

HYPERALLERGIC

Outsider Art Comes to the Metropolitan Museum

The entry of works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation into the Met's collection has prompted the museum to rethink the way it presents 20th-century art history.

by Edward m. Gomez
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Thornton Dial, "History Refused to Die" (2004) okra stalks and roots, clothing, collaged drawings, tin, wire, steel, Masonite, steel chain, enamel, and spray paint, 8 feet 6 inches x 87 inches x 23 inches (all photos courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, unless otherwise noted)

Outsider art is having another big moment in the United States, marked by plenty of talk about the heroic and the historic, and hailed with hosannas of the "It's about time!" variety.

That's because, after several years in the making, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, one of the world's most renowned, encyclopedic museums, has just opened *History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift*. This new exhibition, which will remain on view through September 23, features 30 pieces from a donation the museum received in late 2014 of 57 works by contemporary, self-taught artists of African descent, all of whom lived and worked in the Deep South of the United States, from the William S. Arnett Collection of the Atlanta-based Souls Grown Deep Foundation.

That headline-making gift, which the Met's curatorial staff had a hand in selecting, included drawings, paintings, and mixed-media works by Thornton Dial, Joe Minter, Nellie Mae Rowe, Lonnie Holley, Joe Light, Ronald Lockett, John B. Murray, Mary Proctor, Mose Tolliver, and other art-makers. Twenty quilts created from the 1930s through 2003 by female artists from the area around Gee's Bend, Alabama, were also part of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation's donation. With a title taken from a sculpture by Dial, which is on display in the exhibition, *History Refused to Die* features works by several, but not all, of the artists whose works are represented in the 2014 gift. Among others, they include Dial, Minter, and Holley. Ten of the Alabama quilts are also on view.

Concurrently with the Met's exhibition, Shrine, a gallery in downtown Manhattan, will present *Annex* (from May 30 through July 29), a selection of works by several artists from the Souls Grown Deep donation who are not featured in the Met's exhibition, along with others not included in the gift; among them are Light, Tolliver, Hawkins Bolden, Bessie Harvey, and Mary T. Smith.

For William ("Bill") S. Arnett, the founder of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, and his collaborators, the Met's acceptance of his organization's donation and, now, this high-profile exhibition, represent a validation by the cultural establishment of overlooked or unknown self-taught artists whose work they had steadfastly championed. The SGDF team firmly believed that these artists' accomplishments had long been deserving of serious institutional and critical attention. (Arnett had been researching, documenting, and collecting their works for many decades. In 2010, he established the SGDF to serve as an archive and educational-promotional outlet for the art he had amassed.)

As *History Refused to Die* suggests, the entry of these works into the museum's permanent collection has prompted the Met to rethink the way in which it presents the history of 20th-century art. This development may also be seen as institutional recognition of Arnett's in-depth research and advocacy on behalf of this art over many years. (In the more than three years since the Met received its big donation, through combined gift-and-purchase arrangements, other US museums, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art (Atlanta), the New Orleans Museum of Art, and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco have also acquired works from the SGDF.)

At times, Arnett and his associates carried out their work in the face of unsettling resistance from well-placed art-world or media players who felt uncertain or threatened by such off-the-radar, unfamiliar material. Sometimes the responses they encountered seemed to carry a current of racism, not to mention a whiff of snobbery. After all, such reactions implied, how could poor, uneducated, black tinkerers in the rural South possibly create anything worthy of being called "art"?

In fact, many of the pieces on view seem to feel right at home alongside better-known, canonical works of modern and contemporary art, considering, for example, the formal affinities between the Gee's Bend quilts and modernist geometric abstraction, or the Souls Grown Deep artists' inventive handling of found materials in ways that seem to parallel (or unwittingly presage) quite a few modernist or postmodernist gestures.

Randall Griffey, a curator in the Met's department of modern and contemporary art organized *History Refused to Die* along with Amelia Peck, a curator from the American decorative arts department (the show had originated with Marla Prather, a former modern and contemporary art curator at the Met). Griffey, standing near one of the two entrances to the galleries in which *History Refused to Die* is being shown, said, "The placement of these works right next to works by some of the best-known modern artists sends a strong message – that these self-taught artists' works are not apart, spatially or conceptually, from other works in the collection."

