

ARTFORUM

Thornton Dial (1928 – 2016)

by Bernard Herman
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Thornton Dial at his home in McCalla, Alabama, 2005. Photo: Matthew Arnett.

THE PASSING OF THORNTON DIAL in late January occasioned a host of meditations on the artist and the extraordinary body of art he produced from the 1980s through the last months of his life. Memorials touched on the emergence of Mr. Dial (a title of respect that he appreciated) as one of the great American artists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Some celebrated his biography, delving into his origins in rural Alabama, his labor in the workshops of industrial Bessemer, and the development of his art; others critiqued the application of confining labels—including folk, self-taught, and outsider—to the artist and his art. Mr. Dial, however, tended to keep his distance from those conversations, preferring to talk about his work through extended metaphors for the fraught relationships between art and history that mapped the American South he knew and extended into larger commentaries on world events.

On a cool, bright early April afternoon in 2012, Mr. Dial laid out part of that vision to me in front of a series of recently completed mixed-media paintings installed in his studio space in Bessemer. He gestured to a painting composed of goldenrod, olive, slate, and rags stiffened with white paint, this composite ground overlaid with a diagonally placed swatch of rusted fence wire, pieces of bent and twisted metal roofing, and a fragment of weathered wood. “When you look at art you start thinking,” he began, and then proceeded into a meditation on the history of art in the world. “You set down thinking about things you know have happened in the world,” he explained, “and a lot of things that have happened have been covered up. And covered up by what? By mules. Mules have been the power of the world.”

Dial's view of history raised several key themes that run through his work and mark a significant part of his intellectual and artistic legacy. As the mule pulls a plow, the blade cuts the soil and thereby raises up the past, bringing it to the surface, even as it turns under the present. In a similar way, Mr. Dial suggested, the past is always being raised around us, but we don't always see it even as we pass through it in our day-to-day existence. The mule itself, he elaborated, is like a man. Coercion, no matter how violent, cannot force him to work. A mule, he remarked, can be beaten until it dies in its tracks. And yet a mule will also work itself to death. Men too will resist to the death, and they will work willingly to the same end. The mule's labors and the mule's character fit into much larger cycles of being, where, as Mr. Dial succinctly put it, "life goes on."



Thornton Dial, *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 9' x 13". © Thornton Dial.
Photo: Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio.

The analogy Mr. Dial constructed around his life, both as an artist and as an inheritor of the unfinished business of civil rights and the fight for human dignity in the United States and the world, was part of a complex, nuanced view of past and present: "That's life . . . I love to think about what the mule could do. Sometimes he falls dead, but he still tried to do it. Mules do the same thing that men do. That's life goes on. . . . The mule turns up stuff and reburies it. . . . I don't care if you're old or young, but that's our whole life there, because as the mule pulls you're going to find some art somewhere in the world."

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