



Thornton Dial, *Looking for the Right Spot*, 2004, metal, clothing, oil, enamel and epoxy on canvas, 72 × 84 × 3".

## Beverly Buchanan, Thornton Dial, and the Gee's Bend Quiltmakers ANDREW EDLIN GALLERY

Contingency, a complex relationship to the body, and an abiding respect for the homespun were the threads that wove together this neatly conceived exhibition. The artists here—all African American and natives of

the American South—served as pendants to one another, advancing a shared understanding of the artwork as mediated through memory and use.

Beverly Buchanan (1940–2015) began making her “shack” sculptures in 1986, nearly a decade after moving to Macon, Georgia, from Manhattan, where she was a critical (if critically underrecognized) figure in the city’s post-Minimal art scene. Cobbled together from small pieces of foam, copper, and reclaimed wood, these modestly sized sculptures elaborate the characteristic inconclusiveness of late-1970s process-based art, existing as half-finished things, ready for further assembly, or left to fall apart. Their means of construction—staples and yellowed glue—are makeshift and plainly visible. Various pitched and flat-roofed, they recall Bauhaus buildings in their planarity, yet snub the modernist cool of those structures. Held in states of asymmetry and precariousness, the sculptures defamiliarize the stock ingredients of architecture—windows, walls, and doors—with passages of dreamlike dysfunction.

Consider *House from Scraps*, 2011. Here, a staircase ends in a ledge, while miniature timbers are intricately piled up, lacking any discernible purpose. The work’s casualness belies its complexity. Like the scheme of the shacks as a whole, its design draws on colloquial architectures, which Buchanan both recalled from memory and studiously observed, documenting the spare, self-made dwellings of tenant farmers on her nighttime drives around Macon. Conceiving of her constructions as abstract portraits, she often paired them with narrative texts—“legends,” as she called them—that recount the lives of their inhabitants, many of whom she met and interviewed. Her shacks thus emerge as complex negotiations of structure

and memory, placing the verities of post-Minimalism in dialogue with the lived realities of rural poverty.

Three quilts from Gee's Bend, a small community in southern Alabama located on the site of an antebellum plantation, echoed the inherent bodiliness of Buchanan's sculptures. Their makers, many of whom are direct descendants of the slaves who once labored there, also adopt used materials, which they source from family and friends. Pieced together by hand, their quilts serve to both shelter and commemorate, invoking lost loved ones via the incorporation of a stained work shirt or the worn-out seat of a pair of jeans. In Rita Mae Pettway's *Housetop—Half-Log Cabin variation quilt*, 2015, strips of denim and khaki-colored fabric are assembled in a so-called housetop pattern, whose nested squares resemble aerial views of roofs. The fabrics' details join in the composition, offsetting Pettway's overstretch with cutoff pockets and embroidery. The quilt's title underscores the closeness of clothing and buildings, both of which function as metonyms—linked through wrinkles, hollows, scores, and so on—to the human bodies that once inhabited them.

The wall-bound assemblages of Thornton Dial (1928–2016) offered mnemonics of a different kind. Arranging eclectic items, from sullied carpet to splintered wood, each work contoured absent bodies. *Lost*, 2004 (named after the popular television show), was created as an homage to the women of Gee's Bend, whom Dial met in 2001. The piece conjures a woman ballasted by a mass of fabric in seawater hues. Yet the work also resonates in nonfigurative ways—the disposition of a cable-knit sweater summons the elaborate folds of textiles found in an old-master painting, wherein cloth conveys emotion and drama. Signification aside, Dial's art is

fascinating as messy, material stuff. Ruched and rusted, it visually encodes time, calling to mind the inevitability of disintegration and decay. Like the works of Buchanan and the Gee's Bend quilters, it forms a subversive sort of monument, paying tribute to marginalized figures who use media primed for impermanence.

— *Courtney Fiske*