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The Met Embraces Neglected Southern Artists

by Paige Williams
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One afternoon last week, as pre-Thanksgiving snow whitened Central Park, Sheena Wagstaff was in her office at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she chairs the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, reflecting on a major gift that the Met had just accepted: fifty-seven paintings, drawings, mixed-media pieces, and quilts by thirty African-American artists from the South.

Some of the artists, such as Thornton Dial and Mose Tolliver, are well known; others, less so. The museum had its pick—a rare opportunity—of the fifteen hundred or so works warehoused at Souls Grown Deep, the private nonprofit foundation, in Atlanta, that was making the gift. Souls Grown Deep maintains the world's most comprehensive collection of art by untrained black Southern artists. Its founder, Bill Arnett, a white collector and curator in his seventies, had long argued, in the face of a range of institutional defenses and biases in New York and elsewhere, that the African-American artists he and others had found working in obscurity deserved serious consideration. (Arnett once told me that the foundation's collection documents "the most important cultural phenomenon that ever took place in the United States of America.") The Met's acceptance of the gift now signalled "efforts—and this is happening across the world—to discover neglected artists or neglected times," Wagstaff said. "Here, we have a situation where the art was right on our doorstep—it's been there all along."

The donation includes ten pieces by Dial, whom one Met curator called an "old master" (Dial, an Alabaman in his mid-eighties, makes exquisite drawings as well as massive, complex mixed-media meditations on topics such as race, poverty, and war); twenty quilts by the celebrated women of Gee's Bend, Alabama; and works by artists including Lonnie Holley, Mary T. Smith, Ronald Lockett, and Joe Minter. Twenty-one of the artists are female, nine male.

I first reported the possibility of the deal last year, in "Composition in Black and White," a feature in the August 12th issue of the magazine. The story chronicled the relationship between Dial and Arnett and described Arnett's effort to meticulously document a disappearing cosmos of art and the challenges its artists have tended to face, including ridicule and rejection for their unconventional materials and lack of formal schooling. The most devastating moment for both men came in 1993, when "60 Minutes" portrayed Arnett as an opportunistic abuser of black talent and Dial as a simplistic dupe; the piece set back Arnett's efforts and delayed acclaim for Dial, who is now in his mid-eighties, and frail.

This past summer, the negotiations between the Met and Souls Grown Deep intensified. Plans were finalized after both parties agreed on the list of works to be housed in the museum's permanent collection. When accepting a donation, an art institution is seldom given its choice of pieces, but the Met "pretty much had carte blanche," Wagstaff said. In terms of importance, she compared the gift to that of the Leonard A. Lauder Collection, an "unsurpassed" collection of Cubist art. Eighty-one Lauder pieces are on display at the Met until February. The Souls Grown Deep collection will debut in the fall of 2016, with an exhibition and a Met-produced catalogue published by Yale University Press.

Marla Prather, who will be the curator of the 2016 show, said that the Souls Grown Deep gift represents "significant shifts in the pattern of how the Met has collected art to date." She said, "African-American art is not a completely overlooked area, but there's work to be done. To my knowledge, we've never looked at a concentrated group of works by black artists" until now. "These artists have been neglected; there isn't necessarily a substantial art-historical record for them," she said. Souls Grown Deep's research has documented a "whole important, legitimate world for scholarly research" that might otherwise have been lost, she added. "It's been a kind of rescue operation that I've found incredibly moving."

The work of certain artists without classical training is often labeled “folk” or “outsider,” a characterization that collectors such as Arnett have decried as reductive and demeaning. The Met’s embrace of the Souls Grown Deep gift will “make an enormous difference in the way we interpret our own collection,” Wagstaff said. “The most important aspect is that the collection adds to the American story of twentieth-century art—not the African-American story but the American__ story.”

For years, Souls Grown Deep has prominently displayed, in its rigorously organized warehouse, an untitled piece by Emmer Sewell, an Alabama woman who arranges objects on her property: a chunk of concrete resting in a white plastic yard chair, which is perched atop an upturned semi-whitewashed automobile tire.

“The chair is significant in a number of African cultures,” Arnett once told me. “Emmer Sewell never welcomed anybody into her yard, but her yard looked like a welcoming center. She’d have a row of chairs, and it really wasn’t to invite people there; it made people passing by think it was safe, a nice place. It looks cordial, but it’s shielding her nature. She doesn’t want anybody around, but she doesn’t want somebody to come by and see it all wild. All the wild stuff was back in the woods. There’d be something hanging out of a tree with barbed wire around it and a mirror stuck in it, and a piece of broken glass and a hubcap—whatever.”

