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## ***Souls Grown Deep Like the Rivers: Black Artists from the American South***

**Curated by:** Raina Lampkins-Fielder, with Emma Yau; and Axel Rüger, with Rebecca Bray

**Exhibition Schedule:** Gabrielle Jungels-Winkler Galleries, Royal Academy of Arts, London, March 17–June 18, 2023

**Catalogue:** Raina Lampkins-Fielder, Rebecca Salter PRA, Maxwell L. Jackson, Rebecca Bray, Emma Yau, et al., *Souls Grown Deep Like the Rivers: Black Artists from the American South*, exh. cat. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2023. 138 pp.; 64 color illus. Hardcover: £15 (ISBN: 9781912520954)

**Reviewed by:** Matthew Holman

First published in W. E. B. Du Bois's magazine *The Crisis* in 1921, Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" uses the metaphor of a traveling body of water to narrate the trials and traversals of African peoples from the Euphrates and the Congo to the Mississippi. It is a tender and lyrical poem that manages to be both an individual search for racial identity and a fearsome urging for the collective spirit. Hughes died on May 22, 1967, and his ashes were later interred under Houston Conwill's *Rivers* (1991)—a cosmogram in the foyer of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, with inscribed lines from his 1921 poem. William Arnett, the late collector, curator, and writer from Atlanta, founded the Souls Grown Deep Foundation (SGDF), so named after a line from Hughes's poem. Arnett's mission was to document, preserve, and promote the work of leading African American artists from the US South.<sup>1</sup>

*Souls Grown Deep Like the Rivers* is also the title given to a current exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts (RA) in London, which reproduces the Atlanta collection's name. The exhibition is shown in the Gabrielle Jungels-Winkler Galleries, the RA's sequence of three compact rooms that opened in 2018 with a focus on living artists and architects. The show traces the South's scarred history, from the horrors of enslavement to the cruelty of Jim Crow-era segregation and afterward. The works on view are as much about how these artists found resolve in the necessity for experimentation within extraordinarily difficult economic conditions as they are about racial identity. But they are all unmistakably marked by the specific history of the South, a place where "the War" refers to 1861, not 1941, and where the prevalent claim that the Civil War was not about racism and slavery but "the secession of the states" still rings, for some, with certainty.

*Souls Grown Deep Like the Rivers* succeeds another group show in the Winkler Galleries organized around a shared identity, *Making Modernism: Paula Modersohn-Becker, Käthe Kollwitz, Gabriele Münter and Marianne Werefkin*, which brought together the works of four women modernists from Germany. Exhibitions like these are undoubtedly important as a means to display artists who have been neglected by an institutional canon that is predominantly male and white, and yet the work of artists in both exhibitions can, and should, be read beyond categories of gender and race. It would have been interesting to see Loretta Pettway Bennett's jagged edges of contrasting cotton and twill alongside similar works by fellow weaver Anni Albers, for instance, or Purvis Young's enigmatic assemblages alongside works by that other Southerner Robert Rauschenberg. It is perhaps hoped that exhibitions like this will open the doors for more adventurous group exhibitions in the future, when race may not be the primary lens through which to understand these artists' wide-ranging formal achievements.

As such, it is probable that the average visitor to the RA would be unaware of many, if not all, of the artists shown in the exhibition. Thornton Dial, the Alabama-born metal-furniture maker and radical sculptor of the found object, is the best known of the group. He is presented as being central to the social world of these artists, as the father to artists Thornton Jr. and Richard, as well as uncle to Ronald Lockett, all of whom are included in the show. Lockett's elegy for his great-grandmother, *Sarah Lockett's Roses* (fig. 1), is one of the highlights of the exhibition: a profound and rough-edged work that fuses, like a collage or a familial quilt, cut tins, nails, and enamel on wood. Its cut-glass roses stand for love, for remembrance, and for something beautiful being kept in the voluminosity of its blooms, rather than withering away. I found its hardness and lack of delicacy to be compelling as a eulogy. Other works by this familial group are assemblages indicating life and genealogy. An example is Thornton Dial's *Tree of Life (In the Image of Old Things)* (1994), which throws everything from a plastic air freshener to a rubber tire into the twisting and interconnected warren of a family tree, where nothing seems to fit together. The result looks so precariously balanced as to be at the threshold of collapse at any moment, yet the tree of life manages to stay up.



