

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

## Thornton Dial Takes Fifth Ave

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Thornton Dial Sr. (1928–2016), *Birds Got to Have Somewhere to Roost, Alabama, 2012*, wood, carpet scraps, corrugated tin, burlap, nails, and enamel on wood, 61 1/4 × 48 × 10 in., American Folk Art Museum, New York, gift of the Thornton Dial Family, 2013.6.1. Photo by Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio.

Twenty-five years ago, Thornton Dial (1928 – 2016) received his first solo exhibition at a New York City museum, *Thornton Dial: Image of the Tiger*. More precisely, he received two: the show dually debuted at the American Folk Art Museum and the New Museum of Contemporary Art. Provocative and polemical, the exhibition(s) was a physical manifestation of current art world debates surrounding terms like “outsider,” “self-taught,” and “folk,” and the relationship of those terms to mainstream art. Was Dial, an institutionally uneducated black man who grew up in the trenches of Jim Crow Alabama, an “outsider” artist, or a contemporary one? In 1993, no one could quite settle on an answer, which is partially how Dial’s debut exhibition ended up at two venues so ideologically distinct from one another.

Dial’s work makes a forceful New York City return in the exhibition *History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls*

*Grown Deep Foundation Gift*, now on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art until September 23, 2018. In 2014 the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, at the life-long behest of its founder William S. Arnett, gifted fifty-seven works of art from the African American South to the museum. Selections from this historically important gift are now occupying three galleries in Modern and Contemporary Art. The title of the exhibition is drawn from a 2004 Dial assemblage of the same name, an imposing object made of welded metal, woven fabric, and nested okra stalks. At the time of writing, a banner featuring an image of Dial's *History Refused to Die* graces The Met's façade.

Thornton Dial was and was not a self-taught artist. While he received little in the way of formal education, this was the norm for Southern black Americans in the early twentieth century. Born to a family of sharecroppers, Dial became a laborer at a young age. Schooling was an unaffordable and impossible luxury. However, through the many occupations he held over the course of his life, he learned how to work with a variety of materials. As a carpenter and steel worker, Dial learned how to build things out of wood and manipulate metal. This is clearly evident in works such as the monumental *Victory in Iraq* (2004) which currently hangs adjacent to paintings by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Clyfford Still. *Victory's* swirling masses of barbed wire, found objects, and painted textiles make the other works in its vicinity seem clinical, subdued in comparison.

As a Jane and Morgan Whitney Fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art whose specific research interests concern Dial and his artistic peers, I was able to assist curators Randall Griffey and Amelia Peck in the organization of this exhibition for the greater part of a year. Putting Dial in conversation with Pollock is a curatorial gesture meant to challenge the conventional narrative of modern and contemporary art in the United States. His work, as well as the work of every other artist in the show, disrupts what we think is true about the history of modern art forms like found object assemblage and nonrepresentational painting. Dial belongs to a forgotten, and mostly undocumented, lineage of black American artists inventing and developing their own modern art forms outside of the gaze of the mainstream art world.

If we are to believe in the value of encyclopedic museums—which are currently being called out (rightfully so) as institutions historically entrenched in colonialism and cultural imperialism—then how do we interpret the presence of Thornton Dial in The Met's collection? Some may claim that this exhibition amounts to little more than tokenism, or the fulfillment of a diversity quota. I can say, however, that there are future plans for the display of his work at The Met beyond this show—more opportunities for disruption and historical reconsideration. Rather than do away with encyclopedic museums altogether, we may give them a chance to do their, if very belated, due diligence to history.

We must also remember that, while Dial's work benefits from this display, it is museums and the discipline of art history—two intellectual institutions that are still predominantly white—that receive the greatest benefits. Who is represented in a museum's collection is just as important as who gets to make decisions about those collections. Fixing the structural inequities within museums and academia is a much more difficult task than placing great work in the collections of art museums.

That being said, perhaps we can harness the cultural capital of The Met to help put one debate to rest once and for all: when asked what kind of art institution the work of Thornton Dial belongs, the answer is now simple. Any art museum would benefit from having his work in its collection. And if The Met can make room for him, I suspect many other museums can, too.