At one end of the exhibition space, visitors will be greeted by a panel displaying "Medallion" (circa 1960), a quilt by Loretta Pettway with patches of multicolored, vertical and horizontal stripes set against a black ground. Those entering the galleries from the opposite door will pass through a room with an Isamu Noguchi sculpture and monumental Clyfford Still paintings before coming upon Dial's "Victory in Iraq" (2004), a mixed-media tableau featuring painted found materials tucked in and around V-shaped metal rods. Here, Dial, a former welder in a railway-carriage factory, used rusty metal cans, stuffed animals, a mannequin's head, crumpled steel, and metal

mesh to evoke a battlefield's chaotic atmosphere – and credibly portray a slice of its landscape of destruction. (Nearby looms a Jackson Pollock drip painting whose real and suggested surface textures seem almost subdued in comparison with Dial's material-capturing tour de force.)

In his art, Dial, who died at his home near Birmingham, Alabama, in early 2016, examined such big subjects as slavery, racism, human rights, war, injustice, and nature's forces. Despite the hardships and racism he experienced in his own life, his message was one of hope –and of beauty, too. Here, his "History Refused to Die" (2004), a freestanding, mixed-media sculpture whose title neatly summarizes the artist's worldview, commands a room filled with numerous quilts, as well as such works as Lonnie Holley's "African Mask" (2003), made with old car tires, electrical outlets, a welder's mask, and lace; Ronald Lockett's "The Enemy Amongst Us" (1995), a composition of vertical slats of rusty metal; and Purvis Young's painting on wood, "Locked Up Their Minds" (1972), depicting a crowd of people rallying around two long-necked horses. Some of Young's figures carry large padlocks, about which the artist once remarked, "I put locks in some of my paintings. A lot of people are locked up, struggling. The lock is playing a key part. It means mostly something's wrong."



Thornton Dial, "Victory in Iraq" (2004), mixed media, 83.5 inches x 11 feet 3 inches x 16 inches

Curator Peck, a quilts specialist, proposes something of a fresh take on the fabric works from Gee's Bend, which in recent decades have been featured in exhibitions of their own, winning critical praise. "For so long, these quilts have been looked at in relation to a certain kind of abstract art," Peck told me, adding, "but I'd like viewers to keep in mind that they were made by *women*, not only to be beautiful but also, literally, to cover their loved ones." She suggested that the deeper African textile-arts heritage of the Gee's Bend quilts is another subject that merits research attention.

Sheena Wagstaff, the head of the Met's modern and contemporary art department, played a key role in arranging the museum's acquisition of the SGDF gift. Of this first presentation of selections from the donation, she noted, "I hope that visitors encountering these works for the first time will have a revelatory experience. They are works that will stand the test of time, despite the fact that they did not have opportunities to be acknowledged back when they were first being created."

Texas-reared Scott Ogden, who opened Shrine just over two years ago, came to art dealing after many years as a researcher and collector in the field of outsider art, with a special interest in the works of black artists of the American South – varieties of which he had seen while growing up in the region. In the past, he has collaborated with the SGDF on exhibition projects.

About his *Annex* show, Ogden told me, “In addition to extending the scope of the Souls Grown Deep artists whose works are being presented at the Met, I’d like to try to contextualize this work as contemporary art and also help stimulate a new dialog about it, looking at it as an authentic example of what might be called ‘American *art brut*.’ To date, *art brut* has mostly been associated with Europe and the past, but how and where would we find it in the US?” In the months to come, some of Shrine’s programming will explore this theme. Of special note in *Annex* are a Bessie Harvey sculpture made from a tree root, into which the artist carved several totem-like faces, and several house-paint-on-board pictures by the Alabaman Mose Tolliver, featuring some of his portraits’ signature details – exaggerated body parts and mouths filled with steel-trap teeth.

Some viewers may be struck by how easily the works in *History Refused to Die* seem to slide into the art-historical tracks the Met’s presentation is proposing for them. Others may be impressed by how the artists represented here managed to squeeze so much expressive power out of the most humble materials, from fabric scraps to old shovels and Dial’s endless supply of delectable junk. Ultimately, though, given its strengths and singularities, whether or not this kind of art is endorsed by a high-art temple like the Met may well be beside the point. After all, the artists and the kinds of works that are being showcased in this exhibition are unique unto themselves, speaking and revealing their own aesthetic truths. They defy familiar genre labels.

Still, Dial’s art certainly holds its own alongside examples of “heroic” American Abstract Expressionism. Works like Dial’s or Minter’s, with their uncompromising allusions to slavery and racism, those indelible scars upon America’s soul, demonstrate that, in the hands of such artists, whose lives were shaped by a firsthand understanding of the legacy of a painful past, abstract art could be made to break out of its precious, hermetic-aesthetic zone and say something about the real world, too. To be able to make just this kind of discovery, in any museum, is worth more than a few hallelujahs.