Fig. 1. Ronald Lockett, *Sarah Lockett's Roses*, 1997. Cut tin, nails, and enamel on wood, 129.5 x 123.2 x 3.8 cm. Souls Grown Deep Foundation, Atlanta. © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2023. Photo: Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio

I went to see *Souls Grown Deep Like the Rivers* in the same week that King Charles III signaled support for the commissioning of a report into the historical links between the British royal family and the “appalling atrocity” of the slave trade. A robust debate was also currently taking place on whether the emblem of the three-mast vessel—representing,

according to some, a slave ship—should appear on the soccer crests of both Manchester United and Manchester City. Additionally, the liberal newspaper *The Guardian* acknowledged that their founder, John Edward Taylor, had partnerships with companies that imported vast amounts of raw cotton produced by enslaved people in the Americas. In the United Kingdom, the third corner of the transatlantic slave-trade triangle is now front-page news. *Souls Grown Deep Like the Rivers* seems to have arrived at the right time, during a historical reckoning of the role of the British in founding the US South as an agricultural colony built on enslaved labor.

Given these connections and the concern that many would be unfamiliar with the artists, it is extraordinary how little information is offered in the curated design of the space itself. Within current debates on curatorial education, there has been a tendency to increasingly view the wall text and even the printed exhibition guide as a distraction. Partly shaped by the conscious absence of wall texts in blue-chip white-cube commercial galleries, on the one hand, and by curators' desire to direct their shows with a greater sense of experiential or immersive design, on the other, institutions like the RA have increasingly "let the works speak for themselves." But for an exhibition with an expressed purpose of educating audiences by bringing the works of neglected artists to the public, particularly given the unfamiliarity of the culture of the US South to most Londoners, it was a missed opportunity (and, I think, a mistake) to offer so little explanation on the displayed artists' personal histories, communities of art making, and relationship to broader formal currents in American and global modern art.

With that said, the purposeful absence of recognizable curatorial oversight may be partly an effort to replicate some of the conditions of the "yard show." This peculiarly Southern phenomenon began in the nineteenth century and consists of large-scale, site-specific art installations that sprawl across the backyards, gardens, and communal exterior spaces of properties across the South, including Alabama and Mississippi. Lacking institutions and galleries to exhibit their work, "yard artists" would creatively utilize tree branches, garden sheds, and gravel pits to transform found or discarded objects into narrative-led exhibitions that share in the histories of their local communities. You might feel a bit like you have stumbled into a yard show here at the RA, with assemblages placed in eccentric correspondence with one another, were it not for the elephant in the room that you can never lose sight of: the fact that we are in the plush white cube of Burlington House. If the absence of a fuller educational effort to explain the significance, meaning, and use of materials was a conscious curatorial decision to help throw us alongside the works as they were originally displayed in the yard show, then the suspension of our disbelief has limits.

But, in some ways, this can feel like an unfair criticism to make. Of course, it is true that the experience of encountering Marlene Bennett Jones's geometrically abstract quilts would be more profound if they were suspended from oak trees and gently blowing in the wind at the Airing of the Quilts Festival in Gee's Bend, Alabama, or if we were at liberty to get closer and even touch Mary Lee Bendolph's exquisitely tactile *Burgle Boys* (2007) in situ. Taking these works out of the yard and into a white cube with wood-paneled ceilings does seem to push some of their site-specific resonances far from view. This feels particularly prescient given that many artists are responding to the degradation of the natural world and its exploitation by capitalist resource extraction. In this way, there are also several revelatory works in the exhibition that deal squarely with the particularities of place, capturing changing environments on the fly. Jimmy Lee Sudduth's drawings, for one, which

often mix mud and paint (and grass stains, coffee grounds, and red berry juices) on plywood, capture the drab grit of a social-realist cityscape (see *Atlanta*, 1988) while also allowing the textured forms to almost breathe through the surface as the organization of lines cross over into abstraction.

