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Joe Minter's Heavy Metal and a Look to Southern America's Creative Citizenship at March Gallery

By John Drury

Installation view, Joe Minter: We Lost Our Spears: at MARCH Gallery, New York City. Courtesy of the author.

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Joe Minter: We Lost Our Spears
March Gallery
February 9 through March 19, 2022

A very rare opportunity was afforded to those denizens from, and those only visiting, the heart of Manhattan's East Village recently. Rising buoyantly above a baby blue platform, the complimentary orange rust of artist Joe Minter's philosophical metal explorations, served to celebrate a Southern flavor – hot and spicy. Other than the incorporation of a pair of bowling balls embellishing two of the Minter works (these described as a diptych), all that is so poetically installed - at MARCH - is made entirely of welded steel. These stand-ins for incarcerations ball-and chain, serve as crescendo in the pair of figural works, where hands and heads are replaced with the shovels of blue collar servitude and enforced labor; none-the-less, at right and left, sentinels included amongst this field of Joe's welded weapons of hope – weary guards life and liberty… freedom for all.

It is said (and sung) that rust never sleeps. It might be suspected that the same could be true of Joe Minter, an artist who has filled the expanse of his land to the brim – edge to fenced in edge, with sculpture and painted signage, and imagery in his hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. In addition, there, to the hundreds of painted signs, abstract welded assemblages of chain, repurposed tools and scrap metals, one will often find the 79-year-old artist Joe, youthfully spinning about the premises and eager to explain his position. Outside the exception of only a very few other exhibitions of select autonomous works in Manhattan (Minter was included in the 2019 version of the Whitney Biennial, and the James Fuentes Gallery showed his mixed-media assemblages that same year), Minter's greater work might only be experienced by visiting this outdoor installation, his African Village in America, begun in 1989 and surrounding his home in unrestrained effort to give voice to his concerns. Employing cutting-edge imaging technology, Mr. Minter's enveloping property aimed at revising four hundred years of African-American exclusion from history, is currently being mapped and digitally documented for future generations.

In harmony, the dual storefront spaces that are MARCH compose a set of galleries by its own definition operating at the intersection of art and social justice, as founded by Phillip March Jones. And so, one had not needed to go far in this recent situation to see also, shining examples of work by Joe Minter's southern contemporaries – those often lumped beneath the same "umbrella" of what is (if an unfortunately derivative term) best known as Outsider Art: here including the great Thornton Dial, the visionary artist and musician Lonnie Holley, Mary T. Smith, Joe Light, Mose Tolliver and others – a healthy portion of the best; masterworks all, anchored "in-the-flesh" and philosophically by Thornton Dial's expansive (untitled) slave ship from 1988, at the rear wall of the space. Also from 1988, there is the amorphous tangle of arms and legs - Archie Byron's unsettling concoction of painted sawdust and palpable angst. A Mose T. diptych from '87 is particularly impressive in its painterly expertise, his intuitive though sophisticated hue at full speed. A Hawkins Bolden "scarecrow" cements an aura of the otherworldly, if unabashedly human and exploratory residue not the urban, but rural; product a place where inequalities too often endure, and races live separated. WM

Thornton Dial, untitled (Slave Ship) 1988, enamel paint on metal, 60x124x10 inches.