REVELATIONS

ART FROM THE AFRICAN AMERICAN SOUTH

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! So I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., from his final speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” given on April 3, 1968

This exhibition celebrates the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco’s acquisition of sixty-two artworks created by twenty-two African Americans born in the South during the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Collectively their lives and works were shaped by four major historical events: the African Diaspora in which approximately four-hundred thousand Africans were forcibly ab ducted from their homes and sold into bondage in the United States beginning in 1619; the American slavery system that brutalized and divided their families and descendants until the end of the Civil War in 1865; the institutionalized segregation of the Jim Crow laws that followed the Reconstruction Era (1865–1877); and the rise of the modern Civil Rights movement in the 1950s.

Out of this shared history, these artists forged compelling new aesthetic languages that confronted their unique experiences as African Americans while also addressing universal aspects of the human condition. Their output exemplifies the flowering of an exceptional chapter in the history of American art—one that sheds new light on the complexity of African American cultures in the United States. Embodying the progress of the modern Civil Rights era, these visual traditions bring a distinct perspective to some of the most profound and persistent issues in American society, including race, class, religion, and gender. Originally created as expressions of individual identity and communal solidarity, these eloquent objects are now powerful testaments to African American cultural continuity, resistance, and survival.

“Art is like a bright star up ahead in the darkness of the world. It can lead peoples through the darkness and help them from being afraid of the darkness. Art is a guide for every person who is looking for something.”

—Artist Thornton Dial
In 1962, in the midst of the struggle for Civil Rights, the ferry service from Gee’s Bend to Camden was halted, severing the community from jobs, schools, and shopping. The local sheriff explained, “We didn’t close down the ferry because they were black. We did it because they forgot they were black.”

In 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. visited Gee’s Bend, urging the residents to register to vote, telling them, “I come over here to Gee’s Bend to tell you: you are somebody.”

Salvaging fabric scraps from bed linens, feed sacks, and old work clothes, the women of Gee’s Bend incorporated the remnants of daily life into inventive works of art, which were primarily made to keep their families warm. These artists often refer to their distinctive quilting styles as “my way,” an approach that adapts and expands basic traditional patterns through innovative abstraction and rhythmic improvisation. Their collective achievements are now viewed as an important chapter in the history of American art.
There was a certain root, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it always on my right side, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey or any other white man to whip me.

—Abolitionist Frederick Douglass, recalling the advice of another slave. Extracted from Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845

“A tree is a network of ideas. A plan, a design... Roots symbolize the oldest things, all those things that come to be a part of a man’s life... Everything come from the tree, the tree of life.”

—Artist Thornton Dial

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The roots, branches, and trunks of trees are among the most common art materials employed by African American artists in the South. Their uses can be traced to African precedents and to the slavery and segregation systems, which prohibited or precluded access to most fine art materials. These objects were also potently emblematic for people whose ancestors had been violently uprooted from their families, communities, ancestors, and homelands.

Drawing upon African traditions, root doctors in the United States employed these natural growths for their medicinal properties, while conjurers created root charms to ward against evil spirits, enlist beneficial ones, and deter violence by slave owners. Over time, other associations of trees with the four seasons and the eternal cycles of birth, life, death, and rebirth were grafted with the Christian metaphor of the Tree of Life. This legendary tree linked the underworld, the earth, and heaven, and also served as a symbol of Christ, salvation, and eternal life—an especially appealing narrative for those living under bondage or segregation.

“ROOT AND BRANCH SCULPTURES”

“THE TREE OF LIFE”
THE WORLD AT MY DOOR

THE SOUTHERN YARD SHOW

“"The way you make an African a slave, you make him invisible. I’m making the African visible."

—Artist Joe Minter, speaking about his Birmingham, Alabama, yard show, a sculptural installation he titled the "African Village in America"

“The first impression of viewing [the yard] was that of a half-pleasing, half-offending jumble of greenery and gleaming color; of bush and vine; of vegetable and blooming flower; of kitchen ware, crockery, and defunct household furniture. A marvelous mixture it was."

—Writer Effie Graham, describing the yard show of a woman formerly enslaved in Tennessee. Extracted from The Passin' On Party, 1912

Traditional African burial rituals, in which graves are adorned with humble objects, are among the earliest expressions of African American visual culture. These rites influenced the later evolution of the "yard show," an outdoor gallery of natural and manmade objects that is one of the oldest artistic traditions in the African American South. These installations are also known as "dressed yards" or "medicated yards," conveying their dual artistic and therapeutic functions.

Yard shows typically are populated with found materials that have been transformed into vehicles for expression. These objects often retain the positive associations of their previous owners, but they can also be used to critique society’s values. Several artists have explicitly linked their use of castoff materials to the concept of African Americans being "discarded" by American society. Yard shows represent, in microcosm, the worldviews of their creators, and not only provide their audiences with visual pleasure, but also offer guidance or inspiration of a religious, political, or social nature.
THE WORLD AT LARGE

THORNTON DIAL AND RONALD LOCKETT

"All truth is hard truth. We're in the darkness now and we got to accept the hard truth to bring on the light. You can hide the truth but you can't get rid of it. When truth come out in the light, we get the beauty of the world."

