can be scraped together out of next to nothing; the other of the dignity of those who stand tall despite the toil to which they are chained. In both, however, the message is about survival, as well as the ethic that makes it possible. Dial, for one, has been very explicit in talking about the subject of his work: "My art is talking about the power. It is talking about the coal mines and the ore mines and the steel mills. It is talking about the government, and the unions, and the people that controls the hills and the mountains.... I try to show how the Negroes have worked in all these different places and have come to help make the power of the United States what it is today."

This is not to say that all of the assemblage works have an overt message to convey. What Arnett calls their "symbolic, commemorative, or metaphysical significance" seems to have little to do with "encoding information" and much more to do with inviting reflection. These artists are less like schoolteachers handing out lessons for a good student to repeat than they are poet-philosophers offering something to ponder. That was true above all of Dial, who, with nine works—nearly a third of those on view—dominated the show.

As the selection of work here suggested, Dial is an artist of tremendous range. *Victory in Iraq* and *History Refused to Die* are vehement, implacable statements, but they're far from simple ones. Their intricacy of facture and material heterogeneity support a great emotional complexity, a thoroughgoing ambivalence toward the histories they touch on—in the case of *History Refused to Die*, the saga of slavery and oppression that made for the fortitude of its survivors.

Elsewhere in the exhibit, the mood was more somber than defiant. The delicately mottled surface of Dial's assemblage painting *The End of November: The Birds That Didn't Learn How to Fly* (2007)—a cloudy gray full of many-colored nuances—served as the background for a wire stretched from one edge to the other, hung with clumps of black, wadded-up fabric. They might almost seem like desiccated fruits hanging from a branch long after their season is over—I couldn't help thinking of Langston Hughes's (and Lorraine Hansberry's) "raisin in the sun"—but the title tells us that they represent dying birds who will not survive the cold weather coming that the painting so vividly evokes. This is a work of empathy, of regret for what could not be saved. Yet what might have seemed the most abstract of Dial's works in the exhibit instead represented the most elemental conflict: the big, irregular, splotchy forms of black, purple, and green in *Out of the Darkness, the Lord Gave Us Light* (2003), which signify the slow reemergence of hope.