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Since 1987 Thornton Dial's paintings and sculpture have challenged and transformed standard conceptions of folk art. In his work he confronts such issues as racism and civil rights, ecology, sexual politics, the homeless, natural disasters, the plight of veterans, industrialism and postindustrialism, the death of the American city, and unemployment. Dial's life in rural and urban Alabama was not very different

# THORNTON DIAL SR.

(b. 1928)

BORN EMELLE, ALABAMA  
WORKS BESSEMER, ALABAMA

BY ROBERT HOBBS

brother Arthur. The two boys first lived with their great-grandmother Martha James Bell; after her death and their subsequent move to an aunt's home for approximately two years, they moved to Bessemer. Here they were brought

up by their great-aunt Sarah Dial Lockett, to whom Dial remained devoted until her death in 1995.

Over the years, Dial has worked at a number of jobs, often holding two or three simultaneously, as well as planting big gardens and raising livestock. His main employment, with Pullman Standard, involved him in most of its departments, including punch and shear, where in the 1970s he assumed the critical role of running the center seals to the foundations of boxcars. He remained with the company for almost thirty-three years. Concurrently, he worked intermittently for approximately thirteen years at the Bessemer Water Works. During downtime at Pullman, he was forced to seek jobs painting and building houses, laying bricks, cementing sections of highways, relining tin, pouring iron, fishing commercially, and fitting pipes.

While moving about from job to job, Thornton Dial made things. He built his own house, remodeling and renovating it many times until it pleased him. In the course of rebuilding it, he invented a new style of bricks that he cast in the form of soda cans so that they could be set vertically and would fit conveniently into one another. He also made fishing lures, often using plastic wrap and wire to create intricate and innovative constructions. At one time, he created wooden crosses and cement urns for local cemeteries. In addition, the need to express his feelings resulted in series after series of welded-steel and mixed-media constructions using found objects, including roots and a variety of cast-off objects. Often, he decorated his yard with these objects, but at times, either because of a lack of encouragement from his neighbors or because of fears of reprisals from the white community if his implicit critiques of social wrongs were discerned, he buried or recycled his work. While he obviously valued these objects as symbolic ways to redress grievances and to give a tangible form to feelings that he had been programmed



**CONTAMINATED DRIFTING BLUES** / 1994 / Desiccated cat, driftwood, aluminum cans, glass bottle, found metal, canvas, enamel, spray paint, and industrial sealing compound on surplus plywood / 67 x 49 x 17 1/2" / The William S. Arnett Collection

from the common experience of blacks in the first half of the twentieth century who migrated from rural tenant farms to industrial areas. Instead of leaving the South for Chicago or Detroit as many did, Dial moved from the small town of Emelle, Alabama (near Livingston), on the western side of the state—an area of cotton plantations that is also dotted with fields of sweet potatoes and corn—to Bessemer, which is part of the highly industrialized area known as the Birmingham District.

Born on September 10, 1928, to a girl about thirteen years in age, Dial was never acknowledged by his father. When he was nine years old, he left school to work at such jobs as helping out at a local ice house or digging sweet potatoes. "I come up the hard life," Dial has recalled.<sup>143</sup> His memory of the difficulties sustained in his youth is corroborated by the nickname Patches, which described the unfortunate condition of his clothing. When Dial was ten, his mother, Mattie Bell, had the opportunity to marry, providing she agreed to give up Thornton and his half-

not to express in his daily life, Dial was not comfortable considering them lasting works of art. Their improvisational quality, predicated on impermanency and a need to express deep-seated feelings, is analogous to the nature of the blues. Although scholars have not so far connected Dial's art to this musical mode, his work can be considered its visual equivalent.

In the fall of 1994 Dial made explicit this connection with the blues when he focused on the theme of pollution as a result of finding the desiccated body of a house cat in a crawl space in his aunt Sarah Dial Lockett's house. The cat had unsuccessfully tried to escape the flood of early December 1983 that had affected most of Dial's community, called "Pipeshop," and filled his house with a foot and a half of water. As a memorial to this animal and possibly an elaboration on his commonly used tiger theme, Dial made it the centerpiece of *Contaminated Drifting Blues*, a simulated midden consisting of driftwood from the Gulf of Mexico, crushed soda and beer cans (including a prominent red Coke can on the bottom left), metal shavings, bedsprings, a "C" clamp, and a glass bottle.

