

Culture

Outside the Lines. In a potent retrospective, self-taught artist Thornton Dial gets his due

By Richard Lacayo



Stars of Everything, 2004

AMERICAN ARTISTS DON'T HAVE TO BE licensed—a good thing, that—but they do tend to be credentialed. The art world is bristling with degrees from Yale and Cal Arts and hundreds of other academies. In that world, Thornton Dial stands out. He has no formal training and very little schooling of any kind. To be blunt, he can't read or write. But sometime during his long years as a metalworker in Alabama, he turned to making what he at first simply called "things," because it would be a long time before he, or anybody else, realized that those things are better described as art. And not just that, but some of the most assured, delightful and powerful art around.

Dial's work has sometimes been described as outsider art, a term that attempts to cover the product of everyone from naive painters like Grandma Moses to institutionalized lost souls like Martín Ramírez and full-bore obsessives like Henry Darger, the Chicago janitor who spent a lifetime secretly producing a private fantasia of little girls in peril. But if there's one lesson to take away from "Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial," a triumphant new retrospective at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, it's that Dial, 82, doesn't belong within even the broad confines of that category. The show—which is on view in Indianapolis through Sept. 18, then travels to New Orleans; Charlotte, N.C.; and Atlanta—is a sign that after more than two decades in which his work has settled gradually into the collections of a number of major museums, he may at last be achieving a kind of cultural escape velocity. What he does can be discussed as art, just art, no surplus notions of outsidership required.

When I asked Dial recently what led him to

make his work in the first place, he gave a sideways answer: "I put it out there for somebody to like." People do. People will.

Up, Up and Away

THIS IS NOT TO SAY DIAL'S BACKSTORY WON'T always set him apart from other prominent African-American artists like Martin Puryear, Kara Walker, Glenn Ligon and Lorna Simpson, who are university- and art-school-educated. He was born in 1928 in a cornfield in rural Sumter County, Alabama. His mother, an unwed teenager from a sharecropper family, gave him up to be raised by female relatives. Working in the fields by the age of 6, Dial got little in the way of a formal education. When he left school for good at the age of 12, he was still in the third grade.

It was at about that time, after the death of his great-grandmother, that Dial and his younger half brother went to live with another relative in Bessemer, a midsize industrial town near Birmingham. He worked there in a succession of jobs until he found the one he would hold for years, as a metalworker with the Pullman railway-car company. After starting a family of his own, he began to produce "things" of all kinds at home. Some were practical, like fishing gear, grave markers, decorative fences and furniture. Some were more explicitly art objects, like animal sculptures. All were made with scavenged materials: rope, metal, plastic, tin. "I started picking up stuff," he says. "Beer cans, plastic bottles. I was making stuff to sell." He made a lot of it—until it was piling up everywhere in the house he shared with his wife Clara Mae Murrow and their five children. "My wife told me, If you don't get this junk out of the

Portrait of the artist

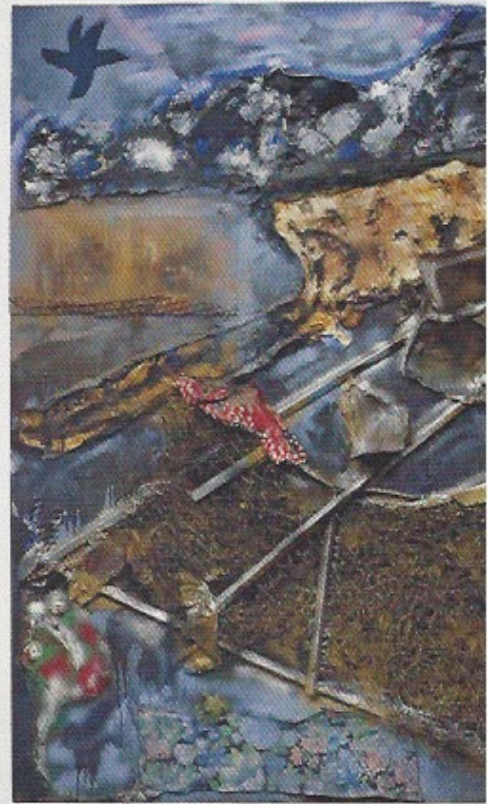
Dial, right, at home near Bessemer, Ala. "Art," he once said, "is strange-looking stuff."



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The Beginning of Life in the Yellow Jungle, 2003



High and Wide (Carrying the Rats to the Man), 2002

house, I'm going to leave you," he says.

In 1981 the Pullman plant shut down, and Dial, in his early 50s, found himself out of a job. But as his son Richard says, "It was probably the best thing that ever happened to him. He kept getting up at 7, going into the backyard and making something." Another self-taught artist, Lonnie Holley, brought Dial to the attention of Will Arnett, a white Atlanta-based collector focused on the work of vernacular Southern black artists. Dial credits Arnett with making him think of himself as an artist, helping his work find its way into the collections of people like Jane Fonda and launching him into public view.

