

ART

Biography, History, Self-Evident Beauty

BY KAREN WILKIN

Indianapolis
The works in “Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial,” at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, are tough, beautiful, disturbing, seductive, improvisatory, unignorable, fierce, exhilarating, ambiguous—and much more. They are also difficult to write about. The intense physicality and raw power of Mr. Dial’s enormous, confrontational collages and constructions, built from a staggering range of salvaged objects, resist description. Reproductions—even carefully chosen, artfully framed details—only hint at the fascination exerted by the dense surfaces of Mr. Dial’s most engaging creations. Words, including the string of adjectives above, seem superfluous; the best response would be to point in silence at these wonderful works.

Often, when saying anything pertinent about a work of art proves overly challenging, it’s possible to fall back on discussions of meaning, subtexts or the artist’s biography. But here, too, a problem arises. Knowing the stories that Mr. Dial attaches to his works, the context in which they were created and something of his history makes his achievement more impressive but, at the same time, seems to invite special pleading.

Mr. Dial, born in 1928 in rural Alabama, worked for most of his adult life as a welder for a railway-car manufacturer. But, the exhibition-brochure tells us, he always “made things” and “gradually became adept in the media of painting, drawing, sculpture, and watercolor.” After his retirement, he concentrated on “making things,” and by the 1980s, with burgeoning interest in “outsider” art, he increasingly attracted attention for his bold, monumentally scaled work. Mr. Dial’s art is prized for its originality, its emotional impact and its acute commentary on the experience of an African-American from the South whose lifetime encompasses the brutal Jim Crow years and the burgeoning civil-



“Lost Farm (Billy Goat Hill)” (2000)

rights movement. Mr. Dial’s work has been included in the Whitney Biennial and is in the collections of such institutions as the Smithsonian American Art Museum; the Hirshhorn Museum; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Milwaukee Art Museum; and the Indianapolis Museum of Art, which originated the current exhibition, the most major study of the artist’s work to date.

Mr. Dial’s story has everything: politically resonant African-American content, the triumph of sheer talent over conventional ways of becoming an artist, and the proverbial happy ending. Knowing the artist’s history and learning something about his personal iconography helps us both to understand some of the sources of his art and to decode some of the passionate narratives hidden in his complex collage-constructions.

It’s useful, for example, to learn about black Southern “yard shows”—sculptural as-

semblages of miscellaneous objects—and to learn that Mr. Dial’s sinuous tigers are a covert symbol for black men and sometimes for the artist himself. It’s informative, too, to read the bitter indictments of society attached to works such as 2000’s “Lost Farm (Billy Goat Hill),” which, we learn, is (not atypically) constructed with “desiccated goat, rat, and turkey; steel, rope, carpet, rope carpet, peach basket, wood, tire scraps, plastic toys, shoes, motor-oil bottle, wire fencing, chains, ironing board, farm and construction tools, wire, paintbrushes, enamel, spray paint, and Splash Zone compound on canvas and wood.”

But reading the label for “Lost Farm,” like learning Mr. Dial’s history, also seems to place his work in a special category when, in fact, the startling specifics of the components of the painting become merely anecdotal; they are subsumed by the rhythms of their context and by blooms of subdued, silvery color into a

Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial

Indianapolis Museum of Art
Through Sept. 18

new, richly articulated whole whose textures and shifts in scale demand our attention. Similarly, while we may search the sinuous images in Mr. Dial’s uninhibited drawings for clues to perhaps concealed narratives in the larger collages, we quickly succumb to the drawings’ own virtues. In the same way, Mr. Dial’s work as a whole transcends categorization.

“Hard Truths” showcases Mr. Dial’s work since 1991. The formal and emotional range of the exhibited works is impressive, but so are the constants: his lack of sentimentality, his ravishing color sense, his virtuoso “drawing” with unlikely materials, and his uncanny ability to create poetry by combining radically disparate things. We can discover the identity of the parts, with effort, but while that identity often relates to the work’s meaning, it never dominates. Mr. Dial’s worn, multivalent components are equally important as formal elements and potent metaphors, embodying variously, depending on how they are deployed, such notions as trapped figures, allusions to quilt-making, homages to African-Americans, references to despoiled nature, paeans to survival and embodiments of the passage of time, among many other subtle ideas. But they are also carriers of pure visual and material intensity.

That Mr. Dial is a self-taught, fearless, ambitious African-American from the South is fascinating. His experience clearly informs what he does, but like the steepest slopes in the Tour de France bicycle race, his work is “beyond category.” The only label required by his formidable collage-constructions is that of first-rate, powerful Art—with a capital “A.”

Ms. Wilkin writes about art for the Journal.