In Memoriam

Thornton Dial

September 10, 1928–January 25, 2016

BY BERNARD L. HERMAN

Thornton Dial at his studio, Bessemer, Alabama, ca. 1995.
All images courtesy of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation.

Birds flock, flutter and fly, strut, preen, and roost through the art of Thornton Dial, citizens in a remarkable graphic menagerie that speak, sometimes forcefully, sometimes joyfully, to what he termed "hard truths." Tigers, signifying the artist as well as a much larger world of African American masculinity, romp, stalk, and carouse in his early works and on through the 1990s. Fish metaphorically course and dapple through themes of lust, love, and femininity in his "fishing for

Green Pastures: The Birds That Didn't Learn How to Fly, *69.5 x 95.5 x 3", 2008, Collection of the High Museum of Art, photo by Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio.*

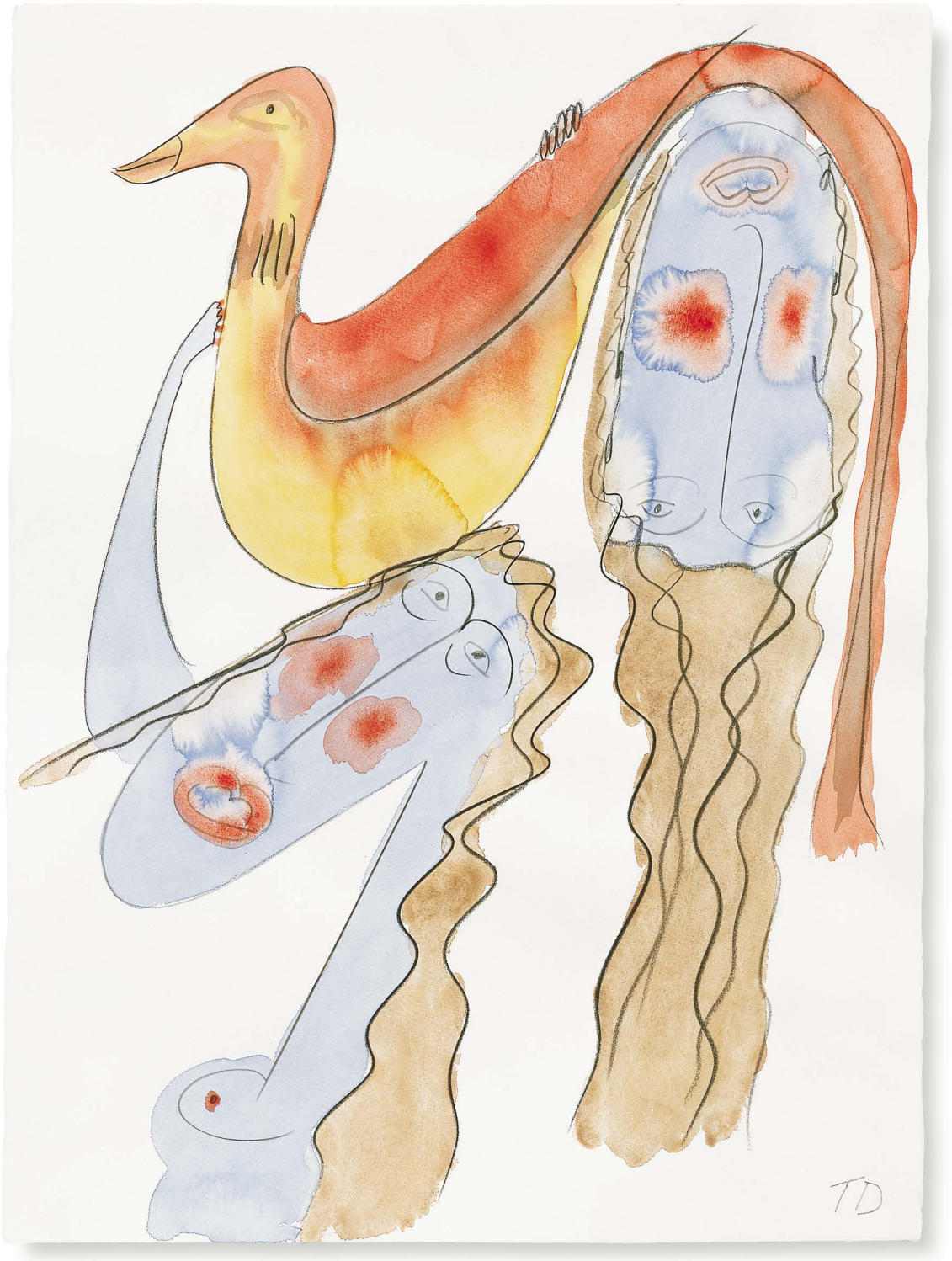
love" works on paper. Bare-breasted women, southern sirens all, entice viewers with fish painted red, blue, green, and gold. And, as he noted in conversation, fish also spoke to personal histories of "making do" in times of want. He recollected the weirs and fish traps he fashioned and how he huckstered his catch to his Bessemer neighbors. Sometimes there were too many fish; sometimes there were not enough. Still, birds fascinated Mr. Dial in truly magical ways. When he passed, I like to think the birds mourned.

