

## African American Art From the Deep South

By Amanda Holiday



Curating an exhibition – particularly of black art history and black art protest – often involves a necessarily synesthetic or even linguaesthetic distillation of sounds and images/imaginings of an era. While 2017's 'Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power' adopted a chronological approach to its survey of Black artists, last year's 'Get Up Stand Up Now: Generations of Black Creative Pioneers', at Somerset House in London, offered a more eclectic, sprawling presentation of 50 years of Black art history to a soundtrack of lovers' rock, ska and reggae. 'We Will Walk: Art and Resistance in the American South', co-curated by Hannah Collins and Paul Goodwin at Turner Contemporary, takes a different tack again, proposing a backyard narrative of the US civil rights movement by observing overlooked and offbeat artistic spaces, accompanied by a musical evocation of the era.

For this first UK exhibition devoted to African American art from the Deep South, featuring works by more than 20 artists, assemblage serves both as the key medium and a structural metaphor. Visitors are led through an array of sad and menacing garden and porch sculptures, folkloric paintings, stark quilts, home-made artefacts, images of yard and allotment 'installations' and the work of prominent US artists Kerry James Marshall and Kara Walker as well as portraits of the musician Sun Ra, before reaching the final gallery's more familiar photographic documentation of civil rights protests. Freeman Vines's playlist (at the time of visiting, the audio experience via shared headphones was curtailed due to COVID-19) includes tracks such as Adolphus Bell's 'Black Man's Dream' (2005), Guitar Gabriel's 'Southland Blues' (1999) and an unreleased Vines field recording of 'Johnny B Goode' (2016).

Ambitious in scope (arguably overstretched in terms of the ground it seeks to cover), 'We Will Walk' invites us to question how Black political history is articulated and framed. Much, if not all, of Black art history involves acknowledging and addressing erasures and deletions – somewhat akin to filmmaking's 'errors and omissions' insurance process. 'We Will Walk' adopts this approach with textually dense displays and signposts in the titles of each gallery: 'The Yard as Witness', for instance, places Collins's large-format yard photos alongside varied



'We Will Walk: Art and Resistance in the American South', 2020, exhibition view. Courtesy: Turner Contemporary, Margate

totems as well as Hawkins Bolden's 'persona' sculptures. 'Nothing but Soul' is largely photo documentation and 'Gee's Bend' features a display of mid-20th-century, linear, abstract quilts created by women from the isolated Alabama hamlet named after Joseph Gee, a landowner who established a cotton plantation there in 1816.

The nub of the show is 'Roots and the Abstract Truth', which presents works by self-taught artist and former slave Bill Traylor, assemblages and yard art by Lonnie Holley, Joe Minter and Thornton Dial, as well as the wrought tree-root totems of Bessie Harvey and Ralph Griffin. Even though the white cube of the gallery space somewhat depersonalizes and sanitizes the artworks, the sense of 'wasteman memorializing' persists in these junkyard reliquaries and artefacts that betray pained history in their every contortion. On a solitary canvas, a washing line is limp with blackened crow rags (Dial, *Green Pastures: The Birds That Didn't Learn How to Fly*, 2007). Wisps of blood-red cotton are caught in a barbed-wire noose (Holley, *They Hung Me with It*, 1998). Rubble branchery rocks gently in a double chair (Holley, *Him and Her Holding the Root*, 1994). A camel, welded from shovels and rusted pipes, stands precariously (Minter, *Camel at the Water Hole*, 1995).

As 'We Will Walk' attests, Black history is messy, poetic, curious, simple, lived, used, belonging. It is wilded, rusted, resistant, disjointed, rag and bone, rough and tumble. It is spooky, bitter, painful, barbed, protective and spell-throwing. It is disturbed, threatening, harmless, mindful, human. It is #BLM. But, mostly, it is a story that is still being told.

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck  
For the rain to gather  
For the wind to suck



For the sun to rot  
For the tree to drop  
Here is a strange and bitter crop

Abel Meeropol,  
'Strange Fruit', 1980

Freeman Vines, Teardrop Hollowbody #2, 1973. Courtesy:  
Turner Contemporary, Margate; photograph: Aaron  
Greenhood