

# HYPERALLERGIC

## From the Deep South, an Overlooked Chapter in Art History

by Edward M. Gomez  
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Thornton Dial, “Don’t Matter How Raggy The Flag, It Still Got To Tie Us Together” (2003), mattress coils, chicken wire, clothing, can lids, found metal, plastic twine, wire, Splash Zone compound, enamel, and spray paint on canvas on wood, 71 x 114 x 8 inches (collection of Indianapolis Museum of Art; photo by Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio, Atlanta, courtesy Souls Grown Deep Foundation)

ATLANTA – Is Bill Arnett enjoying the last laugh?

For five decades, the Atlanta-based writer, curator, and collector has researched and collected a vast array of art forms from around the world. During the latter part of his career, he has given particular attention to a diverse body of formerly overlooked artworks from his home region, the Deep South of the United States. Currently, Arnett and his collaborators are enjoying a moment of satisfaction and recognition – call it a moment of vindication – most of them never dreamed they would ever see.

Except, perhaps, Arnett himself, who sincerely and insistently – some would say stubbornly – has for years maintained that the region’s core group of self-taught, black artists and their creations, which he long ago first encountered and to which he enthusiastically – some would say naïvely or preposterously – committed his time,

money, and energy to championing, constitute one of the most original and resonant phenomena in the history of 20th-century art.

Now, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, that venerable repository of treasures representing the world's cultural patrimony, appears to agree. In December it announced that 57 works of art from the William S. Arnett Collection of the Atlanta-based Souls Grown Deep Foundation had been donated to the museum, whose curators played a direct role in selecting them.

The Souls Grown Deep Foundation was established by Arnett in 2010 to serve as an archive for many of the artworks he has collected, along with a wealth of photographs and other material related to them, and as an educational-outreach platform for projects based on his research. The foundation is an outgrowth of earlier nonprofits Arnett had created and, with his collaborators, operated as vehicles for publishing, exhibition-organizing and related activities.

When I visited Arnett at the Souls Grown Deep Foundation's offices in Atlanta this month, the veteran art researcher said, "I never doubted that the most intelligent scholars and historians would one day recognize the importance of the work of such 20th-century masters as Lonnie Holley, Thornton Dial, Joe Minter, the quiltmakers of Gee's Bend, Alabama, and all the rest. Those who saw their works always recognized it. The problem was getting the right people to see it, given all the effort that was made over the years by various individuals who wanted to prevent that from happening. This body of work has found its rightful, institutional home."

In the past, comments like those sounded hyperbolic to some people in the art world, but Arnett stood firmly behind his claims. His curatorial team helped organize exhibitions of Dial's texture-rich, thematically eloquent, mixed-media constructions, and of the elegantly spare Gee's Bend quilts, with their affinities to the classic looks and forms of geometric-abstract modern art, and those shows went on to become popular and critical successes.

William S. Arnett was born in Columbus, Georgia, about 100 miles southwest of Atlanta. In college, he fell in love with the study of the art and cultures of ancient civilizations and, after graduating, took his savings and headed to Europe to explore old cathedral towns, visit museums and examine in person the masterpieces of Western art. He was not disappointed. Later he worked in England. After returning to the U.S., he recalled, "I went out on my own. I traveled to Europe and Asia, and began collecting art, selling enough so that I could continue collecting. At that time, you could not find art from places like China, the Indian subcontinent or the Indonesian islands in a place like Atlanta." Arnett built up a diverse collection and served museums in the role of what is now known as an art consultant.

Years passed, and Arnett continued collecting artworks of the kind the market called "tribal" or "ethnographic." Little by little, he also began investigating the overlooked art forms that were all around him in the South. He told me, "It was there in plain sight, junk piles and assemblages of old metal, wood and found objects on porches or tucked away in back yards. It's known as 'yard art.' You don't see it as often today as you did in the past."

In the 1980s and 1990s, in Alabama, Arnett met many innovative makers of deeply personal works of art, including Holley, Dial, Minter, Ronald Lockett, Charlie Lucas, Mose Tolliver, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, Emmer Sewell, the Gee's Bend quiltmakers and numerous others. Over the years, he built up a large, definitive collection of their works, and with his four sons and other collaborators, organized exhibitions culled from his holdings. He published well-illustrated books to accompany them, featuring essays by scholarly contributors, and made efforts to call the mainstream art establishment's attention to the beauty and aesthetic power of the work that had seized his imagination.

In the early 2000s, Arnett and his collaborators assembled and published *Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art of the South*, a massive, two-volume, encyclopedic survey whose title is self-explanatory. A modern-day version of Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, this exhaustive production is packed with photographs and informative texts penned by Arnett and other researchers. It chronicles the visual-art achievements of a people that had never before been publicly recognized, never mind critically appreciated.

By that time, though, various museum officials, dealers and other art-world or media figures who had felt threatened by Arnett's discoveries routinely had tried to thwart him. Arnett said, "Their actions were motivated by classism, power, greed, desire for control and, above all, envy." I asked him about racism. He replied, "Racism is what allowed these people to get away with the destruction of culture."

After all, there are few propositions more challenging to the art world's status quo than the notion that a handful of Southern, black autodidacts, without extensive formal education, sizable financial means, or access to high-quality art materials, could have created, individually or collectively, such substantive bodies of work, whose thematic and technical innovations may be seen as both rivaling and paralleling much of what can be found in various strains of modern art's evolution.

Among them: Cubist-style fragmentation of form; constructing sculpture from assembled parts, as opposed to extracting it from lumps of raw materials; appropriating and reassigning meanings to ("recontextualizing") found objects; creating "paintings" as sculptural objects; and what postmodernists might call the "strategy" of representing complex, abstract themes through sophisticated symbol systems.