—Artist Thornton Dial

"Long before I was born, my ancestors had yoked their prospects for survival to the might of steel, just as they had once been yoked to cotton in the sweeping fields of rural Alabama. . . . Short for the U.S. Pipe and Foundry, Pipe Shop gave our neighborhood its name and the men of Bessemer menial employment while the steel industry hung on, paying a barely livable wage."

—Writer Deborah E. McDowell, describing the neighborhood where she grew up and where Thornton Dial and Ronald Lockett lived and worked. Extracted from Leaving Pipe Shop, 1996

In 1981, after thirty years of work as a steelworker in Bessemer, Alabama, Thornton Dial (1928–2016) began to make art. He used both found objects and traditional art materials to create paintings, sculptures, and mixed-media assemblages. Dial's works are distinguished by their multiple and nuanced perspectives, and by their complex use of metaphors, symbols, and allusions. His pieces offer the most compelling artistic account of the prose, poetry, and politics of life in the African American South, but they also tackle national and international issues such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003.

As a younger cousin and Bessemer neighbor of Thornton Dial, Ronald Lockett (1965–1998) inherited a belief in the formidable political and social powers of art. Dial mentored his relative, who began to work with similar found materials before embracing his signature use of recycled tin siding. Prior to his early death from complications of HIV/AIDS, Lockett developed a highly personal approach to his favored themes, including the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth, as well as humankind's exploitation of nature and animals.
From the Margins to the Mainstream

The Art of the Diaspora

“What it means [to be an African American woman artist] is always having to navigate the limits contained in these titles. Even to escape their impact, an artist must pass through this channel. Expectations on the performance of race and gender are simultaneously high and low, depending on who is looking or asking.”

—Artist Kara Walker

“We have shown the world we can float like butterflies, and sting like bees, that we can rocket into space like Mae Jemison, steal home like Jackie, rock like Jimmy, stir the pot like Richard Pryor. And we can be sick and tired of being sick and tired like Fannie Lou Hamer, and still rock steady like Aretha Franklin.”

—President Barack Obama, speaking at the inauguration of the National Museum of African American History and Culture on September 24, 2016

For much of the twentieth century, art by African Americans was excluded from or marginalized within permanent collections and temporary exhibitions of American museums. Only in the wake of the modern Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s did the US art world slowly begin to acknowledge, support, and embrace art by African American artists. This acceptance was accelerated in part by pressure from activists and by the culture wars and identity politics of the late twentieth century, which enhanced awareness of this country’s historical diversity and complexity, as well as its preconceptions and prejudices.

American museums initially demonstrated a preference for works that explicitly depicted African American subjects and themes. This preference tended to exclude African American artists who worked in abstract, conceptual, or other modes not necessarily related to their personal identities. Only recently have museums begun to champion artists whose visual vocabularies are not readily identifiable as uniquely African American, or whose personal identities are not perceived as representative of mainstream African American experience.
"COMING TOGETHER"

ARTISTIC TRADITIONS OF THE QUILT AND THE PRINT

Since the 1930s, the women of Gee’s Bend, Alabama, have been gathering regularly to make quilts, developing their own artistic vocabularies within the medium’s traditions, influencing each other, and, ultimately, developing a shared style of improvisation that defies conventional quilt making. A 2002–2003 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Houston Museum of Fine Arts brought national attention to the Gee’s Bend artists. Pam Paulson of Paulson Fontaine Press (formerly Paulson Bott Press) was so impressed with the quilts in the Whitney presentation that she invited Mary Lee Bendolph, Louisiana Bendolph, Loretta Pettway, and Loretta Bennett to come to Berkeley to make prints beginning in 2005. Paulson, who could see the possibilities of the quilt compositions distilled into formalist abstraction, wanted to promote the quilt designs as works of art in the time-honored tradition of intaglio printmaking.

“Coming together,” a phrase that Mary Lee Bendolph uses to describe her process of making art, takes on another meaning in this gallery that also includes prints by Lonnie Holley, a friend and fellow artist from Alabama who visited the press in 2013 and 2017. Holley’s art comprises found materials that he recycles and fashions into sculpture and three-dimensional installations. For his prints, he scavenged scraps from both inside and outside the print workshop to press onto a soft-ground plate to create his imagery.

“I just started working with the material, cutting and piecing like I was at home, singing my songs and praying my prayer. And then it started coming together.”

—Artist Mary Lee Bendolph, describing her process of making prints in 2006

“The best of these [quilt] designs, unusually minimalist and spare, are so eye-poppingly gorgeous that it’s hard to know how to begin to account for them. But then, good art can never be fully accounted for, just described.”