IMAGES AND OBJECTS FROM THE BLACK DEEP SOUTH: A Landmark Show from One White Man's Collection Reveals a Black Vernacular Art of Soulful Depth and Sophistication (1997)

Of the many events that Atlanta art institutions presented in conjunction with the 1996 Olympic Games in that city, none revealed so much about southern culture as did the exhibition, "Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art of the South." Sponsored by Emory University's Michael C.Carlos Museum, the show closed in the fall of that year but was later reinstalled and remained open for much of 1997.

The setting in both cases was Atlanta's City Hall East, a vast brick structure that once housed the regional headquarters of Sears and Roebuck, at 675 Ponce de Leon Avenue. The exhibit was enormous. It included about five hundred individual pieces, some of them quite large, and was installed in a series of adjoining galleries that took up much of the huge building's main floor. Represented were twenty-six African-American self-taught artists who come from urban and rural sections of the South. In recent years there have been scores of other exhibitions devoted to the work of Southern self-taught artists, but none of the others have been nearly this large or done such an extensive job of exploring the region's rich tradition of black vernacular art.

Most of the artists' names are familiar to viewers who have seen other large group exhibits of self-taught art. Mose Tolliver, Bessie Harvey, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, Thornton Dial, J.B. Murray, Mary T. Smith, Purvis Young, Lonnie Holley, Charlie Lucas, and several others are veritable stars in the field of non-academic, "outsider" art. But only those who have visited these artists in their homes or studios are likely to have

seen larger selections of their work than those in this exhibition. Assembling such a show would have been nearly impossible were it not for the fact that everything in it belongs to a single individual--one William Arnett--who happens to live in Atlanta.

Arnett, a white man who grew up in Columbus, Georgia, is an art collector and self-educated connoisseur of visual art in a variety of traditions, including classical Asian, African, and preColumbian American art, and for more than thirty years he has made his living as a dealer of traditional and contemporary art. About ten years ago, Arnett curtailed his involvement with other art traditions and began to focus his attention exclusively on the work produced by black artists in the region where he has always lived. This shift in his interest coincided with a newfound enthusiasm for self-taught art on the part of art-world insiders and the broader American public.

Arnett wasn't the only high-stakes collector to begin investing heavily in contemporary self-taught art during the 1980s. But the rate at which he made new acquisitions was unmatched among his fellow collectors in this newly developing field. By the end of the decade he had already built a collection of legendary proportions--one that all but overflowed his three-story home in Atlanta's ritzy Buckhead district and a large warehouse not far from there. Large as it was, the extravaganza at City Hall East represented only a relatively small portion of the entire Arnett Collection.

But it's an important portion. Arnett--assisted by his son Paul Arnett and Robert Hobbs, an art historian who teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond--selected what they believe to be some of the best and most representative works by the artists who have occupied the elder Arnett's attention during his marathon ten-year collecting spree. And it was an awesome selection on the whole.

Particularly well-served by the exhibition were Lonnie Holley and Thornton Dial, the two Alabama artists whose work Arnett has credited with inspiring his headlong plunge into collecting black “vernacular” art--the term he has come to favor in describing this work. Viewers entered the exhibit through a gallery in which Holley recreated something of the atmosphere of his densely cluttered yard-art environment in Alabama.

Holley spent years transforming an acre or more of wooded land around his art-glutted house in northeast Birmingham into a sprawling outdoor installation of interconnected assemblages made from bits of wire, scraps of fabric, old machine parts, discarded architectural fragments, handcarved blocks of industrial sandstone, and all manner of other scavenged materials. (In 1998, the year after the original version of this review was published, expansion of a nearby international airport displaced Holley from his longtime home, and he relocated to Harpersville, twenty-five miles to the south, in Shelby County.)

In addition to the compacted recreation of his yard show, Holley was also represented by about thirty assemblages more conventionally installed in several adjoining rooms. These works stood as thought-provoking, symbolic statements on racism, sexism, child abuse, workers’ rights, and other charged issues, inventively combining such disparate objects as spoons, chains, discarded electrical outlets, fire-damaged household furniture, and a defunct photocopy machine.

Dial also recycles a wide array of ordinary objects to make his large, freestanding sculptures and wall-mounted relief pieces. But while such objects typically retain something of their original identities in Holley’s work for symbolic reasons, Dial transforms them more radically to serve his particular artistic purposes. His wall pieces

often incorporate snakelike tangles of rope, rubber hoses, and unstitched coils of braided fabrics salvaged from old throw rugs, and he regularly uses such materials to suggest jungle vines or internal organs and blood vessels. Dial excels as both a painter and a sculptor, and he almost always combines both mediums in his work, often slathering the three-dimensional forms he contrives with multiple layers and colors of paint applied in an urgently expressionistic manner that is one of his art's hallmarks.

Dial shares many of Holley's thematic concerns. His art grapples with the problems of racial and cultural oppression and their consequences, and it also takes on issues such as environmental pollution, corporate greed, and relationships between men and women. One of his tableaux in the Atlanta show pointedly comments on the O.J. Simpson trial by depicting Simpson and attorneys from both sides of the case in grotesqauely caricaturish form, saturated with dingy green paint whose symbolic connotation is spelled out in the title, *Big Business, The Color of Money* .

Dial's work has itself become quite a big business, particularly in the years since his unprecedented blockbuster solo exhibition of 1993-94 at two important New York art institutions--the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the Museum of American Folk Art. That two-part show, consisting largely of work from the Arnett Collection, captured the attention of the New York art world like no other exhibit by a self-taught artist ever had. As a result, Dial is now recognized as an important contemporary artist, and the prices of his work have risen accordingly. Some of his more ambitious pieces have reportedly sold for as much as $100,000.

Several other members of Dial's family have taught themselves or learned from his example to create their own distinctive bodies of work, and they were also

represented in “Souls Grown Deep.” One of the many revelations the exhibit had in store for even seasoned veterans of the self-taught art scene was the impressive selection of paintings and abstract assemblages by Dial’s younger cousin, Ronald Lockett. These pieces indicate Lockett’s emergence as an important self-taught artist in his own right.(Unfortunately, Lockett died of pneumonia in 1998, the year after the writing and original publication of this review.) The exhibition as a whole, meanwhile, signaled the forceful emergence of all these artists into the larger contemporary art arena where, until recently, the efforts of self-taught artists weren’t given serious consideration.

Collector/dealer Arnett is a controversial figure in the self-taught art field. His detractors have accused him of occasionally playing fast and loose with the artists he represents, but he staunchly disputes such allegations. In fact, most of these artists have continued to do business with him, and there can be no question that his efforts have benefited their careers enormously. The evangelistic fervor with which Arnett has promoted their work has alienated some well-placed potential sympathizers, but “Souls Grown Deep” and the response it has somewhat belatedly generated in the art world proves that his fervency and persistence have paid off.

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