Art in America

STAYING SOUTH

By Logan Lockner
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Katz Tepper: Gaping Candle Tripod, 2018, mixed media, 106 by 81 by 10 inches. PHOTO MARC TATTI/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND WHITE COLUMNS, NEW YORK

Before Bessemer, Alabama, made headlines earlier this year following a unionization attempt at a local Amazon distribution warehouse, the Birmingham suburb played a significant, though less splashy, role in the history of American art—as the home of celebrated African American self-taught artists such as Thornton Dial (1928–2016) and his nephew Ronald Lockett (1965–1998). Often using assemblage techniques and making expressive use of found materials, Dial and Lockett—as well as their surviving contemporaries Lonnie Holley and Joe Minter—represent a distinct artistic tradition that is, for many viewers of contemporary art, strongly associated with the American South. The 2018 exhibition "History Refused to Die," which took its title from a monumental 2004 assemblage by Dial, brought works by such artists to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The show was widely seen as bestowing a certain mainstream prestige upon the artists, referred to by some as "outsiders."

In the final weeks of "History Refused to Die" at the Met Fifth Avenue, the Met Breuer opened a career-spanning survey of sculptures by another artist from Bessemer. Jack Whitten, who is perhaps best known for his material innovations in abstract painting, was born in Bessemer in 1939, eleven years after Dial. Whitten enrolled at the Cooper Union in 1960 and then remained in New York, eventually mounting a solo exhibition of his paintings at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1974. In an interview published by the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas days after Whitten's death in 2018, the artist spoke about moving north after

witnessing violent reactions from white people during a late-1950s Civil Rights march he participated in as a student at Southern University, a historically Black college in Baton Rouge. “I made a practical decision to leave the South,” he said. “The impact of my decision was immediate. It drove me deeper into art as salvation.”

View from “History Refused to Die,” 2018; at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.COURTESY METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

SOME ARTISTS STAY SOUTH, and some go elsewhere. Dial and Whitten present an especially striking case in point: two acclaimed artists from the same Southern town, one of whom stayed and one of whom left. The locally rooted artist is often (unjustly) relegated to a second-class art historical category, while the relocated urban artist is (rightfully) regarded as a member of an experimental Black avant-garde, almost as though the two belong to different worlds. As these simultaneous exhibitions demonstrate, Dial is often viewed as quintessentially Southern—Whitten, only incidentally so.

For generations, conventional wisdom has suggested that, as Whitten, Emma Amos, and others did, a young artist from the South looking for serious career opportunities or creative fulfillment should decamp the region, preferably for a Northern metropolitan hub such as New York. Similar proverbial escape routes have often been pursued by queer, bi, and trans youth,

and others who feel alienated, isolated, or endangered in the region. In recent decades, however, multiple factors, including the increasing cost of living in cities like New York, the access to information and easy communication afforded by the Internet, and shifting political and demographic trends—due, in part, to ongoing Civil Rights and intersectional justice activism—have disrupted this narrative of regional expatriation, making the American South in many ways an easier place for emerging artists to live. Beyond challenging common assumptions about the region, many artists living in the South today are honoring and reinterpreting its rich cultural and material traditions while defying the "outsider" label—exhibiting nationally and internationally, even as they remain grounded in the American South.

It's ultimately too simple to describe the situation of Southern artists in terms of those who leave and those who stay. The region has recently emerged as a dynamic site of flux and migration in multiple directions, back and forth. It helps that millennials tend to move far more often than members of previous generations, making up double their share of the population that relocates annually. Overall, according to the 2020 census, the South grew by 10.2 percent during the last decade, the highest regional growth rate in the country. Artist Katz Tepper, who is based in Athens, Georgia, has journeyed out of, back to, and within the South repeatedly, ever since attending an arts magnet high school while growing up in rural South Florida during the early 2000s. "When I was a teenager, I had a map of New York on my bedroom wall," they told me. "I was like, I'm going to move to New York City as soon as I can." When Tepper arrived in the city as a student at the Cooper Union in 2005, that fantasy was quickly disrupted by the onset of debilitating symptoms, followed by six years navigating life in New York through bouts of chronic illness. "I was undergoing a lot of medical treatment in a haphazard way in an attempt to just 'be normal,'" the artist said. "That was the goal, to get me 'back to normal' so that I could live the way everyone in New York was living. But my body had a different plan."

In 2011 Tepper moved back to South Florida, where their father owns and operates a plant nursery, to establish a more suitable pace of living. By that time, the local landscape had become an exaggerated suburban sprawl, with former two-lane roads now expanded to eight, and seemingly endless strip malls receding to the horizon. Tepper—a descendant of Jewish immigrants, a family in which "no one has stayed in one place for more than one generation"—was surprised by the abundance of unexpected artistic inspiration to be found in this commercialized tropical suburbia, remarking that "[my family] doesn't go back generations on this continent, so [Florida] feels like a very random and particular slice of apocalyptic landscape." Tepper realized upon returning "that the setting was obviously depressing and hostile in various ways, but that it would be a shame to not make art that bears witness to this place."

