ARTnews

February 10, 2022

Joe Minter Talks About His Message Sculptures

By Daniel Fuller

Joe Minter, Nine Pound Steel, 1989 (diptych), welded found metal with bowling balls and tire, 54.5 x 30 x 19 inches. Courtesy of the artist and MARCH.

In the summer of 1989, when the city of Birmingham, Alabama, announced plans for a future civil rights museum, Joe Minter became concerned. The Birmingham-based sculptor was worried that the focus would be only on the movement's leaders, overlooking the work of those he calls its foot soldiers. Seeking to tell the whole story, he began building his African Village in America. A continuously evolving outdoor art environment, the work responds to the stories of the African American ancestors—including former slaves, Buffalo soldiers, and three of the four victims of the 1963 Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing—who are buried at Shadow Lawn Memorial Gardens, a historically Black cemetery adjacent to Minter's home.

In addition to elements that stay on site, Minter has long made "message pieces"—stand-alone works that allow these stories to flow far beyond the village. On the occasion of an exhibition of welded-metal message sculptures at MARCH gallery in New York City, ARTnews interviewed Minter about the pieces in the show. The conversation accelerated quickly, with each of the artist's thoughts building on the others and each word carrying a lot of weight. For Minter, history matters. As he says, "What you got to look at is what came before and made us what we are today."

Joe Minter, 2022. Photo: Daniel Fuller.

Joe Minter, We Lost Our Spears, 1989, welded found metal, 51 x 29 x 35 inches. Courtesy of the artist and MARCH.

We Lost Our Spears, 1989

This is the connection of what took us through our protection. You can look anywhere in the African Village, and you see a spear. I made an African spirit and its strength, which is a spear. The sculpture is the loss of the African warrior, a Zulu warrior, the ultimate warrior. Once he lost his spear and was brought into captivity, made into a slave, he lost his manhood and the shield. This is made from old plowshares that you'd hook up to a mule to cultivate the soil. Know that in every piece of my art, you see a chain in it. That is my mark. That comes from what it took in captivity to hold us. And what we had to be put into, to be put down, to just be treated like an animal. They are standing over the fire. They are brave in the fire.

Geese in Formation, 2001

When the weather changes, all animals that can fly make the migration. So, this is the geese in formation. The leader would be the one in the front and might be the only one that knows the route. I took this old piece of iron. I took a four-way lug wrench. That is what that is. These geese migrate between two magnetic fields. What you see now is the beaches full of whales, dolphins, and these other mammals that use migration and use magnetic fields to know where they are going, but there is a disturbance in those magnetic fields. By man's fault. The way of the earth and the function of what we got has been disturbed by the inside coming to the outside. Everything's got carbon in it. And what carbon is, it is a chemical, and when man started talking about the periodical chart, talking about elements, they were making a chart to rob the earth. This is a migration, coming out of the North, coming back South.

Nine Pound Steel (diptych), 1989

On his leg is a nine-pound steel ball. This is part of what you would say is Jim Crow, put up there after the Reconstruction. The breakdown of the rights we were supposed to have after the Civil War. They would take a man up off the street, an African man, never done nothing, didn't owe nobody nothing. And they made what they call a convict leasing system. They would take Black men and put them in coal mines. On the side of the road, they would have what you call a road gang.

Joe Minter, Geese in Formation, 2001, welded found metal, 41 x 30 x 34 inches. Courtesy of the artist and MARCH.

Pure profit. Free labor from men that ain't done nothing but get thrown into a penitentiary with a leasing system, and they put the nine-pound steel on them. Big old ball to make sure you wouldn't run, and you had to drag that thing and work at the same time.

A book called Slavery by Another Name [by Douglas A. Blackmon] goes into detail about all of these big steel plants, TCI [the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company], Sloss Furnaces, all of them did this. It was a system set up for free labor for coal mines, steel plants, and the rest of it. So, you see, this is the kind of history they want erased when they say it's critical race theory. You can't erase a trail of truth. You say, "Oh a snail can't move." But you wake up, and a snail's track is everywhere. That is how history is. History has left a trail. When you tell the history, you got to tell the whole truth.

Joe Minter, Nine Pound Steel, 1989 (diptych) (detail), welded found metal with bowling balls and tire, 54.5 x 30 x 19 inches.