

The New York Times

February 05, 1997

Bits, Pieces and a Drive To Turn Them Into Art

By DINITIA SMITH

BESSEMER, Ala. — Thornton Dial has never seen a painting by Jackson Pollock, at least not that he knows of. He has never seen a Julian Schnabel or an Anselm Kiefer. "I'd never seen any artist's works," Mr. Dial said recently. "I can't copy off anybody because it's something I do my own self."

He can barely read or write. Yet in the garage of his home here, Mr. Dial, 67, a former steelworker, is creating monumental art from pieces of scrap metal, old rugs, tree roots and castoff plastic, work that Roberta Smith of The New York Times has described as "unforgiving" and "brutal" in its power.

Mr. Dial's work, along with that of 24 other artists, can be seen at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in "Bearing Witness: African-American Vernacular Art of the South," an exhibition from the collection of Ronald and June Shelp. The Schomburg show, which runs through March 29 in Harlem, is described as the first attempt in New York City to organize a comprehensive exhibition of contemporary black "vernacular art." The show also includes works by Mr. Dial's sons Richard and Thornton Dial Jr.; his half-brother, Arthur, and his cousin Ronald Lockett.

Critics use the terms "vernacular" or "outsider art" to describe the work of self-taught artists who are utterly outside the mainstream. But Mr. Dial's darkly ominous paintings and his sculptures made from found objects raise questions about "the growing uselessness of the distinction" between outsider artists and "the presumably trained, inside variety," Ms. Smith has written.

Mr. Dial's work is a tragic narrative of the African-American experience: chunks of rubber hose stuck in canvas, for instance, in memory of civil rights demonstrators beaten with fire hoses. Many paintings contain the figure of a tiger -- a symbol of struggle, Mr. Dial said, and of a black union organizer from Bessemer whom he knew in the 1950's. His nickname was Tiger.

A Thornton Dial piece can sell for up to \$100,000 these days, but the artist has chosen to stay in his hometown, Bessemer, a suburb of Birmingham. For hours on end, Mr. Dial, a wiry, energetic figure, wields his blowtorch, welding together pieces of found metal and plying them with paper, bones, bits of garbage and rope "until I get lonesome," he said.

One day recently, someone asked him about a canvas in his garage, a work measuring about 7 by 12 feet, with the outlines of anguished faces emerging from the gloom. "That big, gray thing," he said. "That's a 'combat' piece -- like the Army. It's an old piece. Made out of rope and cotton and wire and canvas. I'm still working on it."

Nearby was another canvas embedded with wire, rags and gesso, which came together to form a single, large face. "That's a dollar bill," Mr. Dial said. "George Washington." Why is it so dark, he was asked. "Hard work," he said with a laugh.

He is sparse with words. Though technically illiterate, he has solid math skills, friends say, and can measure a canvas accurately by eye. "Mr. Dial is smart as a fox," one friend said recently.

For most of his life, Mr. Dial has lived in a segregated world. He was born into a family of 12 children near Emelle, Ala., close to the Mississippi border. "I came up without a daddy," he said; he "had a lot of patches," on his clothes.

"I played with little white children," he said. "They would arrive on little ponies. But I didn't have nothing like that. It was 'Yes, ma'am' and 'No, ma'am.' I used to wonder why I couldn't be with them."

There was no money for toys in his world, and he began creating things out of necessity. "Almost everything we got, we made it," he said. "We'd be carving dolls out of cornstalks."

He had nothing to draw with, but drew anyway. "I used to play with sand and take wire and run it through the sand," he said. "If you're playing in sand, you're drawing."

When he was 10, Mr. Dial and his half-brother, Arthur, were sent to live in Bessemer with a relative. In 1951, he married Clara Mae Murrow, and they had five children. A daughter, Patricia, died of cerebral palsy in 1987 at the age of 28. Mr. Dial's painting titled "Don't Make Fun of What You See, an Angel Watches Over the Handicapped" is about her. At the center is a fiery red figure, mouth open, surrounded by birds and a tiger, waiting to be transformed into a spirit, Mr. Dial said.

