The New Criterion

Art September 2018

Exhibition note

by *Mario Naves*

On "History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift" at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The thirty works included in "History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift" are part of a larger donation to The Metropolitan Museum of Art and constitute a noteworthy addition to the collection. Founded in 2010, Souls Grown Deep—the name comes from a poem by Langston Hughes—has its origins in the collection of William S. Arnett, a historian who also dealt in art, primarily from Asia and Africa. Arnett's emphasis shifted in the mid-1980s, when the Georgia native turned to artists closer to home—specifically, men and women of African descent born during the Jim Crow era. Interest turned to passion after Arnett visited the home of Thornton Dial in 1987. Dial, born into a family of sharecroppers, began making art at age fifty after being laid off from the Pullman Car Company. Taken with the imaginative resourcefulness by which the former machinist reconfigured salvaged materials, Arnett became Dial's patron, funding the artist until the latter's death in 2016. With Arnett, "the rich, symbolic world of the black rural South" gained an energetic and voluble champion. "I came to realize," he told The Washington Post, "that the work created by black culture across the board was as good as any work made by white people." The Souls Grown Deep Foundation builds upon that conviction, advocating for the inclusion of folk artists—that is, artists without formal training or art world imprimatur—into the pantheon of fine arts.

Anyone conversant with the discourse of contemporary art will have noticed some red flags in the previous sentence. "Folk artist"? "Fine arts"? Them's fightin' words in some quarters, and, in fact, qualify as examples of "term warfare." This phrase—a new one to me—pops up in "Self-Taught and Modern," an essay in the catalogue accompanying "History Refused to Die." Randall R. Griffey, a Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Met, writes that "art historians have struggled to identify the most accurate and appropriate means of describing work produced by painters and sculptors working outside urban art capitals and without traditional academic artistic training." The catalogue offers a veritable minefield of terminology around which the essayists tread gingerly. Scare quotes are abundant—and for good reason. Established verbiage becomes suspect when boundaries are in flux. The installation makes plain that artists at the margins of

official culture should be included in the canon. At one end of the exhibition, *Victory in Iraq* (2004), a sizable assemblage by Dial, is placed in the company of signature works by Clyfford Still, Conrad Marca-Relli, Robert Motherwell, and Isamu Noguchi. Point taken. Outsiders are in.

Thornton Dial, Victory in Iraq, *2004, Mannequin head, barbed wire, steel, clothing, tin, electrical wire, wheels, stuffed animals, toy cars and figurines, plastic spoons, wood, basket, oil, enamel, spray paint & two-part epoxy putty on canvas on wood, Gift of Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection.*

Consider how Peck makes a case for the Gee's Bend Quilters—of whom Pettway is a member—on purely aesthetic grounds. I mean, really: talk about *conservative*.

As someone who considers Dial's work impressive in scope but turgid in effect, I find the corresponding bookend to "History Refused to Die" more convincing as an argument for re-writing the history books. *Medallion* (*ca.* 1960), a quilt by Loretta Pettway, is as sterling an exploration of color, craft, and pattern as you could hope for. Practicality may have been its impetus (a body needs to keep warm, after all), but the end result achieves a poetry that is—by equal measures—stringent, vulnerable, bumptious, and poignant. Comparisons to certain strains of Modernist abstraction seem unavoidable, but are to be strenuously avoided—or so we are warned. Amelia Peck, the Met's Marica F. Vilcek Curator of American Decorative Arts, deems as specious any correspondences that could be made between the Pettway quilt and, say, paintings by Josef Albers or Piet Mondrian. "There are other ways to determine that quilts are art without trying to judge them by the same criteria as one would a painting." To bolster this point of view she ropes in Hilton Kramer. Pause, for a moment, to

wonder why Peck is startled that a "highly conservative" critic should be entranced by (in Hilton's words) the "appealing vigor" of American quilts. Then consider how Peck makes a case for the Gee's Bend Quilters—of whom Pettway is a member—on purely aesthetic grounds. I mean, really: talk about *conservative*.

Okay—I'm being snippy. And perhaps less time should be spent mulling the verbiage surrounding "History Refused to Die." But one does worry that the hand-wringing, proselytizing, and tsk-tsk-tsking that circle around art nowadays—much of it centered around the vicissitudes of political correctness or the marketplace and its machinations—do more to offset (or obscure) aesthetic experience than engender it. Fortunately, art has a way of wriggling out from under those who would seek to control it, and the best work in the exhibition connects—not through theoretical grandstanding or well-intentioned guilt-tripping, but by material audacity, visionary independence, and modesty of affect. The aforementioned quilters of Gee's Bend—an Alabama community with a population under three hundred—have gained renown for exactly those reasons. A 2002 retrospective of the work was, for many of us, a signal event heralding an important tributary of American culture. The ten quilts included at the Met are typical—and nowhere near enough. Necessity may be the mother of invention, but it barely accounts for the wit, sensitivity, and vibrancy brought to bear by, among others, Pettway, Mary Elizabeth Kennedy, and Annie Mae Young.

Lucy T. Pettway, Housetop and Bricklayer with Bars quilt, ca. *1955*, *Top and back: cotton and acetate*, *Gift of Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection.*

The rest of the work on view is nowhere near as nuanced or original, but is diverting nonetheless. Nellie Mae Rowe's colorful and cartoonish mixed-media pieces touch on human failings, both comic (*Woman Scolding Her Companion*, 1981) and awful: *Atlanta's Missing Children* (1981) memorializes, albeit in a quixotic manner, those murdered in the infamous killing spree of 1979–81. Other pieces are commemorative as well, whether it be Joe Minter's *Four Hundred Years of Free Labor* (1995), a sardonic comment on Grant Wood's *American Gothic* (1930), or *Locked Up Their Minds* (1972) by Purvis Young, a tumultuous painting that brings to mind James Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888) and the stylizations typical of Ethiopian prayer books. *Grown Together in the Midst of the Foundation* (1994) by Lonnie Holley evinces a canny understanding of space, metaphor, rhythm, and linearity; it would hold its own in the company of sculptures by Martin Puryear or James Surls. As for Dial—the artist who takes up most of the real estate in "History Refused to Die"—let's just say that if his amalgamations of detritus manage to supplant those by Robert

Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Anselm Kiefer in museums far and wide, then his efforts will have been worth their weight in hype.

Mario Naves is an artist, critic, and teacher who lives in New York City.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 37 Number 1 , on page 37

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2018/9/exhibition-note-10139