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Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial a must-see at NOMA

by Doug MacCash
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Trust me, you're going to love the 40 huge, lusciously colored, lavishly textured, carefully composed paintings, sculptures and drawings in the exhibit "Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial," now on display at the New Orleans Museum of Art. Be sure to keep your hands in your pockets, because you may be tempted to reach out and touch the rusted car parts, lost toys, animal skulls, bones, cans, rope and other magnetically tactile materials Dial uses to create his epic works.

Meanwhile, be prepared to be pushed a little off balance by Dial's topical points of view. The 84-year-old isn't shy about expressing his take on race relations, war, terrorism, feminism, poverty and death. But his political positions are rarely simple.

"Don't Matter How Raggy the Flag, It's Still Got to Tie Us Together," Dial's depiction of the stars and stripes coarsely painted over a field of mattress coils and bandage-like rags, is a stirring take on patriotic sacrifice that is neither critical nor especially romantic.

"The Old Water," an abstract landscape sculpture featuring an eagle mocked by a flock of smaller birds, may be a disquieting political vision, but also has a certain cartoon-like buoyancy.

His "The Beginning of Life in the Yellow Jungle" canvas, detailed with a discarded baby doll, empty turtle shell and plastic flowers, is upbeat, yet as mysterious and impenetrable as the title implies. Yellow, the painting label explains, is Dial's code for "the coming together of races."

Dial is an African-American who was born into abject poverty in the rural South in 1928, on the eve of the Great Depression. He labored in the fields as a child, before beginning his adult working life spent, in part, helping build railroad passenger cars near Birmingham, Ala. He received scant formal education. Early on, he began creating objects from collected cast-offs.

"He had a hard physical and psychological life and supported a family during some of our country's worst years of segregation and suppression," said Joanne Cubbs, the Indianapolis Museum of Art curator who organized the "Hard Truths" exhibit. But, she pointed out, he tempered the angst sometimes evident in his art with a sense of optimism.

"He was able to transform those experiences in an open and generous way," she said.

An example of Dial's paradoxical positivism is "Stars of Everything," an assemblage that features a scare-crow-like figure with a disconcerting bird-like head in a field of colorful star bursts made from flattened paint cans. Dial told Cubbs that the painting is a parable for societal inequity.

"He talked about the fact that those in power always look down and see the ground; often the ground that they've plowed and altered with their power," she said.

"When you're at the bottom looking up, you get to see the stars; God's creation," Cubbs said. "He tries in his art to depict a sense of history that acknowledges the dispossessed, but there's always a sense of beauty."

I won't be the first to point out that Dial presents some problems in art-world categorization. Because of his

background, Dial is described as a folk or outsider artist. But, if you didn't know his personal history, Dial's brand of found-object expressionism would seem to drop directly into the 20th-century art-historical mainstream. When the exhibit first opened in Indianapolis in February 2011, Time Magazine critic Richard Lacayo argued that Dial's style relates to textbook found-object sculptors from Pablo Picasso to Robert Rauschenberg.

Modern art aficionados will catch the Rauschenberg connection the minute they lay eyes on "Lost Farm (Billy Goat Hill)," a gritty assemblage near the beginning of the "Hard Truths" exhibit that includes an actual dried goat affixed to the canvas. Rauschenberg, who lived from 1925 to 2008, also famously used an actual stuffed goat in one of his best-known sculptures.

Cubbs says the parallel between the two men may be more profound than just the goat connection. Cubbs said that Dial was inspired to make assemblage art, in part, by observing yard art, a southern African-American tradition of building sculpture from discarded material.

Yard art, she said, could have plenty of subtle meaning – the soles of shoes could represent the souls of men, for instance. But yard art always looked enough like a plain pile of junk not to draw the attention of hostile passers-by.

"This was especially true in past decades in the South, when speaking one's mind and one's truth as a black person could be a very dangerous act," Cubbs said.

And, Cubbs pointed out that the young Rauschenberg, growing up in Port Arthur, Texas, saw the same kind of African-American yard art. Dial and Rauschenberg's art may look somewhat similar because it was inspired by similar visual experiences.

The edgiest work in "Hard Truths" is Dial's sizzingly angry sculpture "Strange Fruit: Channel 42," a figure lynched on a television antenna. The piece was provoked by a 1993 "60 Minutes" television news magazine broadcast in which Dial, who was rapidly achieving art-world fame, felt he had been treated dismissively by a condescending interviewer. The episode, which dealt with the relationship of folk artists and elite collectors, could have been a point of professional pride for Dial. Instead, Cubbs said, "he felt it was a form of public humiliation."

The lynched figure, Cubbs said, is a Dial self-portrait.

One of the most moving artworks in the show – and my favorite – is an eerie skyscape titled "Clouds Moving in the Sky, We Wake in Darkness and Look for Daylight" that Dial created on the occasion of his wife's death in 2005. The color of the sky is produced by scraps of blue denim held in place by a sheet of clear plastic.

The overall effect is subtle, mysterious and sublime. Cubbs put it best when she said: "It's so metaphysical it almost hurts your head."

Speaking of painful metaphysics: While writing this story, I stumbled on a coincidence that I can't let go of: Dial, I read, was born in Emelle, Ala. To locate the little town, I did an online search and discovered that since the 1970s, Emelle has been the site of the largest toxic-waste landfill in the country. Is it possible, that as Dial became world famous for depicting social inequity – among other things – with stuff that Americans no longer want, that America was disposing stuff it no longer wants in Dial's tiny, poor, rural birthplace?

As a preface to the Dial exhibit, NOMA has assembled a selection of works from its folk art collection in the museum's entrance hall. Director Susan Taylor said she hopes "Hard Truths" will "encourage our audiences to re-examine the nature of outsider art."