

Look Through His Eyes: Thornton Dial's Drawings

BY KATHY JOHNSON BOWLES

After the 2012 exhibition and publication *Thornton Dial: Thoughts on Paper* (UNC Press) and continued celebration of Dial by major institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it might seem there would be little left to report or learn about the artist. On view, August 30, 2020–January 3, 2021, the recent exhibition of Dial's works on paper at the Longwood Center for the Visual Arts (Longwood University, Farmville, Va.), gives pause to consider the evolution of his drawings, the variety of themes he addressed, and some of his closest relationships late in life. Executive Director Rachel Ivers said, "Thornton Dial's delicate and lyrical works on paper are among the most important works in the LCVA's permanent collection. Collectively, they demonstrate the breadth of his talent and vision, especially within the context of the raw energy of his better-known assemblages. Dial's work transcends categorization."

The LCVA's exhibition, *Thornton Dial's Drawings*, featured 17 works dating from 1990 to 2002. LCVA

Curator of Exhibitions, Alex Grabiec, selected the works from the 28 works on paper contributed in 2011 by Jim and Barbara Sellman (Richmond, Va.).

The Sellman's friendship with Dial began in the late 1980s when introduced by a mutual friend, William Arnett (1939–2020). Jim Sellman estimates that he and Barbara visited "Mr. Dial" at least several times a year in Bessemer, Ala., ever since that first meeting and continued until Dial's death. Being acknowledged and thanked by the Dial family at his funeral deeply touched the Sellmans, who greatly admired Dial's resilience, authenticity, and profound philosophical explorations via art. According to Jim Sellman, Arnett's support of Mr. Dial was both the right thing to do and was purpose-driven. Making sure Dial had a place large enough to live and work, as well as a steady supply of materials with which to create, was a gesture filled with respect and awe. "We were excited by his genius."

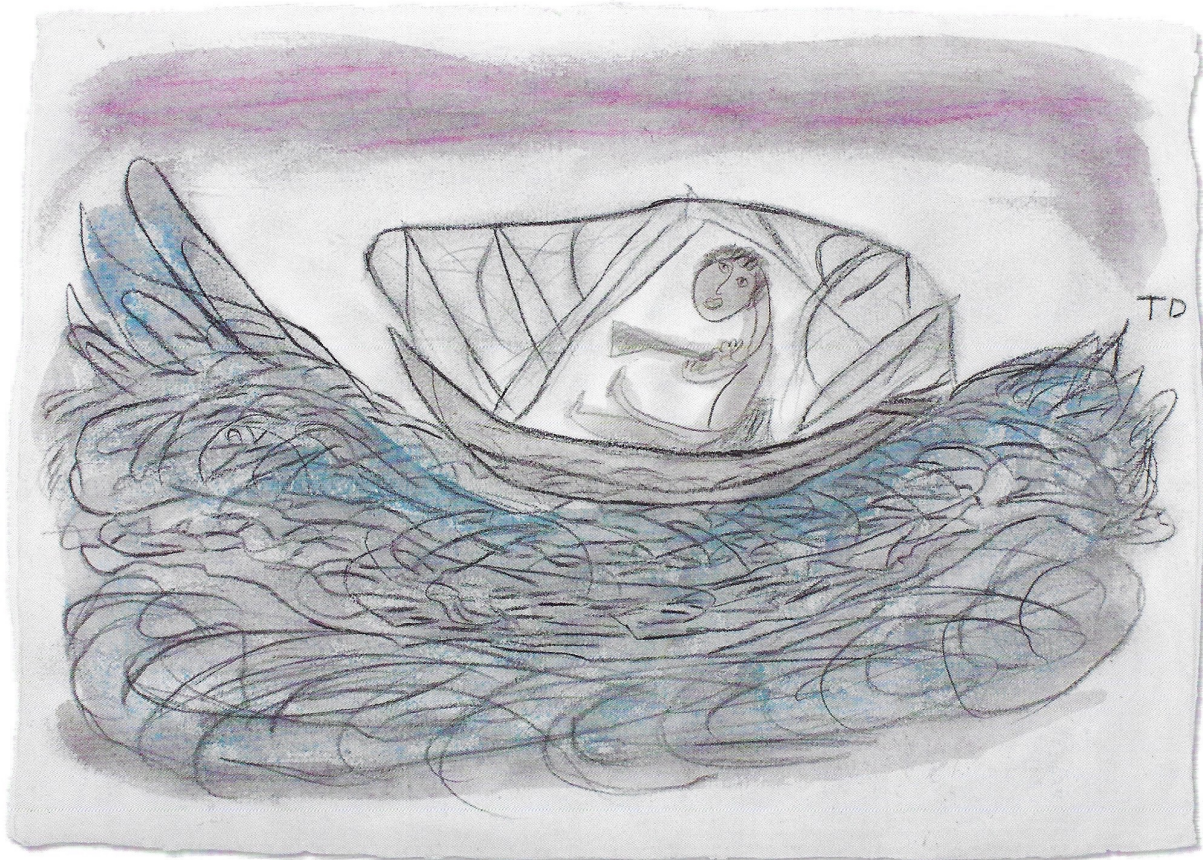
At the LCVA, Dial's works were presented against stark white walls punctuated by text panels recounting

▼ Airplane by Thornton Dial.