Tepper moved again in 2012, this time relocating with their partner to Athens, Georgia—a place within driving distance of South Florida that promised both a vibrant community of artists and a relatively easygoing small-town lifestyle. In Athens, Tepper began combining diverse material elements—including industrial felt, latex rubber, beeswax, ceramics, toilet plungers, spools of

thread, and eggshells—into motley human-size assemblages that alternately resemble open body cavities, the shapes of fruits and vegetables, and glyphs or letters. In *Hysteric Sign (Ribbed Tomato 'n Grapes*), 2018, scraps of rubber and felt held together with pushpins evoke pierced flesh. The roughly symmetrical central shape in *Gaping Candle Tripod* (2018) suggests a ribcage, yet the channels that form this shape are filled with beeswax and wicks, and lined with mottled felt. Referencing the body's porosity with a humorous sense of the grotesque, Tepper implies that our physical and psychological well-being is menaced by the cheap commercial clutter that intrudes upon so many once-open green areas. The fleshy assemblages and wall sculptures mimic the large shapes and emotionally suggestive colors of monumental signs and billboards advertising the big-box stores, fast-food restaurants, and gas stations that pervade car-centric regions like the South. Four wall sculptures from this period were included in "Hysteric Signs," Tepper's 2018 solo exhibition at White Columns, which brought the artist back—after years on an unexpected course—to present work in New York.

In a 2018 talk they gave at Atlanta Contemporary in conjunction with Tepper's solo exhibition "How Does the External Shape Shape the Internal Shape," the artist explained their fascination with roadside visual culture: "When I look at this bizarre installation of giant sculptures, I can't help but see deforestation, global warming, surveillance, addiction, diabetes, chemical waste, labor abuse, NRA funds, political control. [But] I don't judge the people who work here or shop here. I am, of course, one of them. This is the environment we all share now."

Artists come back to the South for many reasons, but leaving and then returning consistently serves as an opportunity to see the region with fresh eyes. Amy Sherald, known for her portraits of everyday Black subjects as well as First Lady Michelle Obama, grew up in Columbus, Georgia, and attended Clark Atlanta University. Earlier this year, the painter told *AiA*, "I don't think my work would be what it is had I not grown up in the South, then left Atlanta for grad school, and then moved back with more knowledge of who I am." Sculptor Charles Harlan—who grew up working in his parents' hardware store in Smyrna, Georgia, before moving away to attend New York University and later joining the roster at JTT, the Lower East Side gallery founded by his college friend Jasmin Tsou—returned to the South in 2019 after seventeen years in New York. Now located in Wilmington, North Carolina, Harlan echoed Tepper when he remarked upon the dramatic changes the region had undergone during his time away. "The South that I came back to feels very different from the South I left," he said, referring to both heightened racial and political tensions and to the gentrification of Southern cities. The latter brought about a recent uptick in the number of institutional contemporary art venues in the region, including the Institute of Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond and Crystal Bridges's satellite facility in Arkansas, called the Momentary.

Coulter Fussell: Graft and Stealth, 2021, mixed media, 5.5 by 5.5 feet.COURTESY THE ARTIST

WHILE GROWING UP in Columbus, Georgia, artist Coulter Fussell would never even have considered looking outside the South for professional inspiration. “When I was little, my artistic heroes were Southern-born artists: Tarleton Blackwell, Roger Brown, Benny Andrews, Alma Thomas, Bo Bartlett, Mike Howard . . . [The list] goes on and on,” she said. “For me, there was always this abundance of art down here, so why search for it somewhere else when it was overflowing all around me?” Fussell readily admits that her experience was uncommon—her father worked for fifteen years as a curator at Georgia’s Columbus Museum, and her mother has decades of experience with quilting and weaving. “I found that the artistic universe was bigger the deeper I dug where I lived,” she said. This much is evident in the materials she sources from her community.

After receiving her BFA from the University of Mississippi, Fussell began working as a server at a diner, a job she held off and on for the next twenty years while making quilts; running both a gallery and a textiles studio in the small town of Water Valley, Mississippi; and raising two sons. “I didn’t learn a whole lot [in college] that I later practiced,” Fussell said, laughing. “What I’ve done artistically has come from what my mom taught me about craft, what my dad taught me about what we would consider ‘fine art’ or whatever, and the work ethic that I got from being a waitress.”

