

Alabama

# 'History Refused to Die' and its living at the Alabama Contemporary Art Center



[<http://connect.al.com/staff/ikenberg/index.html>] By Tamara Ikenberg [<http://connect.al.com/staff/ikenberg/posts.html>]

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The Centre for The Living Arts at 301 Conti St. in downtown Mobile has a new, much more sensible name: The Alabama Contemporary Art Center

"After probably 12 years of using Centre for the Living Arts, people were still confused by the name" said Alabama Contemporary Art Center Executive Director Robert Sain. "It was just to clarify and call us what we are and who we are. It's as straightforward as you can get. It's saying we're the state's showcase for the significant art of our time."

The first exhibit under the new name is "History Refused to Die," a display of brash, intuitive and searingly honest work from 15 self-taught black Alabama artists. "History" will remain at the Center through December, 2015.

The more than 75 assemblages, sculptures, paintings, quilts and additional art forms, confront racism, natural disasters, government corruption, poverty, war and much more.

"It's the story of the African-American experience in Alabama as told through the work of these artists," Sain said. "This art had been dismissed by the art establishment. They just weren't going to let it into the canon, and they would say it's because the artists have no formal education. But in some cases, the unspoken reason is because they're black."

The featured artists are Louisiana Bendolph, Arthur Dial, Richard Dial, Thornton Dial, Thornton Dial Jr., Rachel Carey George, Lonnie Holley, Ronald Lockett, Charlie Lucas, Joe Minter, Lucy T. Pettway, Missouri Pettway, Sue Willie Seltzer, Jimmy Lee Sudduth and Mose Tolliver.

All of the art is from the 20th and 21st centuries.

Some of the artists, like the shaman-like Minter, creator of Birmingham's African Village, and 87-year-old Thornton Dial and his sons, are still alive and kicking and working.

Others, including Tolliver and Sudduth have passed on.

The works are from the enormous art collection of scholar and collector William S. Arnett. His challenge getting the work accepted by the art establishment is an epic story in itself.

"Bill was the champion of this art and he was insisting that this art is as important as any art that's ever come out of this country," Sain said. "'60 Minutes" did a story on Bill some years ago saying he's a white guy trying to exploit poor black artists. It really damaged not just Bill, but the artists too. It made them seem exploitable. The whole thing was horrible. Most people probably would've given up. But Bill just kept plowing ahead no matter what the media had to say. Last year, 'The New Yorker' did a huge profile investigating Bill to death that came out validating him."

Now, pieces from the untrained artists are part of the permanent collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is pretty much the ultimate validation.

The work is an incredible testament to what can be created with the roughest of found materials, a ton of natural talent, and an unstoppable urge to make meaningful art.

The materials and the messages are equally potent and revealing.

"All these artists pretty much use everyday objects that they had access to and saw and encountered every day," Sain said.

For instance, Sudduth used Alabama mud, grass and berry juice in his primitive-looking paintings, and Thornton Dial incorporates everything from mangled Mickey Mouse dolls to strips of discarded American flags.

The dirty, tattered Mickey Mouse, whose eyes are eerily vacant and pupil-less is the focal point of Dial's 3-D assemblage representing a slave ship prow. Mickey, who Sain sees as a pop culture minstrel, is chained to the prow.

Right next to the assemblage is a wooden model of a slave ship with jars of cotton by Joe Minter. The piece is a hybrid of a cotton spool and a ship

"You can't possibly tell the African-American story without including slavery," Sain said. "Some of the artists are more literal and some are symbolic."

The exhibit doesn't just dwell on the past. Minter's "I Was A Warrior," a sad heap of a soldier on a park bench with an "I Will Work For Food" sign attached, speaks very much to the tragic treatment of American veterans.

Next to the installation is Minter's stirring commentary: "From a warrior to a park bench, and from the park bench to having a hand out to ask for a drink of water and a piece of bread. He just says "I need something so that I can stand once more and be a warrior. I served to give. Will you give so that I can serve again?"

Other highlights of the show include a selection of Gee's Bend quilts, and a re-creation of Minter's African Village in the Center's enormous back warehouse room.

The huge space contains clinking, tinkling sculptures from the Village, and the walls move with projections of Minter giving a tour of the Village. Entering the warehouse space feels like leaving town and visiting a totally different world.

There are so many stories within the show, and we will cover more aspects of the exhibit in the coming months.

Make sure to check out the show at LoDa ArtWalk, from 6 p.m to 9 p.m. on Friday, June 12.

"For us, this is a very rich show," Sain said. "It works for any age, people from any walk of life and it works whether you do or don't know art."

For more information, visit <http://www.alabamacontemporary.com> [<http://www.alabamacontemporary.com/>] or call 251-208-5682.

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