"Thornton Dial," Paul Arnett wrote, announcing the death, was a "painter and sculptor whose improbable life's journey led him from a sharecropper's shack in Alabama's Black Belt to recognition by many of the world's leading museums." "Dial's art, by turns ferocious, witty, tender, and incisive," Arnett continued, "developed during many decades of complete obscurity, during which he created 'things' clandestinely—unaware (as he explained later) of the Western concept of 'art' as a special category of human activity—due to apprehensions about how his

Above: Freedom Cloth, *80 x 68 x 57", 2005, photo by Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio.*

Below: Walking with the Pickup Bird, *53 x 63 x 34", 2002, Collection of the Ackland Museum of Art, photo by Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio.*

Life Go On, *30 x 22", 1990, photo by Gamma One Conversions.*



Posing Movie Stars Holding the Freedom Bird, *30 x 22", 1991, photo by Gamma One Conversions.*

socially critical and racially conscious work would be received; he broke apart and recycled much of his work as he went along. Only in 1987, at the age of 56, did he come to the attention of the art world and embark on an artistic career that lasted nearly thirty more years and brought him international renown."

Reflecting on the course of his art and its reception in 2008–2009, Mr. Dial produced a series of mixed-media compositions entitled *The Birds That Never Learned to Fly*. Each of the pieces consisted of a large abstract painting across the face of which Mr. Dial affixed a length of wire or thin metal piping. He wound white rags, caked with dried black paint around coat hangers and hung their stiffened forms from the wire. The hardened knots were discarded homemade artist brushes made roughly fifteen years earlier for a run of abstract paintings on recycled wall-to-wall office carpet. At the time of their making, there was no interest in Mr. Dial's engagement with abstraction and so he rolled the paintings up and placed them in a storage closet along with his ad hoc brushes. Years later, Mr. Dial came across the old work and, inspired by the brushes he had made, he undertook *The Birds That Never Learned to Fly*. Each brush, a bird, hangs motionless from its perch, a seemingly dead thing denied the liberation and joy of flight—except that it appears against the backdrop of a second iteration of abstract canvases. Birds, Mr. Dial explained, always need someplace to roost. No matter how the birds might fly, their freedom is always conditional and their return to the earth inevitable. The tension between freedom and constraint was a fact of life Mr. Dial knew first hand.

But, Mr. Dial's evocations always soared beyond the bounds of his lived experience. In *Freedom Cloth*, a 2005 sculpture, he twisted painted rags around coat hangers and assembled them in a rising vortex of flight. These birds bore the profiles of vultures, carrion feeders flourishing on castoff and waste. The analogy he created described the triumph of the quiltmakers of Gee's Bend, fellow artists who crafted powerful compositions from scraps of old work clothes, the leftover trimmings of clothing factories, and surplus runs of corduroy and denim. The undercurrent of the quiltmakers' celebration in the contemporary art world was for Mr. Dial a dual recognition: the creation of objects of beauty provides its own liberating force; the enthusiastic public reception of the quilts in museums reflects the limits of that liberation. He visited this theme in multiple later works, notably a self-portrait, *Walking with the Pick-Up Bird* (2002), in which he and Lonnie Holley push/shadow a bird-shaped barrow filled with debris, including worn shoes symbolizing the footsteps and remembered traces of earlier lives. Taking flight, the birds of *Freedom Cloth* stretched the bonds that held them back—but their flight knew limits that, although tested, remained in check.

In his first works on paper from the early 1990s, Mr. Dial invoked birds in meditations on love and femininity. Rouged seductresses pose with birds nesting on their heads—signifiers of what Dial sensed was on a woman's mind. Other women cradle roosters—emblems of male vanity—in their arms. When he showed these

works to a group of students on the occasion of an exhibition of his early drawings in 2012, he laughed. "What do you see in there?" And waited for the answers. "You see that in there? That's good!"

Nuance defines Mr. Dial's art and his renditions of birds chatter and sing on multiple levels. When he observed, "Birds have got to roost," Mr. Dial identified a place and action that marked refuge and respite as well as vulnerability and danger. This was the fate of birds—and people. When he stated, "birds have got to roost," he shared an optimist's view of history where truth, justice, and equality blossomed as social and moral realities, where love ruled—not "sex love," as he once stated, but a love between men and women that could border on the sacred. As a pragmatist who endured through the brutal degradations of Jim Crow, he recognized in the birds' cycle of flight the endless cycle of life itself. All living things, even the Earth, move through moments of birth, life, death, where oppression and righteousness war, each betrayed by illusions of its own victory. Mr. Dial's birds are about a quest that never ends, a restless search that is only interrupted before it takes wing again and again. His life of art addresses that search through visual metaphors that compel us to look deeper into how we live our lives as a continuing passage. Mr. Dial's artistic legacy remains, each work of art a promise inviting us to stop and reflect and then take flight. His birds, wearied, fall silent for a moment, but then they rise to sing and soar. As Mr. Dial would declare, "Life goes on."