

Thornton Dial

By Ashton Cooper

Thornton Dial's nearly thirty-year career in the art world began in the late 1980s, when the artist was then approaching his sixtieth birthday. This show of about a dozen works, titled "Thornton Dial: The Earliest Years, 1987–1989" and curated by writer and artist Phillip March Jones, took us back to that moment and to an oft-repeated origin tale—one that featured prominently in Dial's 2016 *New York Times* obituary. The story goes that Dial didn't make artworks or even fully grasp the concept of what those in the know might call "high art" until he was visited at his home in Bessemer, Alabama—where for decades he worked at a railroad-car plant and later made steel outdoor furniture and fishing lures—by artist Lonnie Holley and collector William Arnett. Foundational to the Dial mythos is the premise that before 1987 he made "work" and after that he made "art." Such slippery distinctions

lead to a lot of questions about what exactly—visually, materially, contextually, discursively—signals the supposed difference between objects understood to be art and ones that don't necessarily fit, or have any need for, such a designation.

In a 1993 catalogue assembled for Dial's joint exhibitions at New York's New Museum and Museum of American Folk Arts (now the American Folk Art Museum), writer and Black Arts Movement co-founder Amiri Baraka lampooned the specious distinction between art and nonart objects. "Here is a workingman, you say. He did not know anything about 'art,' someone tells us, and Dial probably told him that. But I know he heard of 'art' in the church, for instance in the Lord's Prayer: 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil, for thou art with me!' Most church folks heard of that and know what it mean." In the same essay, he writes, "To have art defined for one by one's oppressors is part of the social relations of slavery." Importantly, Baraka insists on understanding Dial's art on its own terms.

Employing utilitarian materials, Dial played with gesture, the ur-symbol of modern art. In *People Will Watch the American Tiger Cat*, 1988, the artist took a forty-eight-by-seventy-two-inch slab of wood as his base and used corrugated tin to form the body of the eponymous feline—the whip of the animal's metal tail swerves away from the support. The tiger's textured body is adorned not with stripes but rather with wide daubs of red and white enamel. As something of a finishing touch, Dial covered the entire surface with an overlay of Pollockian paint splatters in silver. In other works on view, building materials were transmuted into expressionistic gestures. To make *Black Star Shine*, 1987, Dial scattered small sections of metal conduit pipe across a wood support and spray-painted them at both ends with bursts of red pigment, creating a lively all-over pattern. In *Untitled*, 1987, irregularly cut pieces of metal tinted yellow and black curl off the surface like undulating three-dimensional marks.

In his influential 1972 essay "Other Criteria," art historian Leo Steinberg describes the canon of American art (from Thomas Eakins to Robert Morris) as anxiously masculine, a tradition in which artists validated and redeemed their work by insisting on its nonartness. While perhaps still proving Steinberg's thesis that Americans prefer their art in the guise of work, Dial's career adds an overlooked dimension to this model. Artists from "outside" (in the multiplicity of ways we might locate such a site) have consistently had to demonstrate that their objects are more than work. In his pieces from the late 1980s, Dial never relinquished quotidian materials, but he frequently splattered them with paint. Rather than bringing "life" into the space of the artwork to somehow guarantee the latter's value, Dial excelled at using the delimiting contours of the canvas to make his life's work legible as art to those outside his world.



Thornton Dial, *People Will Watch the American Tiger Cat*, 1988, corrugated tin, epoxy patching compound, and enamel on wood, 48 × 72 × 9".