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Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers, Royal Academy, London — revelatory art from the Deep South

By Maya Jaggi

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Excluded from the mainstream, resourceful artists made daring, powerful work with materials from coffee grounds to mud

A dog's skull stares from a salvaged turntable in Lonnie Holley's witty assemblage "Keeping a Record of It (Harmful Music)". Alluding to the putative dangers of African-American music in the minds of the white authorities, the 1986 work uses the conceptual irony and found materials — or what the artist describes with relish as "trash, garbage and debris" — familiar in art since Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades. Yet its roots lie in a powerful parallel tradition.

Holley is among 34 artists in *Souls Grown Deep Like the Rivers: Black Artists from the American South* at London's Royal Academy, with work from the mid-20th century to today. Born between 1887 and 1965, most came from the Black Belt of Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi — so-called for its fertile soil and forced labour — in communities that stayed on after the post-civil-war "black codes" curbed African-Americans' rights, rather than joining the Great

Migration north of black families in 1910-70. This show forms a rare Deep South counterpoint to Tate Modern's 2017 survey of northern and west-coast urban art, *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*. During Jim Crow segregation, to make art was to own oneself. Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple* whose family picked cotton in Georgia, once said her mother was "an artist whose palette was a flower garden".

These works attest not only to ingenuity but also to courage, when presuming to make art — let alone conceive of oneself as an artist — risked violent reprisals. As co-curator Raina Lampkins-Fielder says, "This is art for art's sake, and then some."

In Thornton Dial's minimalist collage "Blue Skies: The Birds that Didn't Learn How to Fly" (2008), rags and cast-off gloves on a clothes line bleakly evoke the terror and waste of lynchings.

In his elliptical watercolour “Cotton Field” (1996), luscious red pods overpower a frail, trapped shadow, its neck twisted in open-mouthed despair.

Dial, born in 1928 in Alabama, and other such artists were typically denied schooling beyond elementary level — yet “self-taught” is a misnomer for knowledge passed through informal networks and lineages. His tribute collage “Mrs Bendolph” (2002), hangs opposite Mary Lee Bendolph’s labyrinthine “housetop” quilt “Burgle Boys” (2007).

“Sarah Lockett’s Roses” (1997) by Ronald Lockett, who was mentored by Dial, his cousin, pays homage to his great-grandmother with flowers cut into painted tin tiles, a bouquet of salvaged metal echoing her patchworks. Extending this loose dynasty, “King of the Jungle”, a sculptural seat with a bottle wrapped in chains, hinting at addiction as a new enslavement, is by Dial’s son Thornton Jr. His brother Richard takes aim at religion in “Which Prayer Ended Slavery?” (1988), a welded-steel sculpture bristling with whips, shackles and rust like blood.

Skills were also acquired in what Lampkins-Fielder describes as “jobs available to black men — digging graves, carving tombstones, welding metal, working railroads”. Eldren M Bailey’s “Dancers” from the 1960s, with its jiving couple balancing on intertwined legs, is a joyously secular take on funerary sculpture in white plaster and concrete. Archie Byron’s tender bas-relief “Anatomy I” (1987), with limbs emerging as though from a sand dune, is made of sawdust and glue.

Nellie Mae Rowe’s “Pocketbook” (1982), in paint and pencil, was her final drawing after a cancer diagnosis, its indigo purse aglow with memories. Yet most art supplies were out of reach, giving rise to a stunning range of materials — from tree roots to the splayed spray-paint cans of Dial’s relief “Stars of Everything” (2004), an ironic self-



‘Keeping a Record of It (Harmful Music)’ (1986) by Lonnie Holley © Souls Grown Deep Foundation; ARS/DACS. Photo: Stephen Pitkin



‘Sarah Lockett’s Roses’ (1997) by Ronald Lockett © Souls Grown Deep Foundation; ARS/DACS. Photo: Stephen Pitkin

portrait as a rag-picking American eagle, or the rusty metal in Lockett's "Oklahoma" (1995) whose sinister grille responds to a white-supremacist bombing. Jimmy Lee Sudduth's pigments range from berry juice to coffee grounds, while his skyscraper painting "Atlanta" (1988) stakes a claim to the city in its own red mud.

Another conundrum was where to exhibit, since institutional doors were barred. In drone footage, Joe Minter appears in hard hat at his "African Village in America", an immersive installation of sculptures referencing 400 years of African-American history — complete with a slave ship — in a Southern tradition of yard art that influenced Robert Rauschenberg.

Holley's yard, however, was bulldozed in 1997 to make way for an airport. A life-long up-cycler, whose grandparents salvaged scrap to sell to junkyards, Holley, now 73, spent his early teens at the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children, an ordeal also reflected in works now at London's Edel Assanti gallery. A recording artist since his sixties, his testifying music provides a vital clue to his art. "Can I help you up when you're down?" he sang at Cafe Oto in east London — a reminder of art's role in collective survival, to get people through.

Almost all these works belong to the Atlanta-based Souls Grown Deep Foundation, whose collection of 160 artists was begun by William Arnett in the 1970s. Once relegated to the labels "craft", "folk", "vernacular" or "outsider art", it has been lent to temporary US exhibitions since the early 1980s, but a landmark show at the Met in New York in 2018 triggered acquisitions by major museums.

The foundation takes its name from a line by the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, linking the Mississippi to the Nile. These works can indeed be seen as part of a Black Atlantic tradition. Some quilts echo west African

patterning, while Dial's Mrs Bendolph, in rags and spray paint, brings to mind Frank Bowling, whose abstract paintings are weighted with Atlantic history.

The final room, exemplifying the reclamatory and redemptive quality of this art made in extremis, is given to resplendent, improvisational My Way quilts of the now-famed Gee's Bend women's collective in Alabama. Hand-sewn from scraps and work clothes, pieces such as Marlene Bennet Jones's "Triangles" (2021), with its worn blue-denim pockets and frayed knees, are a moving record of families and the US cotton industry built on their backs. These quilts' mesmerising formal beauty is intensified by the narratives implicitly woven into them, which oblige viewers to grasp, and reckon with, the inhumanity they rose above.

For Holley, they are alive with the toil and tenacious vision of their creators. A quilt is a "mighty piece, even for me", he reflected recently. "Womens [sic] were sewing and sewing, and going to the fields to get leftover cotton... A lot of people are not going to walk up and see it like that [but] I'm able to look at this creature as something people worked at so very hard." ■