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Material Communications: Noah Purifoy at LACMA

Review: *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

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You have to make a journey to visit Noah Purifoy's Joshua Tree Outdoor Museum in Southern California. Driving from the city to the desert, you feel the shift in terrain, the vast silent space, unforgiving weather, abandoned buildings, and wildlife. With that you get a sense of the community there, the thrift-store culture, and the way people recycle and repurpose every facet of their lives. Embedded within this community, Noah Purifoy built relationships and sourced the unwanted materials that would form his outdoor *tour de force.*

The sculptural amalgam that Purifoy created in Joshua Tree consists of rickety geometries populated by balanced and arranged densities of discarded junk (toilets, tires, bowling balls, shoes, etc.) that absorbs all of the qualities inherent in the desert landscape. The Outdoor Museum also integrates Purifoy's life previous to his move to the desert in 1989, at the age of 72, including the social injustices of the segregated South, his experience at Chouinard Art Institute (now California Institute of the Arts), the Watts Rebellion, and his years spent working as a social worker, educator, and civil servant.[1] Purifoy's idea of "recording lifetime experiences" is manifested in the social and relational aspects of his cast-off materials, architectural spaces, and transient objects.[2]

The works in Purifoy's open-air museum ricochet off one another. For instance, *Shopping Cart* (1997), an oversized icon of homelessness, resonates with *Shelter* (1999), a structure whose interior produces the feeling of abandonment and invisibility. Both works contrast with the large-scale *The White House* (1990–93), previously titled *The Castle*, which is the dominant and central structure in Purifoy's civic space. The constructed analytic geometric space of *The White House*, associated with bureaucracy and authority, intertwines with the accumulation and neglect associated with the unregulated space of the street. The museum's overall arrangement seems to follow a broken urban plan, mixing improvisational realities with institutional logic. The sculptures operate both phenomenologically and on an emblematic level. The scale feels human and at the same time like a model of a psychic space. As one meanders inside, outside, and between the structures, the network of sculptures starts to appear as a kind

Above: **Noah Purifoy**, *Shopping Cart* (1997), with *Untitled (Blue)*, (no date), and *The White House* (1990–93), in the background. © Noah Purifoy Foundation, Joshua Tree. Photo © Fredrik Nilsen.
Following spread: **Noah Purifoy**, *Shelter*, 1999. Interior view. © Noah Purifoy Foundation, Joshua Tree. Photo © Fredrik Nilsen.

1. Yael Lipschutz, "A NeoHooDoo Western: Noah Purifoy, Spirit Flash, Art, and the Desert," in *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*, ed. Yael Lipschutz and Franklin Sirmans (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Munich, London, New York: DelMonico Books, 2015), 53. The excellent exhibition catalog features insightful essays from multiple perspectives and incredible photographs of Purifoy's works by Fredrik Nilsen.
2. Ibid., 50.

of body, and subjectivity constantly shifts in relation to the constellation. The forms become a stage for the viewer, and one has the feeling of being able to project oneself into the spaces while simultaneously having the sensation of trespassing. In Purifoy's unique museum, the access, ownership, and privilege associated with commodity culture exchange positions with abandoned spaces and junk.

I first visited Noah Purifoy's Outdoor Museum in 2006, two years after his death. I took my Art Center class, called "Studio Visits," on a field trip. We started in Joshua Tree, at Andrea Zittel's home and studio and the High Desert Test Site (HDTS) headquarters. Zittel took us to visit Purifoy's museum, which is in close proximity to HDTS both physically and in spirit. I wanted my students to see examples of artists who have forged ways to exist that aren't fueled by a standard recipe for professionalism or the art market, that are predicated on experimentation, and that privilege the work in situ creating its own context.

Purifoy's museum site and his creative process seem boundless, like embodiments of the idea of the Wild West. Correspondingly, the artist chose to work with the natural elements, rather than perceiving their limitations. I can relate to some aspects of Purifoy's outdoor situation and the necessity for resourcefulness. I split my time between an urban storefront studio and an abandoned and repurposed solar-powered swimming pool studio in Topanga Canyon. Sunk into the ground, the pool has a deep end, which is leveled with a wood platform, and a shallow end, which is sloped, and it is extended and enclosed with a cobbled together structure of found wood and windows. Birds build nests in the pool, and I just have to share the space with them. Branches, palm fronds and bamboo have often become my materials because they are available. Heat guns and sewing machines pull too much solar power to operate. Structures decay due to the weather. Time slows down and the light slowly changes quality. In an open-air workspace, one becomes aware of the larger timescales found in nature. The outdoors is a place to think and work without the usual distractions. I envision Purifoy having a similar experience in the desert. Perhaps this attitude toward the things one can't control contributes to his works' playfulness and humor. I remember one of my students playing with Purifoy's giant Newton's Cradle, a line of spheres (bowling balls) suspended from a rod in a row. Once activated, the balls smacked against each other rhythmically in a pendular fashion. Perversely, it became the timekeeper for the space. Of course, the sun-weathered bowling balls also display the trace of actual time, unmeasured and unregimented. There is a sense of promise in the decay and trash.

