

ARTFORUM

Thornton Dial
Andrew Edlin Gallery

by Donald Kuspit
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Thornton Dial, *We All Live Under the Same Old Flag*, 2010, cloth, found wood, bones, iron wire, found doll, paint on canvas on wood, 54 1/4 x 74 x 9”.

A former bricklayer, carpenter, and welder, Thornton Dial is an Alabama-based, self-taught artist known for his masterful assemblages and paintings—and his paintings are, in effect, wall-mounted assemblages. Featuring scavenged debris organized “formally” to aesthetic effect, his work derives from “yard art” or “yard shows”—groupings of junk, the leftovers of life, displayed on the front lawn. This exhibition, the artist’s first in New York in more than ten years, coincides with “Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial,” a traveling presentation of his work that debuted at the Indianapolis Museum of Art last February.

Addressing struggles for equality on the part of women and African Americans, as well as subjects such as bigotry and war, Dial’s work can be situated within the tradition of American protest art. Big, brash, and turbulent, his works here first and foremost evince anger. Unlike, for instance, Dial’s early memorials to deceased relatives, there is nothing elegiac about them. Moreover, their troubling chaos—the sense of barely controlled order, of wild disarray however formally calculated—seems to convey distress. Oppressed, the self falls apart, even as it struggles to hold its parts together; Dial defends against this entropic collapse by turning disintegration into art.

We All Live Under the Same Old Flag, 2010, is a beaten-up, all but disintegrated flag—a piece of glorified junk. The “stripes” are dead branches painted red and white, and the “stars” are gestural splotches on a blue rag. The assemblage also contains bones—the flag is a graveyard. Indeed, while Dial’s work certainly has affinities with high modern art—it seems to condense Cubism, Expressionism, and Surrealism; and like Robert Rauschenberg’s early output, Dial’s sculptures are marked by clutter and abundance, saturated with materials and images—it resists assimilation by reason of the suffering symbolized by its ruined materials. The cast-off objects, many of them machine-made (coat hangers, for example), weary with wear and tear and finally worked to death, may symbolize the feeling of being an outcast in American society, and perhaps signify an aspect of the African-American experience.

In *Freedom Cloth*, 2005—the title seems ironic—Dial presents a hulking, woven-together mass of multicolored fabric, wire hangers, and artificial plants: a heap of fragments. He may be suggesting, expressionistically, the lush, dense foliage of the Deep South, wrought with the wonderful rich ambiguity particular to his work. Indeed, the whole thing seems overgrown, and birds perch on top of the sculpture. The central, topmost bird appears to have had its wings clipped—they droop downward, suggesting it can’t fly. Does this injured bird suggest a wounded eagle—another critique of patriotic iconography? One might suspect. Ultimately however, Dial’s charged, complex work brooks no easy interpretation.