

Art in America

Thornton Dial

by Anne Doran
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Photo: Thornton Dial: Birds Got to Have Somewhere to Roost, 2012, wood, burlap and mixed mediums, 61¼ by 48 by 10 inches; at Andrew Edlin.

Born in rural Alabama in 1928, Thornton Dial worked as a machinist at the Pullman boxcar factory in Bessemer, Ala., for 30 years before he turned to making art full time in the 1980s. By the early 1990s he had gained considerable recognition for sculptural assemblages and relief paintings that, despite their resemblance to Robert Rauschenberg's Combines and canvases by late 20th-century Neo-Expressionists respectively, had their genesis in Southern African-American vernacular artistic traditions such as the yard show. In the subsequent decades, he has emerged as a major contemporary artist, whose work—materially inventive, structurally complex, thematically ambitious and politically astute—renders such classifications as mainstream and self-taught immaterial.

Dial's work has long focused on social issues, with a particular emphasis on themes of power and oppression. In "Thornton Dial: Viewpoint of the Foundry Man," his second solo show at Andrew Edlin, the artist looked back on his life in a series of autobiographical pieces made during the last two years. While more personal, these are no less political than previously; in his art, Dial's own story is always only part of a larger history, spanning the Jim Crow era in the South and the Civil Rights movement through such phenomena as the economic globalization and Great Recession of the 21st century, which have disproportionately affected African-Americans.

The exhibition comprised some dozen relief paintings. As in the past, these new reliefs are composed of layers

of salvaged paint, wood, cloth, metal and found objects built up on rectangular supports. But in contrast to the vibrantly imagistic, pop-inflected works Dial showed here in 2011, most are nearly, or totally, abstract, their

meaning largely encoded in their materials—denim and tin roofing, baby dolls and artificial flowers. And, although generally smaller than is usual for this artist (the largest being about 6 by 4 feet), they are also less congested and more monumental in their effect than almost any work Dial has made before. While each easily stood on its own, they appeared very much of a piece. A predominant palette of ash grays and earth browns, shot with soft pinks and blues, acid greens and yellows, and bright reds and oranges, set the mood of the show, which was reflective and even somber but humming with life and energy. The feeling was not unlike that of Houston's Rothko Chapel.

Some reliefs are starkly monochrome, such as *Jim Walter Number Four*, an angular construction made from pieces of black-painted wire mesh and sheet metal. Others are more delicately colored. Dial specializes in making works whose overall hue is difficult to pin down; many of the works here, like the black paintings of Ad Reinhardt, only slowly reveal the tonal variations within them. One such is *Birds Got to Have Somewhere to Roost*, whose image of nature overtaking dead or overbuilt land is a common motif in Dial's work. The neutral tones of its constituent parts—lumber and carpet scraps from which emerge plantlike forms cut from tin—are subtly lightened and warmed by a fine overspray of gold paint.

As one progressed through the show, the works became increasingly spare, and increasingly elegiac. At the exhibition's close was *Recalling the Pain*, a simple grouping of pieces of charred wood reminiscent of the slashing brushstrokes in a Franz Kline painting. Plainspoken, composed and tough, it epitomizes both the artist and his art.