My connection to the desert site and my feeling for the way the sculptures operate there made me hesitant at first to see the exhibition *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). I feared that the experiential quality of his work and the spirit lodged in his sculptural world in the desert would be lost. And it is, to a degree. The container of LACMA could never serve the unrestrained quality of Purifoy's work in situ. However, *Junk Dada* was able to serve the work in other ways unavailable at the desert site, including providing a social and art historical context for his work.

The title of the LACMA retrospective, *Junk Dada*, positions Purifoy's work within the anti-art and anti-capitalist strategies employed by the Dadaists, the European avant-garde movement whose formation correlated with the eruption of World War I. The museum's wall didactics cite Marcel Duchamp's Readymades as an influence as well as the work of Kurt Schwitters. Recently, we have seen a resurgence of exhibitions with roots in Dada and the psychological concerns of Surrealism, a movement that was an outgrowth of Dada. The LACMA show connects the spirit of Dada with Purifoy's pedagogical concepts and activism. In the exhibition catalog, Purifoy is quoted as saying, "Community-based art programs had their roots in Dada, since they reverse the direction of traditional and religious art, thus making contemporary art possible and accessible."[3] This idea echoes Joseph Beuys's concept of Social Sculpture, where "every human being is an artist," fostering a situation in which creativity has the power to transform social consciousness. Beuys states, "Communication exists in reciprocity."[4] Communication and exchange seem to be the engines fueling many of Purifoy's endeavors. The title *Junk Dada* also references assemblage art, a movement in which artists used low-cost, everyday materials. The movement had its heyday in California in the 1960s, at a time when West Coast artists were mostly excluded from participating in the New York art market.[5]

Purifoy is sometimes depicted as an outsider artist. This show makes very clear that he was not. He was well aware of his art historical precedents, and he influenced his contemporaries and many artists who followed him, including important African American assemblage artists Betye Saar, John Outterbridge, David Hammons, and John Riddle.[6] And his work resonates with artists today, for example in the recent exhibition *Unmonumental*, at the New Museum in New York, in which contemporary artists deployed assemblage in reaction to the nationalism, consumerism, and trauma associated with the post-9/11 and post-Katrina United States.[7]

Junk Dada is organized thematically rather than chronologically. The installation, which is structured by periods and interests in the artist's life, is designed so one could enter from either side and get a sense of his trajectory. Entering the exhibition on the side that features his early modernist furniture piece, *Untitled (Bed Headboard)* (1958), one can see his adherence to the concepts of form and function and the tropes of art and life that would inform his later practice. The high craft and design of luxury goods for an elite clientele thus frame the work that follows as a rebellion against these economic principles, yet his approach continued to evoke the formal craftsmanship and abstraction housed in these early endeavors. In the successive rooms, the work becomes noticeably scrappier, showing influences of African art and often celebrating famous jazz musicians. For instance,

3. Sims Lowery Stokes, "A Place to Go," in *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*, 68.

4. Joseph Beuys, "I Am Searching for Field Character," a lecture from 1973 anthologized in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel, 2006), 126.

5. Stokes, "A Place to Go," 62.

6. Ibid.

7. The *Unmonumental* exhibition catalog cites David Hammons and the Arte Povera movement as historical touchstones, but makes no mention of Purifoy, who is another obvious influence. See Richard Flood, *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century* (London: Phaidon, and New York: New Museum, 2007).

Noah Purifoy, *Rags and Old Iron II (After Nina Simone)*, 1989. Mixed media assemblage, 70 × 41 × 6 inches.
Sue A. Welsh Collection at Tara's Hall.

Rags and Old Iron II (After Nina Simone) (1989) commemorates the talented jazz singer and civil rights activist, whose story was riddled with success and tragedy, and also embodies the lyrics of the song itself through abstraction and careful object selection. Tattered scraps of fabric and trimmings interrupt, overtake, and entangle loose geometric structures; the elements are organized in a way that seems to reference Gee's Bend's folk quilting traditions, a practice passed down by a community of African American women in rural Alabama, where labor-worn clothing was repurposed and transformed into striking irregular geometric compositions. Its companion piece of the same year (*Rags and Old Iron I [After Nina Simone]*) is comprised of many found objects, including silver shoes, a purse, evening gloves, a tennis racket, masses of wadded clothes, and brooms. Here, within the poetics of the relief, the formal organizational system seems to corral the objects, creating an underlying tension.

Entering the exhibition on the other side, which seems like a more natural entrance, one is confronted with the remade automaton-like sculpture *Sir Watts II* (1996), a gray mannequin housing a circuit board and topped with an armored helmet decorated with a badge. The piece is a chilling portrait of mindless authority, the kind that spurred the racially motivated police brutality and economic and social injustices in South Los Angeles, and which led to the Watts Rebellion in 1965. In the exhibition, *Sir Watts II* ushers in a group of works by various artists from the seminal 1966 exhibition *66 Signs of Neon*. Purifoy, who was then the founding director of the Watts Towers Arts Center, together with artists such as Judson Powell, Deborah Brewer, Ruth Saturensky (now Charu Colorado), and Arthur Secunda, scavenged objects and scraps from the burnt debris and crystallized neon signs left in the wake of the rebellion and transformed them into art. The exhibition *66 Signs of Neon* seems to have been less about provocation and more about Purifoy's belief, as an artist, teacher, and social worker, in the creative process as a source of empowerment and a tool for communication.[8] *Pressure* (1966), one of the works in the *66 Signs of Neon* installation, embodies the feeling of compression caused by oppressive forces and the sense of release embedded in the riots, translating it into kinesthetic abstraction. This reference to the burnt aftermath of the rebellion was carried into later works through Purifoy's act of giving his materials a burnt patina.