▲ Most People Love Fish and Flowers by Thornton Dial.



▲ Riding in the Boat by Thornton Dial.

Thornton Dial's thoughts about his work and process (as told to William Arnett and recorded in his book, *Souls Grown Deep, Volume 2*).

While the exhibition was not accompanied by a curatorial statement, Grabiec explained that the works on exhibition represent a microcosm of Dial's experimentation with types of paper and mediums. While the exhibition includes works traditionally categorized as paintings and drawings, Grabiec hoped by titling the exhibition, *Thornton Dial's Drawings*, the viewer would make a conceptual leap to consider Dial's lifelong interest in drawing. Thus, the definition in contemporary art theory of any type of mark making as drawing blurs the boundaries of categorization as art.

Grabiec asserts that Dial "owns" his way of working as unique in defiance of categorization. Grabiec also considered the state of racial unrest in the U.S. as he selected the works. It would have been interesting to read about Grabiec's vision via an introductory statement exploring these concepts along with didactic panels for several of the works.

The viewer does learn from the artist's statements that Dial drew throughout his life. Growing up in Alabama, he drew in the dirt as a child. As an adult, he drew designs for patterns at the Pullman Factory where he worked. Later, he created preliminary sketches with blackboard chalk on wooden panels for his complex large mixed media works.

Dial started using "art" materials like archival paper and pastel, watercolor, etc. in the 1990s after an *Atlanta Journal Constitution* art critic naively questioned and underestimated his abilities following an exhibition at Kennesaw State University.

The drawings *Airplane*, *Most People Love Fish and Flowers*, and *Untitled* possess a vivid graphic appeal with deeply saturated colors. Blues, greens, reds, and yellows right out of the tube exude a sense of urgency on Dial's part. One of Dial's quotations posted with the drawings expresses this: "Since I been making art, my mind got more things coming into it. The more you do, the more you see to do. The spirit works off the mind and get stronger like an angel following you around. Angel watching over you is just like in your own body."

Other works like *Loving to Cook* and *Old Man* illustrate Dial's visceral physical relationship with the materials he uses. The graphite, conté crayon, charcoal, and pastel move across the paper's surface, intensely pushed and pulled by his hands.

While the imagery may be accessible, the meaning is far more complex. Consider the pieces *Walking Inside the Fence*, *Tobacco Farm*, and *The White Man Studies the Woods* from the point of view of Dial's experience as a poor African-American without

a formal education living in the rural South. These works are not merely depictions from life but reflections of power and privileges not afforded to Dial. One of the pieces Jim Sellman finds exceptional as a metaphor for the life Dial lived is *Riding in the Boat*. When discussing the work, Sellman exclaimed, "My god, that's great."

Sellman urges us to contemplate the depths of Thornton Dial's character as reflected in his work, saying, "I love to look through

his eyes." Over the years, it became clear to Jim, "Mr. Dial didn't let anything get to him. While he was a man of few words, he was comfortable with himself. He could live with uncertainty, unpredictability, and chaos; he understood he had zero control and the system was against him. He was always adaptable—constantly searching and renewing himself."

Thornton Dial's works mirror his own words, as quoted in an exhibition text: "Art is like a bright star up ahead in the darkness of the world." This exhibition offers us an opportunity to consider both the work and the experience of an artist trying to live and make art against all odds. While not explicitly told by the LCVA, I am struck by how the artist's story is intertwined with the friend/patron/collector/donor's story in a relationship of respect. Both Dial and the Sellmans took to heart the power and validity of Dial's assertion, "I believe I have proved that my art is about ideas, and about life and the experience of the world." By doing so, their united conviction became self-perpetuating.

Institutions, like the LCVA, continue to facilitate the impact of Dial's work and learn from revelations held therein. Every time Dial's work is exhibited, his aim is fulfilled. "I plan for my art to help a person think. If he think about what art is saying, he is going to be thinking for himself. Everything an artist make supposed to help a person handle his life better." Dial's messages about struggle, power and freedom are universal and as important today as they were during his lifetime. His works continue to remind viewers, as he said: "Art is something to open your eyes. Art is for understanding." ❏

KATHY JOHNSON BOWLES is the president of Gordian Knot Consulting, in Raleigh, N.C.

Note: The exhibition's text panels reference the Souls Grown Deep website, www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/thornton-dial, as the source of Dial's quotations. However, these quotations were published originally in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume 2*, Tinwood Books, Atlanta, 2001, by William Arnett, in the chapter, "MR. DIAL IS A MAN LOOKING FOR SOMETHING – Told by Thornton Dial."



▲ *Untitled* by Thornton Dial.