

Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers at the Royal Academy review: an essential show

By Ben Luke

Artists like Lonnie Holley, Thornton Dial and Joe Minter are finally getting due attention, but this exhibition will leave visitors wanting more

In the sculpture *Copying the Rock* (1995), Lonnie Holley took a beaten-up photocopier, placed a rock on its scanner and scrawled under its lid: “It’s like I am living in hell.”

Holley, who was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1950, has described the motivation for the work in the context of the history of Black communities, particularly in the southern states. “We people have had a hard time, but we struggled through it,” he said. But technology, symbolised by the copier, brings “new problems” and “we can’t just copy the past. We got to deal with the new.”

That weighty rock, then, could be a gesture of defiance or emblematic of the weight of addressing injustices facing African American communities and the long histories that inform them. And they are the background for all the work in *Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers*. But the exhibition is frustratingly



Thornton Dial, *Stars of Everything*, 2004. Mixed media, 248.9 x 257.8 x 52.1 cm. Souls Grown Deep Foundation, Atlanta. / Estate of Thornton Dial / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London 2023. Photo: Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio

The exhibition focuses on 34 Black artists from the Southeastern United States from the middle of the 20th century to the present day, whose work hums with the harrowing resonance of slavery, the segregationist Jim Crow laws and their legacies.

Artists like Holley are only now getting due attention after working with little recognition for decades. And the materials he uses are symbolic of much of this show: worn and discarded, salvaged and recycled into profoundly stirring new creations.

It might be in the sculptural collages of Holley and fellow Alabama artists like Thornton Dial and Joe Minter, or the quilts made from jeans, corduroy and other fabric scraps made in the rural community of Gee’s Bend in the same state, or paintings on rough wood made in Florida by Purvis Young.

These are works made not in academies and studios but among families and communities, in kitchens and on porches. They’ve not been widely shown, until now, in kunsthallen and museums, but instead in yards and



Joe Light, Blue River Mountain, 1988. Enamel on wood, 81.3 x 121.9 cm. Souls Grown Deep Foundation, Atlanta. / ARS, NY and DACS, London 2023. Photo: Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio

limited; I left wanting much more. The 64 works are drawn mostly from one source, the US-based Souls Grown Deep collection, and they're displayed in the limited space of the Gabrielle Jungels-Winkler Galleries, rather than the grand Main Galleries.

Very few artists, like Dial and Holley, are explored in the depth one might hope for. Many are only represented by one or two works. The entire Gee's Bend quiltmaking story, with its brilliant variations on Housetop and Blocks and Strips quilts (the improvisational forms are known as "my way" quilts) is given half a gallery, with a total of eight pieces in the entire show.

There's also the difficulty of translating the energy of the work and its original presentation. The design is perhaps too elegant given the rawness, even brutality of the materials and techniques on view. For instance, one feels that Holley's Copying the Rock could sit directly on the floor here, rather than on the polite plinth it's given.

On the basis of the work alone, though, this is an essential show. One just has to hope there's a more comprehensive one not far behind it.