

Birmingham folk artist Joe Minter turns junk into spiritual statement

By Greg Garrison



Retired construction worker Joe Minter has created a spiritually inspired sculpture garden in his yard, built from objects he found or bought at flea markets, thrift shops and garage sales. (The Birmingham News / Frank Couch)

There may be only one place in America to see the Scripture verse John 3:16 painted on a tailgate removed from a Dodge pickup truck, propped up against a fence next to a historic cemetery.

It's the same place where giant red plastic letters from a defunct movie theater are nailed to a wooden fence, spelling out "His Word is Real."

Those distinctive creations are the work of folk artist Joe Minter of Birmingham, part of his African Village, a yard full of hand-painted boards and pieces of metal, stacked and mounted in ways that may make sense to no one but Minter himself.

"Every piece has got a story," Minter said.



Joe Minter's colorful creations at his African Village include the Beatitudes painted on boards. (The Birmingham News / Frank Couch)

He has welded giant rusty wrenches into six crosses. He has a crown of thorns made of encircled barbed wire, mounted on a kind of robotic metal crucifix.

It's a mishmash of religious folk art and tributes to patriotism and African ancestry.

"It becomes symbolically taking something that's been discarded and giving it new life," said Rutgers University scholar Charles Russell, editor of "Self-Taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art," who wrote an article on Minter for the December issue of the arts journal *Raw Vision*. "It has a spiritual message and a cultural message, taking pieces of the past that have not been valued and bringing them back and giving them value."

Minter said God gave him a vision in 1988 to start building his collection, which has become either a unique outdoor sculpture garden or a massive junkyard, or something in between, depending on the eyes of the

beholder. It's like a giant collaboration between Fred Sanford, Elmer Gantry and Salvador Dali.

Even his wife, Hilda, said she was adamantly opposed when Minter began stockpiling junk that he picked up at flea markets, garage sales and thrift stores, which he shaped into theological and philosophical statements on everything from the Iraq War to slavery to Hurricane Katrina.

"Well, I'm going to be honest with you," she said. "I thought it was junk. But I came around."

Now she sits on the porch and offers copies of Minter's book, "To You Through Me," for \$27 and postcards for \$3. The book includes pictures of Minter's yard, interspersed with his rambling theological and philosophical statements on just about anything.

"She'll pat me on the back and keep me going," Minter said of his wife.

What turned public opinion in Minter's favor was recognition of him as a folk artist. Actress Jane Fonda came and took a tour of his yard. She also took a piece of his art.

"She didn't buy it," he said. "She just took it."

Minter has become a regular at art shows.

"I'm using the tool of a compassionate heart to teach what's needed -- love, not hate," Minter said. "Love heals; hate kills."

Minter, 67, a retired construction worker, has spent thousands of hours shaping his creations and calls it a testament to hard work and faith.

"God loves sweat and tears," he said. "This is a very religious region. Alabama people have sweated

all their lives in coal mines, limestone quarries and steel mills. The most powerful thing on the face of the earth is the human soul.”

Russell said Minter has taken junk and transformed it into art.

“Artworks are objects that give you a sense of meaning, grace, composition and flow, approaching beauty,” Russell said. “Formal visual quality can emerge out of junk. He has a real sense of balance, proportion, openness that you would find in a trained artist. He has an innate aesthetic sense that you would find in abstract sculpture. He’s a really good artist. There’s a sincerity, earnestness and purity of vision that’s to be respected. There are some sculptures, you could put them in any gallery in New York and they would hold their own.”

As he gave a tour of the sculpture garden, Minter carried a 7-foot-long walking stick he calls the “talking stick.” It has bells on it that jangle as he walks.

Shadow Lawn and Grace Hill cemeteries are adjacent to his yard. He pointed out the grave of his father, Lawrence Minter, a World War I veteran buried about 20 yards from Minter’s back fence.

Others buried nearby include an ancestor of Michelle Obama, he said.

Minter calls the cemeteries “ancestral African burial grounds,” holy places.

Russell, who has visited the African Village several times, noted that Minter uses iron chains and tools frequently in his art to address the black American experience.

“Chains have a loaded reference to the African-American past, to bondage,” Russell said. “It also symbolizes connections. Each person is a link in a chain. The tools represent all the labor. Slaves were brought over to do labor. Rescuing these tools that would rust and disappear is analogous to testifying to the past of labor.”

As Minter guided a visitor through his yard, he pointed out three poles he has painted and labeled separately as “Father,” “Son” and “Holy Ghost.” They have chains connecting them overhead.

“You’re walking in the Holy Trinity,” Minter said. “As you walk through there, you are gonna hear God make music through the wind.”

That just about sums up the sculpture garden, he said.

“It’s serenity and trinity all around us.”