In Richard Dial's abstract chair sculpture *Which Prayer Ended Slavery?* (1988), we are confronted by a complex configuration of materials, including welded steel, wire, and paint, that the artist has constructed to suggest scenes of wanton violence. From one viewpoint, the bent metal reveals the unmistakable presence of a figure whipping another at full tilt; from another viewpoint, we identify a stick-thin victim of lynching, whose lifeless body fills the central space; a third figure is held in rusted chains, with a bowed head that, even in this most foundational of gestures, expresses something vital about the assault on the human spirit within all forms of chattel slavery. It feels like a lantern show of two-dimensional silhouettes dragged through a torture chamber. If the title appears to offer up religious faith as a possibility to ameliorate institutional violence and murder—if we were *only able to choose the right prayer*—then it also stands as a rhetorical device to direct us to spend more time in the realm of action and activism than in one of redemptive belief alone.

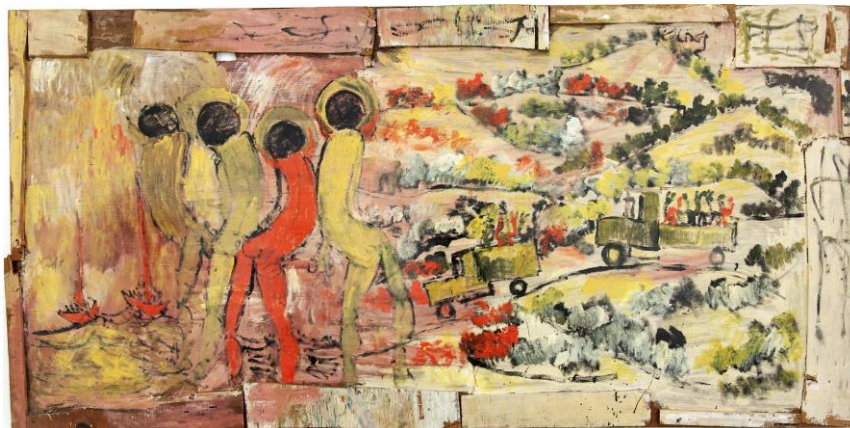


Fig. 2. Purvis Young, *Untitled (Narrative Scene)*, 1980s. Paint on found board with frame made by the artist, 121 x 245 x 8 cm. Courtesy of the Graham Fleming & Maciej Urbanek Collection, in memory of Larry T. Clemons. © 2023 The Larry T. Clemons Collection / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Maciej Urbanek

Purvis Young's *Untitled (Narrative Scene)* (fig. 2) is described by Raina Lampkins-Fielder, the external exhibition curator who works for the SGDF, as "an expressionist parable about the immigrant experience in America" (28). Using a palette of inflamed reds, sunflower yellows, and seething oranges, Young's depiction of migration in a hostile climate asks the viewer to imagine the costs, the means, and the ends of inhuman migration policy with unflinching honesty. As in Dial's *Which Prayer Ended Slavery?*, in which the singularities of individuals are absented for the basic contours of universalized bodies undergoing a collective struggle, each of the four figures in the foreground are depicted in ranging curvilinear anonymity. Some sense of the figures' psychological interiority is suggested as we see this new terrain from their perspective. On one side, we can glimpse perilous journeys on squally waves and in makeshift vessels that seem to be no more stable than paper boats (representing the means). On the other side, we see the "rewards" of the

journey should they make it: day laborers and undocumented immigrant workers are moved in the backs of trucks, crisscrossing an American landscape alight with colors (representing the ends). It is a terrifying image that shines with the wealth plucked from the ground that is never repaid to the laborer.

In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes writes, “I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.” Wherever they hear the singing, there is a remarkable ability for these artists to transform materiality. Next time, I hope the curators spend more time in the golden muddy bosom.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The SGDF collection contains more than one thousand works by more than 160 artists, two-thirds of whom are women, and focuses on African American artistic traditions, methods of visual storytelling, and a vernacular use of found and transformed materials.