Shortly before making the piece, Dial had vis-

ited fellow self-taught artist Lonnie Holley, who had found a circa 1960s bomb shelter underneath a deserted shotgun house in his neighborhood. Its association with Cold War politics and widespread fears of radioactive fallout are no doubt concerns that catalyzed Dial's *Contaminated Drifting Blues*. At the time that he made this work, Dial was thinking about how his childhood hometown, Emelle, had become a nuclear waste site and was deeply concerned about a proposal for a nuclear waste dump in Bessemer.<sup>144</sup>

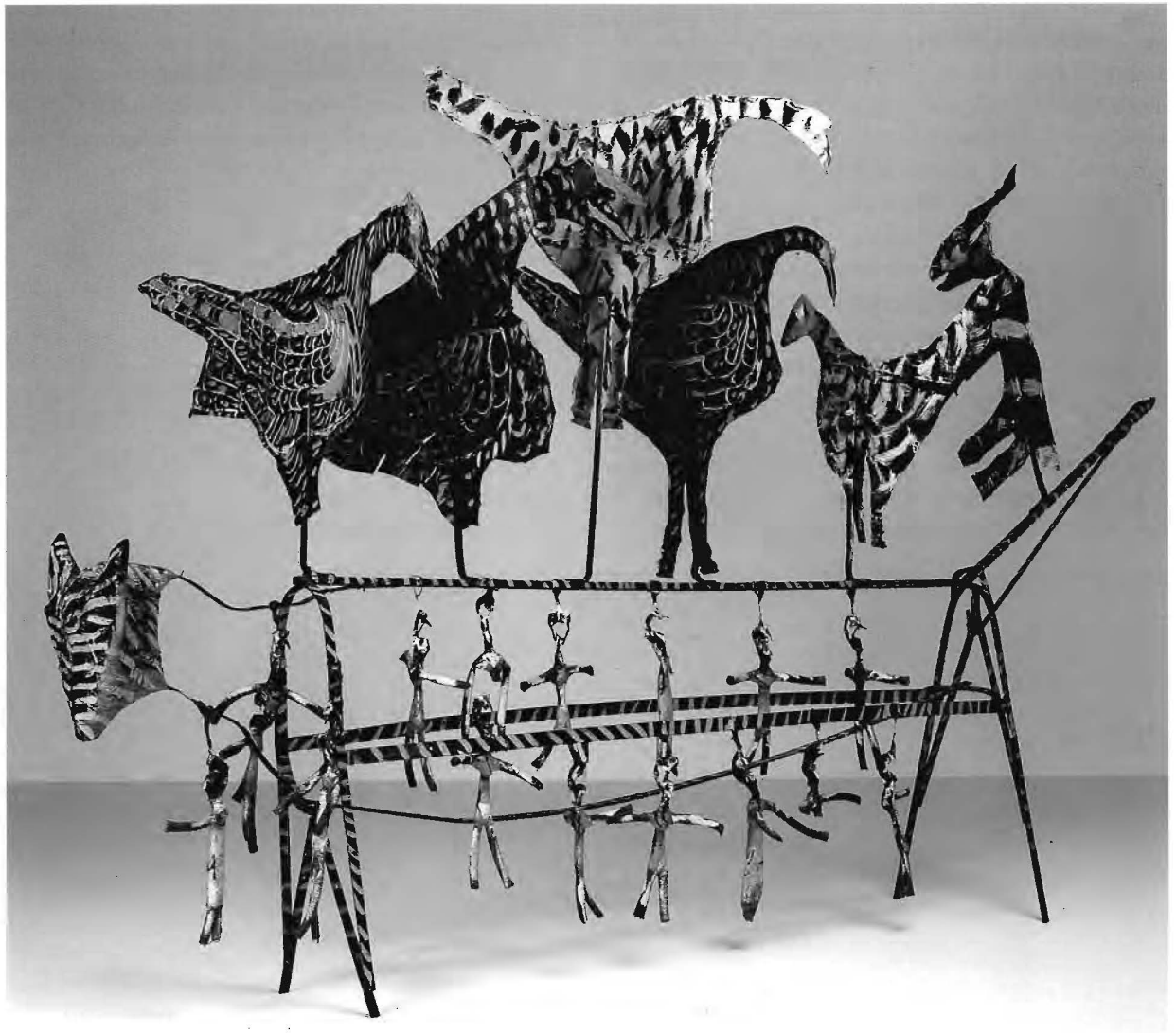
The title *Contaminated Drifting Blues* recalls the well-known blues song "Drifting Blues," by Wallace "Pine Top" Johnson, which features this chorus:

You know I'm drifting,  
and I'm drifting just like a ship out on the sea.  
Well, I'm drifting and I'm drifting like a ship out  
on the sea.  
Well, you know I ain't got nobody in this world  
to care for me.

