

Thornton Dial, Sr. (1928-2016)

Thornton Dial, Sr., an African-American artist from Alabama, was always making art and expressing his ideas; however, he did not know it was art until he met art dealer William Arnett in 1987. With Arnett's help, Dial reached notoriety during the late 1980s, becoming an innovative and key player in Vernacular Art. Dial's expressively composed art presents an artist unafraid of experimentation. Focusing on the themes of human struggle and history, his often monumental works were developed through an organic process where Dial found materials and stored them until he had enough to create a work of art through which he could make a statement about life.

Dial, Sr was one of twelve children, and never knew his father. His family made their living sharecropping, and he grew up helping out on the farm. Dial went to school on and off for a few years, but dropped out completely after he was ridiculed for being 13 years old in the 2nd grade. Instead of going to school, Dial snuck off to work odd jobs, including carpenter, house painter, cement mixer, and ironworker. From 1952 to 1980, he worked for

the Pullman Standard Company, a railroad car factory in Bessemer, Alabama. Dial says he learned about drawing from his job at the Pullman factory, studying designs for the steel machines. After his retirement, he concentrated on his artwork, raising turkeys, and making wrought-iron lawn furniture with his sons. In 1987, Dial met William Arnett, an art dealer and collector from Atlanta, Georgia. Arnett traveled throughout the Southeast, meeting and discovering artists like Thornton Dial. This type of art, known as “self-taught,” “folk,” “outsider,” or “vernacular” art, was unknown to the larger art community. It was not truly considered “fine” art until artists like Dial exhibited at museums like the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and the Whitney Museum of Art in New York.

Dial said he liked to create his artwork with materials others had thrown away. In most of his sculptural pieces, Dial collected all of the components of the work, such as old carpet, rope, fence, or clothes, and constructed the work first. After the piece was built, Dial painted the entire sculpture to tie the composition together. His sculptural paintings were often very large in scale, resulting in imposing art that literally enters the

viewer's space. Dial's work often explores the themes of freedom and power. His use of a tiger motif in much of his artwork was meant to symbolize the general theme of struggle, as confirmed by the artist himself. However, critics and art historians have widely regarded Dial's tiger to specifically represent the African-American man's struggle for freedom in America.

Dial continued to work well into his eighties, consistently creating large sculptural paintings despite his declining health. He passed away in his home state of Alabama on January 25, 2016. In addition to the Gadsden Arts Center & Museum, Dial's work can be found in many notable public and private collections, including the High Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Thornton Dial, Sr.

Everything is Under the Black Tree, 1980s

paint on wood

48 x 31 ½ inches

Gadsden Arts Center & Museum Permanent
Collection

Gift of Lou and Calynne Hill, 2009.1.2

Everything is Under the Black Tree is a painting of a large white fish surrounded by a flowering black tree against a yellow background. We can estimate that it was created in the 1980s, before Dial began his large sculptural assemblages and his drawings on paper. This style appears more rigid than his later painting style, and the large number of images and forms squeezed into one piece is like a precursor to Dial's larger form and image filled sculptural assemblages. Dial's drawings and paintings on paper, which he began painting in the 1990s, have less figures and animals filling the space.

Thornton Dial, Sr.

Big Black Bear Trying to Survive, 1990s

mixed media

62 x 40 ¼ inches

Gadsden Arts Center & Museum Permanent
Collection

Gift of Lou and Calynne Hill, 2009.1.1

Big Black Bear Trying to Survive is typical of the large sculptural assemblages Thornton Dial, Sr. was creating in the 1990s. These intricate, thoughtful compositions often contain messages dealing with race and inequality in America, and male-female relationships. These large-scale works were created with items Dial would find in his yard or in the trash. *Big Black Bear Trying to Survive* is composed of scrap metal, carpet, and trash bags, and depicts a large black bear laying on its side intently staring out at the viewer.

Thornton Dial, Sr.

*The Tiger Knocks the Lady Down and the Midget
Runs Away*, 1988

enamel, wood, vinyl, plastic, industrial sealing
compound on wood

97 ½ x 48 inches

Gadsden Arts Center & Museum Permanent
Collection

Gift of Lou and Calynne Hill, 2009.1.3

This assemblage depicts a fallen woman surrounded by a tiger, a man, and a sea of eyes. According to the book, *Thornton Dial: Image of Tiger*, this painting is said to be part of a pair of works that form an analogy between pet ownership and racial inequality. In this piece, the tiger has pounced on a white woman and knocked her down. The other figure, representing African-Americans, has escaped the woman's control. The swirling eyes are crowded into the background, a common theme in Dial's work that represents all of humanity watching and waiting for an outcome.

Thornton Dial, Sr.

untitled, 1990s

mixed media

60 x 60 inches

Gadsden Arts Center & Museum Permanent
Collection

Gift of Lou and Calynne Hill, 2023.2.12

This assemblage is a stark narrative that brings to life the risk and high mortality rate from childbirth in low-income communities. In the lower right corner of this assemblage, a woman gives birth to a baby. The deceased child wearing a halo made of rope can be seen lying across the bottom, and then flying up to heaven, seen in the center of the work. Two midwives at the top of the assemblage panic and scramble to save the baby, their arms protruding from the work towards the viewer. Sadly, the woman's empty womb can be seen in the bottom left corner of the work.