



CREATION STORY

Gee's Bend Quilts and the Art of Thornton Dial



THIS EXHIBITION explores parallels and intersections in the quilts made by the women of Gee's Bend, Alabama, and the assemblages of Thornton Dial, a self-taught artist from Bessemer, Alabama. In related ways, these artists use cast-off materials to create works of profound beauty and evocative power. Though produced against a backdrop of poverty and racism, their art has an appeal that crosses aesthetic, social, and geographical boundaries, earning widespread recognition as being among the most compelling art of our time.

For well over a century, the women of Gee's Bend have made quilts for use as bedding. Early quilts utilized recycled clothes in the creation of functional yet visually arresting works; more recently, the quilters began using new fabric scraps in the orchestrations of strong colors, dynamic patterns, and eccentric geometric shapes for which they have become internationally celebrated.

Going beyond the beauty and sensuous appeal of the quilts, the assemblages of Thornton Dial constitute a harder version—literally and in terms of content—of the artists' technique known as bricolage—the aesthetic reconfiguring of found materials. Dial assembles objects and materials to

evoke personal memories, insights into root causes of racism and poverty, and reflections on the world as witnessed in news events and programs he sees on television.

This exhibition was conceived by William S. Arnett, an art historian and collector of southern black vernacular art, from whose Souls Grown Deep Foundation most of the works in this exhibition were borrowed. Having observed aesthetic similarities between different types of African American vernacular art, Arnett sought to identify a common source. He found it in the quilting tradition:

A majority of the artists told of having grown up in homes filled with quilts.... Often the works of African American vernacular artists—their paintings, sculptures, assemblages—seem crucially quiltlike. Many artists painted or drew with massed blocks of colors, or organized their compositions like patchwork or with an emphasis on surface patterns and effects rather than pictorial “depth.” Many used recycled materials whose origins and revivification mirrored the ways quiltmakers rescue old clothes from family members and others. And some used medleys of fabric, and even actual quilts, in their work. The quilt, it seemed, was a vital piece in the understanding of black visual identity.¹

THE QUILTS OF GEE'S BEND

Gee's Bend quilts received their first major public exposure in 2002 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The exhibition generated glowing reviews and attracted large audiences. Visitors to the museum, and to subsequent exhibitions of the quilts, were excited by these examples of untutored brilliance. That they came from a tradition that had been nurtured for over a century in one of the poorest communities of the country, isolated on a horseshoe-shaped curve in the Alabama River, only made them more compelling.

The first section of the exhibition begins with work-clothes quilts, which have been made from worn-out clothing and other household fabrics that outlived their original purpose and were recycled into warm bedcovers.

This was not an aesthetic choice so much as a necessity; there was

simply no money for new fabric and the homes of Gee's Bend could get cold in the winter.



The work-clothes quilts' designs were dictated by the size and shape of the available scraps. Yet they are no less remarkable for their subtly balanced colors and rhythmic improvisation, which often take full advantage of the

Fig. 1. Missouri Pettway (1902–1981). Blocks and strips work-clothes quilt, 1942

visual variety provided by seams, patches, tears, and stains. The quilts are composed of large sections of cloth, generally cut into rectangles to give them an uncanny resemblance to the geometric paintings of modernism.

Because they are composed of remnants of clothes worn by those who came before—deceased parents, children who had grown up and moved away, a loved spouse or sibling—work-clothes quilts are embodiments of memory. Mary Lee Bendolph once commented, “Old clothes carry something with them. You can feel the presence of the person who used to wear them. It has a spirit in them.”²

As the twentieth century progressed, the quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend increasingly used new fabric, making quilts that placed emphasis on strong colors, off-kilter geometries, and surprising juxtapositions of textures and surfaces. Their works were not always improvised; quilters often created variations on patterns in wide use around the country. The “Housetop” pattern, a variant of the “Log Cabin” pattern, has long been favored by the quilters of Gee’s Bend. Arnett notes that, “The ‘Housetop’ is nothing more or less than a meditation on the various ways rectangular strips of cloth may be joined at their ends to form larger composite shapes.”³ As in Mary Lee Bendolph’s “Housetop” variation (cover), these works often have gridded constructions that resemble a bird’s-eye view of a housetop or a community of homes as seen from above. Though they are not depictions of actual rooftops, they do relate to architecture in the broadest sense. As Mensie Lee Pettway puts it, “We was taught there’s so many ways to build a quilt. It’s like building a house.”⁴



Fig. 2. Patty Ann Williams (1898–1972). “Monkey Wrench” single block variation, ca. 1955

Throughout the twentieth century, commercial pattern books became increasingly available to the women of Gee’s Bend. For most of the quilters, they were a starting point, not a destination. As with the “Housetop” quilts, pre-existing patterns were often adapted, improvised, or absorbed into the quilters’ preferred compositional motifs. It was not unusual for a quilter to begin with a lone block of a quilt pattern and enlarge it to give the composition a bold simplicity, as seen in Patty Ann Williams’s single-block variation of the popular “Monkey Wrench” pattern (ca. 1955, fig. 2). Essie Pettway’s “Pinwheel” shows an adaptation of the classic pattern in six parts, with each containing unique configurations of triangles, while retaining an overall sense of order through repetition.