Fussell makes her quilts from fabric—faded Little League T-shirts, century-old draperies, portions of her mother’s quilts, neckties, and macramé—discarded or donated by local residents of Water Valley. “All of my material comes from people who know I’m making quilts, so they’re interested enough to bring me the stuff,” she said. “I’ll be in my studio, and some guy who’s got his aunt’s old stash and doesn’t know what to do with it throws it off the back of his pickup truck and honks his horn and drives off.” In their forms as well as the sourcing methods, Fussell’s works push the boundaries of traditional quilt making, drawing on abstract painting and collage techniques. Fussell, who grew up near Georgia’s Fort Benning, has produced a number of quilts that reference history, war, and gender. In *Graft and Stealth* (2021), a cougar—presumably cut from a larger tableau—emerges between two curtain-like forms comprising small squares of colorful fabric. Above the cougar and between these implied

curtains, almost hidden away, a piece of army regalia shows the figure of a soldier and a partially concealed military insignia. The quilt's title is taken from the final stanza of a 1935 Langston Hughes poem, "Let America Be America Again": "Out of the … rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies / We, the people, must redeem / The land."

Another recurring element in Fussell's work is the presence of her sons, whose drawings on fabric are sometimes integrated into her quilts. "There was a period when I had many jobs at once, and I was doing a lot of sewing during the nighttime when I wasn't at work at my other jobs," she said. "I had to explain to my kids why we were sitting in front of the TV for six hours while I sewed." So she told them: "Y'all—this is a group effort. We're all gonna do this thing that's gonna get us in a better position." Some confirmation of this dedication arrived in 2019, when Fussell won a United States Artist Fellowship, an unrestricted $50,000 award. Notification first came as a buzz in her apron during a shift at the diner, and she had to return the call while standing in a back alley. As the panel delivered the news, Fussell interrupted them through tears of excitement to tell them, "I have to go back inside, I've got a full section!" Then she returned and finished her shift.

As with Fussell and her sons, it's often personal responsibilities and family commitments that lead artists to remain in the South. "The idea of moving to New York—first of all, as an adult, that's just impossible," she said, laughing. "People ask me sometimes, 'Why don't you live in New York?' And I'm like, 'Are you payin'? Do you have an apartment where I can live? Are you going to teach my kids?'" Adler Guerrier, a Miami-based artist whose sculptural installations and works on paper were included alongside Fussell's quilts in the 2016 Atlanta Biennial, gets similar questions. "Especially for artists like me, who've had opportunities to show elsewhere, this question has emerged a lot: Why are you still here?" He says that's the wrong question.

Adler Guerrier: Untitled (Flâneur), 1999–2001, digital print..COURTESY THE ARTIST

"People live in a place because of a complex set of decisions. Family life is more than 50 percent of that. I have a daughter who's eighteen years old, so for about twenty years of my practice, I stayed home."

Guerrier arrived in Miami in 1986 after spending the first ten years of his life in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Shortly after receiving his BFA from Miami's New World School of the Arts, he placed work in the landmark 2001 exhibition "Freestyle" at the Studio Museum in Harlem, a group show that put then-emerging artists such as Julie Mehretu, Sanford Biggers, and Rashid Johnson on the map. "Really early on, that sort of opening from institutions made it possible for me to take my practice really seriously," he told me, citing support from several Miami museums as well as the Studio Museum.

During the same period, Guerrier's work—especially his "Flâneur" series (1999–2001), for which he photographed his own often unidentifiable figure against blurry Miami cityscapes that are almost visibly humid—took on an acute relationship to place. "I grounded myself in the Miami of the time, what was available to me," he said. "I wanted to make work that reflected my being a resident of this city and being a Haitian immigrant, communicating my Caribbeanness more poetically than didactically." The series, a portion of which was shown in the 2008 Whitney Biennial, also grew out of Guerrier's passion for walking as both a practical mode of transportation and a method for research. He cited pioneering documentary photographer Eugène Atget (1857–1927), whose images commemorate Parisian city life at the turn of the twentieth century, as an artistic antecedent for his project chronicling contemporary Miami.

Guerrier also offered a keen analysis of his city's multiple overlapping cultural, historical, and social spheres. "Miami is in Florida; it's in the Caribbean; it's in the South; it's in the US; it's a global city," he said. "All of these things are true, and there are people who live here who operate within one or two of these spheres, but not all of them. As an artist, I'm conscious of all five, and I've tried to make my practice touch them all." This series of overlapping, sometimes contradictory impressions is perhaps best conveyed by Guerrier's use of techniques such as solvent transfer and collage in works on paper that create ghostly, overlapping black-and-white images of both natural and urban landscapes, often punctuated by cascading geometric shapes or intricate compositions. These works temper representation with more opaque visual poetics, creating images of a place that feel both familiar and far away.

Guerrier resists the tendency to portray the South as the sole scapegoat for America's painful past. "It's really easy to [speak] of the South as a place that's dominated by slavery and its aftermath. It's not that it's not true, but rather that there's nowhere in the United States that it's not true," he said. Guerrier advocates taking an extremely localized, even individualized approach to understanding his region. "The proper way to go is not by the dominant historical narrative, but to go down and try to see, let's say, What does it mean to walk around downtown Miami? What does that have to do with the American South? That's not going to be an easy five-word answer, right?"