Lonnie Holley's ingenious way of bringing together disparate objects or materials – a rock with a photocopier; wooden crutches with the side of a baby's crib; scraps of rusty wire and old wood – and, even more magically, of combining their spirits, gives his creations a talismanic quality that leaves Marcel Duchamp's appropriationist exercises cold. The aura of Holley's concoctions is probably what the surrealists were aiming for; what he conjures up is more naturally, unaffectedly intense.

Dial, a former railway-car factory welder living in Bessemer, Alabama, is a master craftsman whose complex, freestanding or wall-mounted constructions are expertly assembled and astutely composed. There is nothing Dial has not used to make art; with such titles as "History Refused to Die," "Tuscaloosa" and "Don't Matter How Raggly the Flag, It Still Got to Tie Us Together," his works have not shied away from life's biggest subjects – racism, justice, war, death, redemption and hope.

Dial used mattress coils, chicken wire, old clothes, metal-can lids, plastic twine, wire, epoxy patching compound, enamel and spray paint to make "Don't Matter How Raggly," his depiction of the American flag. This work is to the visual arts what Jimi Hendrix's interpretation of "The Star-spangled Banner" at Woodstock was to popular music. Among the other wonders Arnett has encountered and called attention to are the colorful quilts made by female artisans in the western-Alabama hamlet of Gee's Bend. A traveling exhibition of their fabric works, whose bold colors and simple geometric patterns share affinities with a range of modernist idioms, became a blockbuster hit more than a decade ago.

About his art, Dial once modestly remarked, "I was doing some drawing recently about the Negro and the history, about slavery, about the families, about how we come to be in the United States, and about the future for everybody. I was drawing about the coal mines and the ore mines, about mules and horses, and coming to town—what you seen on the road."

In a catalog essay for *History Refused to Die: The Enduring Legacy of the African-American Art of Alabama*, a two-venue exhibition that will open in Alabama at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts and the Centre for the Living Arts in Mobile during the weekend of March 14–15, Arnett describes the evolution of the visual language that finds powerful expression in the works of these artists, writing that it "emerged in isolation, in slave cemeteries and secluded woods."

Why? Because, "[w]hen black Africans disembarked from slave ships, they were subjected to a harsh system that was designed to strip them of every aspect of their personal dignity and cultural identity." In time, Arnett explains, as these forcefully displaced people began to forge a new cultural identity under the most restrictive conditions, "they had to avoid detection by the holders of power" if "the signposts of this new identity [were] to survive and thrive."

He adds, “A private accumulation of philosophical and theological concepts had to be woven into diverse forms of art, music, and oral literature [...].The music was safe. Its performers sang in private and could alter their lyrics according to who was present.” But makers of art objects “could not totally conceal” them. To “protect” their creations, Arnett notes, black art-makers “[i]ntentionally disguised” or “brilliantly made abstract, symbolic and metaphorical” what they had produced.

Referring to such artists as Holley, Dial, Minter and other mainstays of his collection and research, Arnett states that it was this “tradition” of art-making through a subtle, mysterious, coded visual language that, “in the twentieth century spawned some of the greatest visual art forms produced by any culture.” This language, Arnett observes, is the visual counterpart to the various musical forms people of African ancestry in the Deep South had developed over generations – gospel, the blues, jazz, and rock’n’roll.

The mind game that is Duchamp’s bicycle wheel implanted in a wooden stool (“Bicycle Wheel,” 1913) did not emerge out of this kind of cultural-aesthetic, social-historical setting, but is it possible – or likely – that Robert Rauschenberg’s goat wrapped in an old tire (“Monogram,” 1955-59) owes more than an unwitting debt to the kind of art Arnett has spent his professional lifetime documenting and analyzing?

Of Rauschenberg, who was born and grew up in East Texas, Arnett noted, “Certainly he saw and appreciated examples of this kind of deeply personal yard art, and it influenced the making of the mixed-media assemblages for which he became well known.”

Sheena Wagstaff is the head of the modern and contemporary department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The British-born former chief curator of London’s Tate Modern, Wagstaff took up her new role in 2012 and was directly involved in selecting works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation’s Arnett Collection for the Met. She told me, “There will be an exhibition of almost all of the works in the donation in the museum’s main building in 2016. We’re very keen to show them there, in the context of the Met’s entire collection. It will be a celebratory exhibition.”

Speaking of the artists whose works are included in the donation, Wagstaff noted that they constitute a remarkable achievement from a region of the US that, historically, has not been as well known for its visual-art innovations as it has for its musical richness. The people who produced these works often intended for them to be placed outside their dwellings. They did not know each other, nor did they ever take part in any self-conscious artistic movement. All of these details add up to a fascinating story “that must be told,” Wagstaff said.

She did not hesitate to admit that, in doing so, the history of 20th-century art is going to have to be reconsidered and presented in a new way, one that makes room for the phenomenon of these Southern, self-taught artists’ contributions to its narrative. Wagstaff seemed excited by the curatorial and educational task the Met will undertake. She said, “Making something in the world with what you have around you and with the skills you have – that’s what this art is all about, and that’s what this great museum has always focused on in looking at any period in any civilization.”

I mentioned Wagstaff’s remark to Arnett the other day by telephone. Obviously savoring her deep appreciation of the artworks that are now in her care, with a sense of gratitude and delight, he laughed.

History Refused to Die – Alabama’s African-American Self-Taught Artists in Context will open at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts (One Museum Drive, Montgomery, Alabama) and the Centre for the Living Arts (301 Conti Street, Mobile, Alabama) on March 14.