

Mose Tolliver

Decoded

“A good musician could play a Tolliver painting.”

—William S. Arnett

Mose Tolliver paints what he sees. As if guided by some internalized blues conductor, the artist’s strokes reveal a wet-on-wet painting technique, layering flattened planes and blending surfaces to create chromatically harmonious works of art. Unable to stand without crutches, Tolliver sat on his bed to paint, balancing the board on his knees, and rotating them when necessary. The resulting works employ homegrown visualized forms of syncopation, rhythm, lyrics, percussion, and other musical elements. Buses glide, turtles lie, faces grin, women dance, and fantasies unfold in these works. Many of these playful, occasionally whimsical, images conceal more complex stories or other truths, even ugly ones.

Sophisticated and accessible, Tolliver’s paintings possess a flattened and graphic style that can disguise their metaphorical significance, hiding in plain sight. Paintings of comically elongated buses refer to the Montgomery bus boycotts while the Nall paintings pay tribute to an artist he admired, an Alabama native named Fred “Nall” Hollis who lived and worked in Europe, creating a visual dialogue between them and a suggestion of Tolliver’s ambitions. Rhythmically splattered turtles speak to the physicality of an old man slowed by age and without full use of his legs, while the more directly titled self-portraits blend Cubist aesthetics with recurring motifs: long faces, round and toothy mouths, bright, watering eyes.

Tolliver describes the genesis of his painting: “When I got hurt, I had more time to paint, and wood was a whole lot easier to get hold of. The first picture I did on wood was a red bird. People brought me books to copy out of so I started doing that.” Indeed, the vast majority of Tolliver’s imagery is gleaned from books, magazine advertisements, and other readily-available printed materials. This was not, however, the artist’s first form of visual expression. Tolliver’s initial foray was through the lens of landscaping and the creation of root sculptures. “Peoples say I first painted when I hurt my feet, but I painted way before that. I did what you call landscapes. I was in the landscaping business. And I loved it.”

Much like the origins of his artistic career, Tolliver’s work is frequently misunderstood, and perhaps underestimated. His paintings are in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Centre Pompidou, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and dozens of other prominent institutions. They also hang in kitchens, bedrooms, and living rooms across the country, providing visual humor, wit, and graphic sensibility to those who live alongside them.

Mose Tolliver: *Decoded* is a humble attempt to de-mystify and contextualize the work of one of America’s most well-known but least understood painters. Organized into small groupings of archetypes, the exhibition employs written passages from artists, writers, scholars, and gallerists, to both clarify and interpret Tolliver’s visual vocabulary, honed and developed over many years.