He added, “You used to find that all over the South, but you won’t find it anymore. I mean, you are looking at the end of it.” As we toured the Souls Grown Deep warehouse one day, he passed by Sewell’s chair and said, “I mean, MOMA—right?” As Scott Browning, the foundation’s collections manager and assistant director told me last week, when the Met deal was announced, Arnett was “only off by twenty-nine blocks.”

Arnett went to visit Sewell one morning in the early spring of last year. She lives alone, in a tin-roofed house, at a dip in a two-lane highway. Her broom-swept yard, an expanse of bare earth, was known to host an ever-shifting arrangement of objects. Axes had been planted in the dirt (Sewell believes they split storms), and the tips of tree limbs held glittering bits of wadded aluminum foil. The dusty panes of one window displayed baby pictures, a dollar bill, strips of weathered cloth suggestive of the American flag, and images of Barack Obama: a kind of shrine. Four American flags hung from the eaves, alongside a row of laundry. Two decommissioned automobiles stood rusting near the porch, which teetered on cinderblocks. An empty Spam tin lay angled atop a stubby tree root, like a jaunty hat.

“That’s a charm,” Arnett said, noting a tradition of warding off spirits. “Something like fifty per cent of the population used to believe things like that,” he said. “I don’t consider it any more out of the ordinary than drinking the ceremonial blood of God. I mean, that’s pretty crude, too, you know? What’s the difference?” He said, “The traditions of black culture, they’re homegrown. Those traditions are meaningful and they make sense. If you live in a place like this, you’ve gotta protect yourself.” It was hard to say whether he was talking about the house, or America.

The place appeared deserted, but Arnett marched halfway up the front steps and hollered, “Are you the famous Ms. Emmer Sewell that I read about in a book?” Arnett had written about Sewell in at least one of his self-published books—enormous, meticulously produced volumes containing biographies of the artists he has known.

When a deep female voice answered, Arnett urged the voice to come out to the yard. A soiled white head wrap and a pair of brown eyes appeared above the laundry. “I would come out, but I’m so ugly, you know,” the voice said, from behind the dangling clothes.

“You ain’t ugly!” Arnett yelled. “Why don’t you come out and talk?”

Sewell had been known to sprint from her house and off into the woods rather than entertain visitors, but this time she agreed to chat. As Arnett waited for her to put on some shoes, he noted a small pasture beyond the house. “She used to have these beautiful scarecrows—I’m not suggesting it’s artwork, but in some ways it is,” he said. “It’s the final phase of a long tradition that’s dying. Come back in ten years and there won’t be anything.”

Sewell emerged wearing a pink housecoat and bedraggled leather sneakers, and holding a tattered stuffed panda. She handed the bear to Arnett’s son, Matt, who worked with him at Souls Grown Deep. “Set that thing up there,” Sewell ordered, meaning the station wagon. Matt obeyed, propping the bear on the hood of the car. “Turn it around,” Sewell said, and Matt did. “You think it look nice that way?”

Arnett took up the subject of Sewell's favorite symbol: the X. When Arnett first met her, he found X's everywhere. "You had 'em painted on the trees, and you had chairs lined up so that the legs of the chairs would make the X," he reminded her. The passenger side of a thoroughly rusted car still held X's, as did the door of a castoff refrigerator that sat tucked beneath a cedar tree.

"Look, it's just like Pat Sajak," Sewell told him, as if the answer were obvious. "Them things come down and hit, and you be a winner."

"That's right!" Arnett said. "You said it symbolized winning, success, being on top."

He shifted the conversation to her other work. "I bought a piece from you once—remember that? It was an automobile tire with a plastic chair on it, and a rock sitting in the chair." (The assemblage, which will now reside in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, could be found on page one hundred and eighty-six of the second volume of "Souls Grown Deep," a book, edited by Arnett, about untrained black Southern artists.) Sewell told him, "When I rum' around all my things I hope to find that book. You got some important things in there."

"Including you," he said. "You important."

Before leaving, Arnett hugged Sewell, and shook her hand. Sewell said to come back in the summer by appointment, when her hair was fixed and her house was clean. Arnett told her he doesn't travel much anymore but that he would try. She took his right hand in hers and turned it over, and with her finger, on his exposed wrist, she silently traced out an X.



Thornton Dial, "January 20, 2009." For the story of Thornton Dial, see "Composition in Black and White," from the August 12, 2013, issue of the magazine.



Thornton Dial, "Victory in Iraq." The critic and musician Greg Tate once said that excluding Dial's art from top museums is like "excluding Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, and Jimi Hendrix from any serious conversation about postwar American music."