

ARTnews

Thornton Dial, Pioneering Artist Who Channeled Everyday Materials Into Intricate Constructions, Dies at 87

by Andrew Russeth
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Thornton Dial.
STEPHEN PITKIN, PITKIN STUDIO/©THORNTON DIAL

Artist Thornton Dial, who used found objects, fabric, and paint to make astounding, intricate wall reliefs and sculptures that harbor nuanced narratives at once grand and intimate, died yesterday, Monday, January 25, at his home in Emelle, Alabama. The cause of death was not released. In recent years he had been ill and had strokes. He was 87.

The dense surfaces of Dial's art, loaded with everything from slices of metal to doll parts to carpeting and bedecked with intriguing combinations of color, radiate carefully controlled energies. The undulating compositions can bring to mind titans like Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock; the thick textures, the work of Anselm Kiefer; and the sheer pleasure in disparate materials, Robert Rauschenberg and Edward Kienholz. They hint at stories, whether about the destruction of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, or the activities of animals on a farm.



Thornton Dial, Don't Matter How Raggy The Flag, It Still Got To Tie Us Together, 2003.

STEPHEN PITKIN, PITKIN STUDIO/©THORNTON DIAL/COLLECTION OF THE INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART

Termed an outsider artist, a vernacular artist, and a folk artist, among other labels, Dial, who was African American, was one of just a few self-taught artists who, over the past century, began making art well beyond the borders of the predominantly urban, white mainstream art world but who would eventually find a form of success within it.

Living in rural Alabama, Dial made work throughout his life, but received wider notice only in his late 50s, when the artist Lonnie Holley tipped off the collector Bill Arnett to his work, sparking a friendship and business arrangement that would be both controversial and fruitful, and that would eventually lead to major museums collecting his work, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which now owns 13 of his pieces.

Dial was born in 1928 rural Emelle, Alabama, which is just a few miles from Mississippi and today has a population of about 50. His mother, Mattie Bell, who was a sharecropper, had a total of eleven children. In a comprehensive profile in the *New Yorker* in 2013, Paige Williams runs a quote from Dial recalling the first thing he remembered making, when he was “a little old bitty thing”: “I hook up a matchbox to two hoppergrasses, tie threads around their neck. I wanted to have my own mules and wagon.”



Thornton Dial, Beginning of Life in the Yellow Jungle, 2003.

STEPHEN PITKIN, PITKIN STUDIO/©THORNTON DIAL

Sent to live with relatives in Bessemer, about 15 miles southwest of Birmingham, Dial began working at a young age and stayed in school only through third grade. (Large for his age, Dial once told Arnett that students at school made fun of him. "They told me, 'Learn to figure out your money and write your name. That's as far as a Negro can go,'" he said. "I learned that." He could not read or write. He did construction and carpentry jobs throughout his early years and was later employed building boxcars for Pullman-Standard. He married Clara Murrow in 1951. She died before him. He is survived by a daughter, Mattie Dial, three sons, Thornton Jr., Richard, and Dan, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, as well as a half brother, Arthur Dial.

Though Dial was constantly making things, he said that he did not know that what he was doing was art, and regularly reused parts of old pieces to make new ones. When he met Arnett, according to Williams, Dial had "never been to a museum or seen an art book." The collector and dealer purchased a sculpture of a turkey from the artist, and they came to an agreement for Arnett to pay him a stipend for making art. In the coming years, Arnett would introduce him to making works on paper, suggest titles, and offer interpretations of his art, leading some to suggest that he was overstepping his role as Dial's agent. The collector also helped cultivate scholarship and commercial interest in his work. Dial always said he was happy with their working relationship.

Such criticisms evaporate when looking at Dial's work, which is sturdy in both an aesthetic sense and a physical one—humble items pieced together and then honed, solidified. Explaining his work, Dial at one point told Arnett, "I only want materials that have been used by people, the works of the United States, that have did people some good."



Thornton Dial, *Out of the Darkness, the Lord Gave Us Light*, 2003, collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

STEPHEN PITKIN, PITKIN STUDIO/©THORNTON DIAL

Dial's exhibitions included a traveling survey organized in 2011 by the Indianapolis Museum of Art, which visited the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the New Orleans Museum of Art, and the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina. Last year, New York's Marianne Boesky Gallery, which shows mainstream figures like Frank Stella and Roxy Paine, announced that it would represent the artist, a sign of Dial's prominence beyond the self-taught-art community.

Numerous museums hold Dial's work in their collections, including the Whitney Museum and the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Harvard Art Museums in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ten pieces recently entered the Met's collection as a result of a gift from Arnett's Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Works from that gift will be shown by the museum in the summer of 2017.