Junk Dada has several large, open rooms that feature works excised from the Joshua Tree Outdoor Museum. While I favor the works in their original desert context and the off-kilter and nontraditional spatial conventions that Purifoy employed when placing his works there, I did enjoy being able to see them as autonomous structures. Their isolated presentation allowed me to better study the artist's thoughtful formal decisions and construction methods within each work. *No Contest (Bicycles)* (1991), *From the Point of View of the Little People* (1994), and *Old Woman* (1990) are exceptional sculptures engaged in a poetic interplay between theatrical modes of display, performativity, and abstract compositions. They also show the way Purifoy employed language, including titles, as an important element in the work. For instance, in *No Contest (Bicycles)*, a cabin-like façade with a window

8. Ibid., 65.

Noah Purifoy, *Pressure*, 1966. Mixed media, 17 × 14 inches. Noah Purifoy Foundation, Joshua Tree. © Noah Purifoy Foundation. Photo courtesy Noah Purifoy Foundation.

Noah Purifoy, *No Contest (Bicycles)*, 1991. Mixed media, 168 × 252 × 24 inches. Installation view, *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, June 7, 2015–January 3, 2016. © Noah Purifoy Foundation. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA.

Noah Purifoy, *Ode to Frank Gehry* (1999) and *65 Aluminum Trays* (2002), installation view, *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, June 7, 2015–January 3, 2016. © Noah Purifoy Foundation. Photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA.

supports a diagonal plank topped with two bicycles. One of the bicycles is flipped, rendering it functionless. The comedic title reinforces and translates the form into an absurd game with unfair odds.

There was also a different kind of ricochet effect occurring within his large circle of influence. Standing in the room dedicated to ephemera and documentation of his exhibitions at Brockman Gallery and his civic and educational endeavors, including working as the director of community services at Central City Mental Health and later serving on the California Arts Council, I couldn't help but think about contemporary equivalents. Art + Practice in Leimert Park, founded by artist Mark Bradford, collector and philanthropist Eileen Norton, and activist Allan DiCastro, which recently mounted a show of ephemera from the Brockman Gallery, and Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses in Houston are just two of many examples of artists working to create social change within urban African American communities. And Bradford's recent show, *Scorched Earth*, at the Hammer Museum, featuring works that embody the trauma of the Rodney King Riots in South Los Angeles in 1992, resonates with *66 Signs of Neon*, and reminds us that history needlessly and frustratingly keeps repeating itself.

Two works in *Junk Dada* are situated outside of LACMA, in the elements. *Ode to Frank Gehry* (1999) and *65 Aluminum Trays* (2002) stand in the courtyard, between a concurrent retrospective of the architectural works of Frank Gehry and Michael Heizer's *Levitated Mass* (2012), the $10-million megalith permanently sited on the museum's grounds. Situating Purifoy's works between architecture and land art seems apt, especially in relationship to land artists' need to work outside the gallery system, although, in Purifoy's case, he left the city for the desert at least in part due to economic concerns.[9] He then embraced the opportunity the landscape offered.

In a time where artists are increasingly searching for ways to take back their agency and autonomy from a market-run system, Noah Purifoy provides an inspiring example of how an artist can live and work. He was a pivotal figure and a bridge between multiple historical lineages, and his legacy will continue to grow. This much-deserved LACMA retrospective is an important step toward a wider audience understanding his practice more fully. Cheers to the pioneers!

Katie Grinnan is an artist working in Los Angeles. She is an assistant professor at California State University, Long Beach. Her solo exhibition *Nocturnal Hologram* was on view at Diverse Works in Houston in the fall of 2015, and her *Astrology Orchestra* was most recently performed at the James Turrell Skyspace, *Twilight Epiphany*, in conjunction with that exhibition.

9. Accounts of why Purifoy left Los Angeles in his seventies differ. Joe Lewis, the president of The Noah Purifoy Foundation, says that Purifoy left the city for financial reasons: "He had no choice. He was living on social security. He didn't have any kind of retirement fund." (See Tanja M. Laden, "Junk Dada: The Stories behind Noah Purifoy's Joshua Tree Sculptures," *Artbound*, KCET, September 22, 2015, http://www.kcet.org/arts/artbound/counties/san-bernardino/noah-purifoy-joshua-tree-sculpture-garden-photos.html.) However, in an interview in the *Junk Dada* exhibition catalog, Purifoy indicates that he came to the desert because he wanted to make environmental sculpture. C. Ian White, in *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*, 103.