THE ARTWORK OF THORNTON DIAL

The second part of the exhibition features the art of Thornton Dial, in which combinations of raw materials allude to everyday life, historical events, and the social and political situation in the United States, with particular emphasis on race and class. The section begins with works that relate to the aesthetic properties of quilts and the recycling ethos of quiltmakers. Dial's interest in the quilt as both material and motif first appeared in the mid-1990s, when his great-aunt Sarah Dial Lockett died and left a cache of quilts she had made over her lifetime. They reminded Dial of the love he had received over the years from the strong African American women who cared for him as a child. *In Memory of the Ladies That Gave Us the Good Life* (2004, fig. 3), Dial pays homage to these women. The assemblage follows an eccentric grid reminiscent of an improvised quilt structure. Recycled clothes are among its mediums, and suggestions of vernacular architecture—fences and shotgun houses—loosely echo the architectonic content of a “Housetop” quilt while lending an intimate domesticity that evokes warm memories associated with the women who helped him through childhood.

The influence of quilts became more visible in Thornton Dial's work after he met some of the Gee's Bend quiltmakers in 2001. He and master quilter Mary Lee Bendolph soon became mutual admirers, then fast friends. There were similarities in their backgrounds; both were African American children of the Great Depression who grew up in an environment of poverty, backbreaking work, racism, and a lack of educational opportunities. There were differences, as well. She was from the small farming hamlet of Gee's Bend, while he lived most of his life in the industrial town of Bessemer. She came from a culture in which quilting skills were passed from mother to



Fig. 3. Thornton Dial (b. 1928). *Memory of the Ladies That Gave Us the Good Life*, 2004

daughter in the most intimate type of apprenticeship. His work had no such lineage. It came from within, a clandestine activity done after working long hours in various heavy industries.

Bendolph's print *To Honor Mr. Dial* (2005) and Dial's painting *Mrs. Bendolph* (2002) signal the deep respect that the artists have for each other. But his most resonant reflection of the influence of the quilts is contained in *Creation Story* (detail, inside cover), which provides the title of this exhibition. This is composed of jean scraps left over from a work-clothes quilt, which Bendolph sent to Dial soon after meeting him. Barely discernible at center top are three dark figures, which may signify three of the quilters of Gee's Bend.

Other works by Dial relate directly to the quiltmakers. They include *Lost* (2005)—which links the geographical isolation felt by Gee's Benders with the television show of the same title—and *Freedom Cloth* (2005, fig. 4). This sculpture contains a group of birds made from rags, symbolizing the freedom attained by the quilters of Gee's Bend, both in terms of artistic expression and as a reflection of their ability to make a good living.

The capacity to find value in detritus connects both Dial and the quiltmakers to the vernacular expression known as yard art, arrangements of old materials and objects that can be seen throughout the South. While to the outsider the objects might seem to be junk, for the yard-artist a set of rusty tools may have been the prized possessions of a deceased grandfather, and a faded T-shirt may commemorate a long-ago childhood.

Yard art is often indecipherable to an outsider. Such purposeful mystification is a reminder of a time in which black Americans felt the need to mask their communications and hide their individuality from whites, who saw a threat to their control in any type of black self-assertion. Indeed, it can have an encoded subversive content, something that is also true of Dial's work. What are we to make of the white female mannequin at the center of



Fig. 4. Thornton Dial (b. 1928). *Freedom Cloth*, 2005



Fig. 5. Thornton Dial (b. 1928). *The Farmer's Wife and the Colored Graveyard*, 2005

The Farmer's Wife and the Colored Graveyard (2005, fig. 5)? Does it symbolize a woman Dial once knew? Does the small stuffed lion nestled at her shoulder, smudged with black paint, refer to a black man, perhaps a farmhand? Could this imply an illicit relationship? Dial will not say, but one can imagine this to be an embedded allusion to the racist's greatest taboo, interracial mingling.

In *The Farmer's Wife and the Colored Graveyard*, the rhetoric of race is latent; it can only be drawn out through supposition. But Dial also uses his art to explicitly condemn racism and the injustices borne by the poor. Works inspired by a lifetime of observation convey a sense of irony, simmering anger, and reflections on the questionable promise of the American dream.

The Blood of Hard Times (2004, fig. 6), made of siding from old sheds, hog pens and barns, bits of clothing, and a section of chain, is a bird's-eye

view of a landscape metaphorically soaked in the blood of slaves and sharecroppers. The more recent *Mr. Dial's America* (2011, fig. 7) shows three people sitting at a table, surrounded by symbols of the United States: an image of the Capitol building and Lincoln Memorial, historic portraits, and a slave ship. Their blue jeans and torn caps and their ruined surroundings reflect the ongoing impact of poverty. The work was begun during the summer of 2011—when Dial and the rest of the nation watched as Congress remained deadlocked over the question of tax cuts versus budget cuts, and was completed in the fall, as the Occupy movement spoke of widespread dissatisfaction with the cozy and corrupt relationship between businesses and government. Are the people at the table victims, or are they the ones who can shape the future? It is an important question that Dial cannot answer for us.

