

TimeOut

‘Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers: Black Artists from the American South’

By Eddy Frankel

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The American south is a scarred land: scarred physically by farming, violence and war, and scarred emotionally by the brutal legacy of slavery. And out of those scars came some of the twentieth century’s most important cultural movements: blues and jazz. But far less appreciated is the visual art of the American south, a wrong the Royal Academy is trying to right with ‘Souls Grown Deep Like The Rivers’, an exploration of the paintings, sculptures and installations of Alabama, Georgia and their neighbouring states.

This isn’t the pristine, clean, easy art of the history books. This is the dirty, broken, rough, improvised art of the streets. The gallery is filled with chunks of driftwood and scraps of discarded metal. They’re assembled into the charred, vicious canvases of the influential Thornton Dial or welded into twisting new forms by his son Thornton Jr. Lumps of trash – wires,

chairs, photocopiers – become semi-abstract assemblages in the hands of Lonnie Holley, sheets of corrugated iron become canvases for Mary T Smith. Everywhere you look there is spray paint and glue, rubbish and rust.

Part of that is an aesthetic tendency towards the rough and makeshift, and part of it is necessity. These artists existed, and largely continue to exist, well outside of the established art system. Money is scarce, materials are scarcer, so they work with what they have to hand. It’s their world, literally, reshaped and put on display.

And all of that independence, that existence outside of the art world, is important, because none of this art was made to be sold in a fancy gallery, or even shown in a fancy museum. It was made because the artists wanted to make it, because they needed to make it.

So your eyes might spot links between Henry

Speller and a major modern painter like Jean Dubuffet, or his wife Georgia Speller and the drawings of Louise Bourgeois, but the links aren't there. This is totally uncontrived art, these aren't experiments in aesthetic naivety or plays on modernist art theory by formally trained painters, it's art for its own sake, and lots of it is amazing.

Joe Light's paintings are bright and simple, Jimmy Lee Sudduth's are dark and haunting, Charles Williams' light stand is a riot of colours and ideas, and the quilts from the incredible Gee's Bend community are stunning geometric canvases of total artistic freedom.

And then there's the 'yard show' work. Lots of these artists used their gardens as personal outdoor museums, creating sprawling installations for their neighbourhoods. Little chunks have been transported here: Joe Minter's animalist metal tool monsters, Charlie Lucas's surreal cyclist sculpture, the pulsating colours of Purvis Young's paintings.

It could have been such a great, intense experience seeing all these artworks together, but the display is just so tediously austere. Those yard show works should be overwhelming and hectic, the paintings should feel full of passion and life. But they've taken all this vibrant art and hung it miserably, drably, reverentially, like the most boring of modern art shows. So much of this was designed for front yards and walls and streets that just whacking it unceremoniously in a gallery has stifled it. They've managed to suck all the joy out of it.

But these artists thrived long before any museum came along, and their art will continue to do so long after, because they're dealing with life in the south, its painful history, the shadow of slavery and racism, the grind of daily living, and doing it with uncontainable creativity, boundless enthusiasm and endless joy. ■



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