Not only does the title reinforce Dial's work, but the references to the sea could characterize *Contaminated Drifting Blues*, with its earth-



THE NEW BIRMINGHAM AND THE OLD BIRMINGHAM / 1993 / Rope, wire, vines, found wood, roots, corrugated tin, stones, soil, oil, enamel, spray paint, and industrial sealing compound; on canvas mounted on wood / 82 x 133 x 7 1/2" / The William S. Arnett Collection



THE TIGER CAT / 1987 / Steel, tin, enamel, tubing, and tape / 69 1/2 x 107 1/2 x 57" / The William S. Arnett Collection

colored panel placed in front of a larger acrid blue-green one that could represent either water or sky.

This relationship with the blues deserves investigation in order to understand how Dial's art is related to this rich and vital twentieth-century tradition. Dial himself stressed the importance of the blues to his life when he said, "For years, music was my only pleasure."<sup>145</sup> Over the years, he has appreciated a wide range of blues works, including music by B.B. King and Fats Domino, his longtime favorites. On Friday nights, after getting off work at 11:00 P.M., he would spend a couple of hours in Bessemer juke joints such as Duke's Club or those that he remembers were run by Andy Hall and Bill Hardy. He recalls that the interiors of these clubs were painted in rich patterns that captured the flavor of the music. The overall improvisational character of these painted walls can in general be considered a vernacular tradition important to Dial's paintings, and these paintings may represent one way he has effected visual equivalents to this important musical form and the places from which it came.

Music first called "blues" in the 1920s actually made its initial appearance around 1900 in the Mississippi Delta region. One possible source may have been "slave seculars," which lampooned spirituals, as critic Sterling Brown notes:

*Bible stories, especially the creation, the fall of Man, and the flood, were spoofed. "Reign, Mastr Jesus, reign" became "Rain Masser, rain hard? Rain flour and lard, and a big hog head, Down in my back yard."*<sup>146</sup>

The blues are often considered a cross-cultural blend of African American work songs, field hollers, and traditional European-American ballads.<sup>147</sup> However, blues tunes, unlike slave songs, were mostly solos in which individuals expressed deep personal feelings. William Ferris argues, in his *Blues from the Delta*, that this music most likely developed after the Civil War because it commonly relies on the accompaniment of a guitar, and this instrument was not illustrated in pre-Civil War literature.<sup>148</sup> Blues lyrics favor such subjects as bad luck, a broken family, callous or unrequited love, a general feeling of being ill at ease with a cold world of trouble, and a sense of rootlessness. All of these topics, except unrequited love, are of crucial importance to Thornton Dial's art.

A number of African American musicians and scholars and others believe that the blues represent a special understanding of what it means to be black. Although some have attributed this music's great success to its inherent universality, others, such as B.B. King, have emphasized its way of establishing bonds between African Americans. King noted, "If you've been singing the blues as long as I have, it's kind of like being black twice."<sup>149</sup> Philosopher Cornel West believes that blues and other forms of black music constitute an "Afro-American humanist" tradition.<sup>150</sup> And American studies specialist Jeffrey Stewart perceives the blues to be a culturally sanctioned mode for channeling African American tribulations:

*The blues is not just the language of oppression and the realization that there's no way out of this belly of racist capitalism. It is the ability to overcome . . . to sing a song of transcendence, of madcap joy in the midst of all hell. It is the ability to laugh to keep from crying, to open the heart instead of shutting it once she's gone, and to say "I didn't want the . . . anyway." The blues is perhaps best represented by the concept of irony that connects us to the slave's experience of building America, from sunup to sundown, and being called lazy. . . . The blues aesthetic is living and expressing the contradictions between the American ideal and black reality.*<sup>151</sup>

Scholars have written that the blues established a way for African Americans to cope with adversity by finding an artistic medium capable of conveying their feelings, enabling them the opportunity to appreciate the irony of their situation, sharing the commonality of knowing that others have experienced similar difficulties, and transcending negative feelings through the sheer beauty and power of their chosen medium. One might say that, similarly, Thornton Dial's paintings and sculpture allow him the opportunity to do all these things.