The Dial family lived in the deteriorating Pipe Shop neighborhood of Bessemer. For 30 years, he worked at the Pullman Standard boxcar factory.

"I was mostly a helper," Mr. Dial said. "Black people weren't allowed to work with blowtorches. Those were higher-paying jobs. They'd say you wouldn't have been able to handle the job. I'd think, 'You could be able to do that.' " When whites abandoned the dangerous work, he was finally allowed to handle a blowtorch.

"Pullman used to work you three weeks, then lay you off," he said. So he took what odd jobs he could find: highway laborer, carpenter, house painter, commercial fisherman, pipe fitter, raising hogs and cattle. He built his own house. "I didn't know how to build a house," he said. "But I always have looked at things and observed."

All the time, Mr. Dial was making art, animal figures out of scrap metal, flowers with petals of frayed rope. There was so much art that he buried it to make room for more. He was also afraid that people would laugh. Later he would dig it up and reuse the materials.

Mrs. Dial, who says she used to refer to her husband's work as "the mess," once objected when he used the kitchen stove to solder metal pieces. "I'd be fussing that he was just running up gas," she said. "We were ashamed of it."

Mr. Dial said, "She shamed me too."

Now, Mrs. Dial says, "I wish I had a lot of that stuff he threw out -- I know now it was beautiful."

In 1983, Mr. Dial retired from "Pull," as the boxcar factory was called here, and started Dial's Metal Patterns, a garden furniture business, with his sons in their backyard.

In 1987, Lonnie Holley, a neighboring artist whose work is also in the Schomburg show, saw Mr. Dial's handmade fishing lures -- "crazy stuff," Mr. Dial said. "He said: 'This is an artist. Who did this work?' He brought Bill over to see me."

Bill Arnett is an Atlanta-based collector of African and African-American art. Mr. Dial dragged a life-size "iron turkey" sculpture out of his garage to show him. "Bill said, 'What you want for it?' I said, 'Give me

\$20.' He said: 'No, I wouldn't take that away from you. Give me another price.' I said, 'Give me \$35.' He said, 'I still won't take it away from you.' " Finally, the two settled on \$200.

"I said, This man's got to be crazy!" Mr. Dial remembered. "My child said to him: 'You in trouble. My daddy's going to make you some mess.' But me and Bill have traveled together from this time on. I had no dealings with any other white man before I met him."

Mr. Arnett began giving financial support to Mr. Dial, promoting his art, getting it into galleries and to collectors. He also exposed Mr. Dial to the work of other black artists.

"I never seen anything like this before," Mr. Dial said. "Really strange. They let you know you're not just the only one thinking. If it's strange, then I can make something strange. It gives you more ideas. When I saw Bessie Harvey, it just took me off my feet. Her work just went all over me." The late Ms. Harvey's work -- birds and animals carved from the roots of trees -- is also in the Schomburg exhibition.

Mr. Arnett encouraged Mr. Dial to branch out into drawing. "I started using chalk and watercolor," Mr. Dial said. "I didn't know so much about those things." Mr. Dial's drawings are of fluid, delicate figures, vaguely human, and of animals gently colored in pastels.

In 1990, Mr. Arnett purchased a nine-bedroom, 10,000-square-foot house in Bessemer for Mr. Dial, who lives there now with his wife and two of their adult children and their families. In a "60 Minutes" report on their relationship in 1993, it was implied that Mr. Arnett had exploited the artist. Mr. Arnett angrily denies this. "I'm not his representative," he said. "I don't get a cut. I'm his very good friend."

Recently, Mr. Dial said, a busload of people came from New York to see his work. "Bill said: 'Don't get afraid of them. They're nice people.' I don't know who they were. Very nice people. One was a preacher. It doesn't matter to me what they're saying. None of that bothers me."

"Where I am, I'm just that," he added. "When I go to New York, I ain't interested in staying too much."

"I fool with them," he said, "and then I come on back."