Thornton Dial is a modern-day history painter, taking personal experience and insights and broadening them to define a profoundly American



Fig. 6. Thornton Dial (b. 1928). *The Blood of Hard Times*, 2004



Fig. 7. Thornton Dial (b. 1928). *Mr. Dial's America*, 2011

pathology. Yet within his bleak vision lies a seed of hope. Years after Martin Luther King's assassination, Dial paid homage to the great Civil Rights leader in his monumental sculpture, *Trip to the Mountaintop* (2004), inspired by King's last speech envisioning a color-blind society. Works like *Growing Season* and *The Berry Patch* argue that there are ways to escape poverty and racism: education, determination, and perhaps art might enable the attainment of a certain measure of freedom.

In all his works, Thornton Dial may be seen as the voice of those who are tired of being silent and invisible. While many scholars and academically trained artists penetrate, analyze, and critique the factors shaping attitudes toward race and class in this country, Dial cuts to the bone. His work, like that of the quiltmakers of Gee's Bend, arises from personal experience. Its honesty and directness is at the root of its power.

Mark W. Scala, chief curator, Frist Center for the Visual Arts

Notes

1. Arnett, William. "Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt," in *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2006), 8-62, p. 20.
2. Cubbs, Joanne. "A History of the Work-Clothes Quilt" (includes interview with Mary Lee Bendolph, March 2006), in *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, 66-78, p. 74.
3. Arnett, William. "Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt," in *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2006), 8-62, p. 37.
4. Arnett, William. "Mensie Lee Pettway," (interview by William Arnett, November 1999), in *Gee's Bend: The Women and Their Quilts* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2002), p. 386.

List of illustrations

Cover: Mary Lee Bendolph. "Housetop" variation, 1998. Cotton, corduroy, twill, and assorted polyester, 76 x 72 in. Courtesy Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Photography by Pitkin Studio

Inside cover: Thornton Dial. *Creation Story* (detail), 2003. Clothing, carpet, steel, enamel, spray paint, and Splash Zone compound on canvas on wood, 67 x 91 x 5 in. Courtesy Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Photography by Pitkin Studio

Fig. 1: Missouri Pettway. Blocks and strips work-clothes quilt, 1942. Cotton, corduroy, and cotton sacking, 90 x 69 in. Courtesy Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Photography by Pitkin Studio

Fig. 2: Patty Ann Williams. "Monkey Wrench" single block variation, ca. 1955. Cotton, 81 x 81 in. Courtesy Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Photography by Pitkin Studio

Fig. 3: Thornton Dial. *Memory of the Ladies That Gave Us the Good Life*, 2004. Tin, carpet, wood, glove, washbasin, scrub brush, yard ornament, motor-oil bottle, paintbrush, clothing, wire, enamel, and spray paint on wood, 98 1/2 x 82 x 10 1/2 in. Courtesy Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Photography by Pitkin Studio

Fig. 4: Thornton Dial. *Freedom Cloth*, 2005. Cloth, coat hangers, steel, wire, artificial plants and flowers, enamel, and spray paint, 86 x 68 x 57 in. Collection of William S. Arnett. Photography by Pitkin Studio

Fig. 5: Thornton Dial. *The Farmer's Wife and the Colored Graveyard*, 2005. Mannequin, stuffed animal, baseball cap, clock, lawn ornament, wood, fabric, clothing, metal, tire rubber, cow skull, doll, jawbone, barbed wire, paint cans and lids, plow element, and enamel on wood structure, 89 x 100 x 60 in. Courtesy Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Photography by Pitkin Studio

Fig. 6: Thornton Dial. *The Blood of Hard Times*, 2004. Corrugated tin, metal, clothes, chain, nails, staples, oil, enamel, spray paint, and Splash Zone compound on canvas on wood, 58 x 89 x 5 in. Collection of William S. Arnett. Photography by Pitkin Studio

Fig. 7: Thornton Dial. *Mr. Dial's America*, 2011. Clock, framed images, books, calculator, chair parts, rope, artificial leaves, carpet, clothing, barbed wire, sheet metal, wood, and enamel on canvas on wood, 74 x 97 x 9 1/4 in. Dial Family Collection. Photography by Pitkin Studio

CREATION STORY

Gee's Bend Quilts and the Art of Thornton Dial

Frist Center for the Visual Arts
May 25–September 3, 2012

This exhibition has been organized by the Frist Center for the Visual Arts
and Souls Grown Deep Foundation, Atlanta, Georgia.

PLATINUM SPONSOR:



THE FRIST CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS IS SUPPORTED IN PART BY:



919 BROADWAY
NASHVILLE, TN 37203
www.fristcenter.org