The blues have appealed mainly to an older generation that has used them to cope with the contradictions of residual forms of slavery or its ongoing aftereffects in a democratic world. According to Ferris, this music is "the expression of a generation which grew up before the Civil Rights Movement and attitudes expressed in their verses are very





EVERYBODY GOT A RIGHT TO THE TREE OF LIFE / 1988 / Enamel, tin, glass marbles, and industrial sealing compound on wood / 48 x 96 1/2" / Philadelphia Museum of Art / Gift of Ron and June Shelp / 1993.150.1

different from those of 'soul' singers like James Brown and Aretha Franklin."<sup>152</sup> To this, one might add that the southern rural blues singer is usually male, whereas the urban blues outside the South is often epitomized by female vocalists.

When Dial asserts that his art is "about reality" and is "concerned with the way things really is," as he has said on a number of occasions to this writer, he is in accord with an overall attitude of blues singers who believe in the veracity of their message and their mode of conveying it. In *The Spirituals and the Blues*, James H. Cone records this certainty among a number of performers:

*[I]t is necessary to view the blues as a state of mind in relation to the Truth of the black experience. This is what blues man Henry Townsend, of St. Louis, has in mind when he says: "When I sing the blues I sing the truth." . . . Or as Furry Lewis of Memphis puts it: "All the blues, you can say, is true." . . . In the words of Memphis Willie B.: "A blues is something that's real."*<sup>153</sup>

This emphasis on reality might help to explain why the theme of the road often recurs in Dial's art. According to the following lyrics:

*When a woman takes de blues,  
She tucks her head and cries.  
But when a man catches the blues,  
He catches the freight and rides.*<sup>154</sup>

And this requirement that authentic art must be faithful to objective reality without the aid of a *deus ex machina* may be a reason for Dial's unrelenting examination of humanity's depths in such pieces as *The Lord's Plan*, *Rolling Mill*, and *City Lines*.

(Williamsburg, Va.: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1985), p. 10.

#### KENNETH J. GERGEN ON EMERY BLAGDON

<sup>140</sup> Dan Dryden and Don Christensen, "Grassroots Artist: Emery Blagdon," in *KGAA News*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1988), pp. 1-2.

<sup>141</sup> David E. Nye, *The American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

#### NORMAN J. GIRARDOT ON HOWARD FINSTER

<sup>142</sup> For the past several years, Finster has publicly talked about his plans to be "criminated." However, he has most recently (as of June 1997) capitulated to his wife's wishes that he receive a more conventional, and traditional, Christian burial in God's Good Earth. The "anticipatin' coffin" and full-length mirror remain as described.

#### ROBERT HOBBS ON THORNTON DIAL SR.

<sup>143</sup> Thornton Dial, conversation with the author, September 2, 1995.

<sup>144</sup> Fortunately, this proposal was refused because it was felt that underground water channels would soon spread the pollution throughout the area.

<sup>145</sup> Thornton Dial, conversation with the author, April 20, 1996.

<sup>146</sup> Sterling Brown, in James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991, reprint of The Seabury Press Edition, 1972), p. 98.

<sup>147</sup> Richard J. Powell, *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Project for the Arts, 1989), p. 19.

<sup>148</sup> William Ferris, *Blues from the Delta* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978), p. 31.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>150</sup> Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), pp. 85ff.

<sup>151</sup> Jeffrey Stewart, "Given the Blues," in Powell, *op. cit.*, pp. 89ff.

<sup>152</sup> Ferris, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>153</sup> Cone, *op. cit.*, pp. 102ff.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

#### WENDY STEINER ON PURVIS YOUNG

<sup>155</sup> Paula Harper, "Art as a Matter of Life and Death," in *Purvis Young* (Miami: Joy Moos Gallery, 1992), n.p.

<sup>156</sup> Maria Elena Fernandez, "Hard Palette," *Miami Sun Sentinel*, 7 April 1993, p. 1E.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6E.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1E.

<sup>160</sup> Elisa Turner, "Anguished Vision of Street Life Empowers Purvis Young Exhibition," *Miami Herald*, May 2, 1993.

<sup>161</sup> Fernandez, *op. cit.*, p. 6E.