



Thornton Dial, George Viener, and Bill Arnett in Dial's Bessemer, Alabama, studio in 1992. Courtesy, Outsider Folk Art Gallery.

**BELOW:**  
Thornton Dial, November 2010. Courtesy, Outsider Folk Art Gallery. Photograph by the author.

# THORNTON DIAL

by Emily Christensen



An important part of the story of art has been characterized by self-taught ingenuity and work ethic honed by struggle for survival and passionate appreciation for life. As an African-American man born in Alabama, Thornton Dial's (b.1928) art represents a deeply important voice in this story and embodies many of the developments and shifts in the way art is made, understood, and consumed in the modern world.

Dial did not receive his technical skills and knowledge of materials at an academic institution, nor his philosophical and aesthetic ideas solely from Western sources. His work is grounded in the African-American culture and visual traditions of the South and in a craftsmanship refined from utilitarian skills. He does not fit the definition of an "Outsider." Instead this self-taught artist's work has been called folk or vernacular, and while these categories are not necessarily false, Dial's art transcends them.

A clear-eyed observer of the human condition, Dial has spent the last two decades exploring the complexities and contradictions present in American history and culture. Different media express the vision behind his abstracted, symbolic subjects in different ways, and the interplay between painting and sculpture roots the work in twentieth-century art, where the blurring of these traditional categories has been thoroughly explored. Dial draws with metal, sculpts with paint, and creates complex space using line.

A laborer at various industrial and agricultural jobs throughout his life, Dial was a steel welder for much of his professional career. His monumental sculptures are elaborate metal structures adorned with, sometimes covered by, painted fabric and found objects such as dolls, mannequin parts, and animal bones. In the sculptural



**Thornton Dial (b. 1928)**  
*Leaving the Shadows*, 2008  
Graphite, pastels, coffee on paper  
30 x 28 inches  
Courtesy, Outsider Folk Art Gallery

**BELOW:**  
**Thornton Dial (b. 1928)**  
*Lost Cows*, 2000–2001  
Cow skeletons, steel, golf bag, golf ball,  
mirrors, enamel, and Splash Zone compound.  
98 x 101½ x 20 ½ in.  
Souls Grown Deep Foundation  
Courtesy, Indianapolis Museum of Art

relief surfaces of his mixed media paintings, Dial weaves fibers, sometimes carpet or clothing doused in paint, into undulating net-like lattices that seem to appear and disappear on the canvas. His geometric patterning and bold colors are contemporary while also relating to traditional African-American quilt making.

Dial's work is included in private and museum collections across the country such as the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, the Milwaukee Museum of Art, and the Indianapolis Museum of Art. He has had solo exhibitions at major museums including a joint exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the American Folk Art Museum in New York in 1993, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 2005, and was featured in the 2000 Whitney Biennial. In February 2011, the





**CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT:**

Thornton Dial (b. 1928)

*Cotton-Field Clouds (Some Go, Some Come)*, 2004

Synthetic fiber, cloth, enamel, spray paint,

and Splash Zone compound on canvas on wood.

H. 53, W. 74, D 2 in.

Courtesy, Dial Family Collection

Thornton Dial (b. 1928)

*Yellow Women Supporting Each Other*, ca. 2001

Pastel on paper, 44 x 30 inches

Courtesy, Outsider Folk Art Gallery


Thornton Dial (b. 1928)

*Power Across the World*, 1994

Graphite, pastel on paper, 21 x 21 inches

Courtesy, Outsider Folk Art Gallery

Indianapolis Museum of Art will premiere the touring exhibition *Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial*. The most extensive survey of the artist's work ever mounted, it will include over fifty large-scale paintings, sculptures, and wall assemblages. The exhibition will be accompanied by a major publication celebrating Thornton Dial's contribution to American art, by David C. Driskell, Greg Tate, Joanne Cubbs, and Eugene W. Metcalf. From March to

June 2012, The University of North Carolina's Ackland Museum will host an exhibition featuring over fifty of Dial's works-on-paper and will be accompanied by an exhibition catalogue edited by Bernard L. Herman. 

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