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Filling in a racial gap

Fine Arts Museums' mindful acquisition of works created by African Americans

By Charles Desmarais

It's not often that an art museum can address a major gap in its collection with one bold move. So when the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco made a deal early this year to acquire 62 works by 22 contemporary African American artists, the museums decided to produce a full-scale exhibition with catalog in four months — a fraction of the normal lead time — to celebrate. The result, "Revelations: Art from the African American South," opened last week at the de Young Museum; it will be on view through April 1.

That the resulting product is both a solid document and a fitting commemoration of the acquisition is particularly a credit to

"Revelations" continues on E2



Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Top: Jessie T. Pettway, "Bars and String-Pieced Columns" (1950s).
Above: Lonnie Holley, "Him and Her Hold the Root" (1994).

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Giving black artists’ works full due

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FAMSF’s curator of American Art, Timothy Anglin Burgard, who had already done substantial research.

An even greater challenge than the timeline, though, may have been the years bringing along the passionate and demanding art historian and collector William S. Arnett. It was Arnett who amassed the much larger group of works — more than 1,200 — that eventually became the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, from which the FAMSF collection is drawn.

The serendipitous arrival of a new director at FAMSF and a new president at the foundation, combined with the museum’s demonstrated interest, finally led to the 50-50 gift and purchase by the museum in February. A similar deal between the foundation and Atlanta’s High Museum was announced in April.

The show is an engaging look at a moment in American art that looks increasingly significant with every passing year, but that might have attracted little notice were it not for Arnett’s obsession. Among other coups, it was he who assembled in one place and popularized the extraordinary, highly praised abstract works of the quilters of Gee’s Bend, Ala., touring them in the early 2000s to major American museums.

A gallery in “Revelations” displays, but cannot fully contain, 10 exuberant Gee’s Bend examples. The old metaphor of abstract art as jazz would only begin to describe Jessie T. Pettway’s “Bars and String-Pieced Columns,” created in the 1950s. Add a tap-dance solo amid a swaying crowd on a long hot night. And throw in a breathless scat riff.

Every example here seems to simultaneously accept a dictate of order (a quilt does have to cover the bed and warm its inhabitants) and to invent a new graphic logic: less glib, more authentic, more dependable than the old rote geometries. Annie Mae Young’s “‘Bars’ Work-Clothes Quilt” is made of scraps of used clothing and traces of the knobbed joints of beloved ghosts.

All the sculpture in the exhibition is fashioned from found materials. Lonnie Holley is the conceptualist of the group. With a simple pairing of disused rocking chairs and part of an uprooted tree, “Him and Her Hold the Root” (1994) elegantly conjures thoughts of the entanglements of love and the depths of heritage, loss and death. “Mith” (1993) right-angles a fractured headstone of natural granite across a concrete plank, intersecting happenstance and purpose, sacred and profane, faith and doubt.

The best known artist in the show is Thornton Dial. I have always approached his large-scale works with the same caution I bring to the bombast of Anselm Kiefer. His “Lost Cows” (2000-01) doesn’t get much beyond the haunt factor of the desiccated cattle skeletons that are its primary materials. I much prefer the lightness, lyricism and invention of a drawing like “In the Roosevelt Time: Penned In” (2003), with its gray cotton picker dwarfed by green and blue-



Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco



Gamma One Conversions / © Estate of Purvis Young



Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio / © Estate of Thornton Dial/Artists Rights Society

Top: Installation view of “Revelations: Art from the African American South” at the de Young Museum.

Above: Thornton Dial, “Lost Cows” (2000-01).

Left: Purvis Young, “Talking to the System” (1970s).

Revelations: Art from the African American South: 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Through April 1. \$6-\$15. De Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. (415) 750-3600. <http://deyoung.famsf.org>

white plants.

Ronald Lockett is, to me, the surprise star of the exhibition, with painted reliefs that vary so in technique, one might at first think they were by different artists. Yet six substantial works presented together make a convincing case for a unified vision, set in some mid-place of existence. “Rebirth” (1987), a small and quiet work compared to the rest, depicts a lonely animal in a dark landscape, its back turned from a world of

vibrant blue sky and green fields. In “Fever Within” (1995), a lacerated female figure in yellow levitates in a yellow field, neither dissolving nor emerging, but suspended between.

Art such as that in “Revelations” — works coaxed out of humble materials by makers without formal art training — occupies an unsteady place in the annals of visual expression. In the early 20th century, if it wasn’t ignored (or, just as likely, discarded as junk), some of it might have been blessed by the “American folk art” fad that swept museums and the popular press of the era. By the 1950s it would have been called “art brut”; in the 1980s, “outsider art.”

The Fine Arts Museums, appropriately, avoid such la-

bels, which can have the effect of diminishing the work and, if inadvertently, demeaning the artists. The exhibition’s catalog and accompanying texts go to great lengths in describing the show, instead, as “a broad overview of a groundbreaking aspect of contemporary art practice” — “a recognizable cultural phenomenon ... that also addressed universal aspects of the human condition.” Burgard’s catalog essay traces the history of African enslavement, segregation and the battle for civil rights, which he sees as intellectual and emotional sources, pausing only at the end to decry the work’s historical marginalization as “‘folk,’ ‘naive,’ or ‘outsider.’ ”

Of course, grouping the works together is its own form of categorization. The Fine Arts

Museums attempt, with partial success, to address that problem by interposing other objects from the collection. Still to be answered is the question of what the museums plan to do about the vast unwritten story of artists of color throughout American history and geography.

In the long term, as FAMSF has acknowledged and as other museums are only beginning to admit, the answer will lie not in integrating part of an existing collection into a temporary exhibition of one group of artists from one area and era, but seeing the whole of art history through a wider lens.

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