

MARCH

Circa 1989

February 9–March 19, 2022

“When I heard that Birmingham was going to build a civil rights museum, that gave me what you call a stepping stone. From what I was hearing, the main players in the freedom struggle, the foot soldiers, was left out of the story. We need the leaders, but without the foot soldiers, the struggle and fight can’t be won. But where is the recognition for the soldiers?”

–Joe Minter

This moment provides the backdrop for *Circa 1989*, an exhibition featuring works by 11 Black southern artists working in the same region and from the same cultural impulse as Joe Minter when he began building his sprawling environment, the African Village in America. The collector and art historian William S. Arnett describes the landscape in *Souls Grown Deep Volume 2*: “From the late 1960s through the 1970s, after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., a remarkable cultural phenomenon unfolded in the southern United States yet went almost unnoticed. As if in unspoken response to a trumpet’s *reveille*, Black people throughout the region came out from their houses, or factories, or in from the fields, and intensified their creation of artistic environments, or “yard shows,” so the outside world could see what had been previously expressed in secrecy inside and behind their residences. It had been there for centuries, this yard-show tradition, but almost no one outside the culture knew about it, this not-for-our-eyes cubism, fauvism, expressionism, surrealism, dada, abstract expressionism, pop, minimalism, graffiti, postmodern, neo-this, neo-that, neo-everything. Or proto-everything.” *Circa 1989* builds on this moment, exhibiting paintings, sculptures, and drawings made in the following decade, the fruits of this initial flowering, when the artists are at the height of their powers or pushing the boundaries of their works using new materials, scales, and concepts.

Paired alongside Joe Minter’s solo exhibition, *We Lost Our Spears*, *Circa 1989* features masterworks by Hawkins Bolden, Archie Byron, Thornton Dial, Richard Dial, Lonnie Holley, Ronald Lockett, Gracie Scott, Mary Tillman Smith, Georgia Speller, Henry Speller, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, and Mose Tolliver. Despite geography and the limited technology of the era, many of the artists knew one another or had met at the introduction of Arnett and Lonnie Holley. As a result, they began to understand their respective places in this larger cultural moment, one that continues to be studied, published, and exhibited both in the United States and abroad. Indeed, the oft-held notion that these artists toiled in obscurity, outside the structures of society, friendship, and even patronage are not only wrong but evidence of stubborn attitudes regarding race, class, geography, and other circumstances of birth.

It has been just over thirty years since Joe Minter began work on his African Village in America, one of the last remaining yard shows in the southern United States. His contemporaries, many of whom are featured in *Circa 1989*, have mostly passed on to the next phase of existence, but their influence and historical importance continues to grow. It is our hope that these tandem exhibitions open larger conversations about this essential period of modern American art history and the individual artists responsible for its *naissance* and evolution.