Sometimes it was too public. In November 1993, when Dial was the subject of two simultaneous one-man museum shows in New York City, Morley Safer did a segment on *60 Minutes* that asked whether Arnett had questionable financial dealings with the artists he collected. Dial, who appeared on camera briefly, felt that Safer's questions for him were condescending and that the broadcast led museums and collectors to shy away from his work at the

very moment it had begun to take off. If it did, the Indianapolis show—drawn largely from the collection of Arnett's Souls Grown Deep Foundation, which has right of first refusal on Dial's work—is a sign that momentum is back in his favor.

Though he makes work on paper—drawings and watercolors with a gleeful, springing line, like *African Athlete*—Dial's main medium is assemblage, mostly three-dimensional wall pieces made by gluing or welding found materials and painting over and under them. What that means is that he arrived on his own at a practice that, in terms of conventional art history, had its origins a century ago in the welded sculptures of Picasso and Georges Braque and the collages of Kurt Schwitters, then came back strongly after World War II, when Joseph Cornell, David Smith, Isamu Noguchi, Louise Nevelson and Cy Twombly all took it up. No one went at assemblage with more devilish abandon than Robert Rauschenberg, Dial's near contemporary, whose combines of the 1950s and '60s could make a persuasive ménage à trois out of a stuffed goat, a rubber tire and a tennis ball.

When Dial came to assemblage, he was unaware of any of this history. He had never set foot in a museum. What he had by way of guidance were the traditions of African-American folk art all around him, in which combining scrapheap materials was standard practice long before Picasso ever picked up a blowtorch. In the show's catalog, Joanne Cubbs, the curator who organized "Hard Truths," reminds us that just like Dial, Rauschenberg, who grew up in the largely black town of Port Arthur, Texas, was influenced by the "yardshow" assemblages he saw as a boy. The memory banks of small-town African America, yardshows were pieced together from things discarded without losing their residue of personal history, the kind from which the larger varieties of history are built.

History is very much the point here. Dial spent most of his life in an Alabama that was brutally segregated, a battleground of the civil rights movement where the Klan was a force to be reckoned with and Governor George Wallace was the hero of diehards everywhere. Dial's work is a memory bank too, an attempt to come

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African Athlete, 1998

to grips with the struggles of black people over the years and the predicaments and ragged glories of American life generally.

With that as his goal, Dial wants his art to be legible without being obvious. So he operates by developing images with dense but graspable layers of reference. In some works, he lets tigers symbolize the strategies black men and women use to get by. But those coiled, slinky cats may turn out to be made from carpet remnants—a reminder that for all their wiles, these beasts get stepped on. In *The Last Day of Martin Luther King*, from 1992, the tiger appears again, as a stand-in for King, but now it's made from painted-over mop strings, so it simultaneously refers to the cleanup work to which so many African Americans were restricted and to King's great historical task of cleansing the stain of racism from American life.

When Dial is at his best, he even manages to inject new life into one of the most clichéd images of postwar art. Mickey Mouse, who usually gets dragged into service as a symbol of the trivial strain in American culture, does much more complicated double duty in *High and Wide*

(*Carrying the Rats to the Man*). A stuffed Mickey doll, the white portions of its face smeared in black, hangs in chains in the midst of a wire-and-rod construction meant to signify a slave ship with goat-hide sails. With one compact gesture, Dial invokes the atrocity of the Atlantic slave trade and the minstrel-show culture the descendants of those slaves adopted to entertain and outwit their oppressors. It would all be funny if the laughs didn't come so hard.

In a piece like that, Dial claims a place within the line of history painters stretch-

Dial's work is a memory bank, an attempt to come to grips with the struggles of black people

ing back to the 18th and 19th centuries. He doesn't try to call on their visual high rhetoric—who would anymore?—but at the same time, there's very little in his work you could call folkloric. There's no easy charm, no appeal to whatever is left of our collective fantasy about country innocence. But maybe because he operates free of the standard postures of contemporary art—irony being the most obvious—what he can do is reach, when he wants to and without apology or ironic distance, for euphoria. It's hard to imagine another contemporary artist attempting, much less getting away with, the sincere effulgence of *The Beginning of Life in the Yellow Jungle*, Dial's lush take on the first stirrings of the world.

Rauschenberg once said, "Art doesn't come out of art." What he meant, and Dial would surely agree, is that it comes out of life. If anything, *art* is a word so contaminated these days by hype, misunderstanding and sales talk, it's tempting sometimes to think we should try doing without it. Until you remember that it's the one word spacious enough to contain what Dial does. ■