

# **THE EARLIEST YEARS: 1987–1989**

## **THORNTON DIAL**

**June 6–July 31, 2021**

Parker Gallery is proud to announce the forthcoming exhibition: *Thornton Dial, The Earliest Years: 1987–1989*, the first solo exhibition of the artist's work on the West Coast, and the first to focus on this formative period of his life and career.

In the late summer of 1987, Lonnie Holley brought his friend and collector, William Arnett to visit the home of Thornton Dial, an event that would change the course of their lives. Holley, an artist and seeker of like minds, had met Dial at the introduction of a former girlfriend and acquired several of his handmade fishing lures which hung on the wall of his home. Upon seeing them, Arnett suggested a visit. The two men, in conversation with Dial, found him to be somewhat guarded and it became clear that he didn't know or acknowledge their concept of art. For the purpose of demonstration, Arnett asked Holley to make an artwork who then created a pocket-size wire sculpture of a woman's profile that included a metal ring, some turkey feathers, and a discarded, mass-produced fishing lure, all found outside. Dial's response to this impromptu creative exercise was: "If that's art, then I'm going to show you some art." Over the next few years, he made good on his promise.

This moment marks the beginning of the impossibly inventive first stage of Dial's career as an artist, a period characterized by rapid innovation, material exploration, and self-discovery. The earliest works in the exhibition rely on the artist's experience as a fabricator. With his children, Dial had a small furniture business and in the weeks that followed his meeting with Holley and Arnett, Dial transformed chairs, plant stands, concrete sidewalk liners, and other utilitarian objects into sculptures. As time went by, he began using more traditional materials, creating two-dimensional paintings and assemblages that explore cultural origin stories, religious mysteries, family dynamics, racial tensions, and the problematic socio-economic realities of modern American life, among other subjects.

From the beginning, Dial insisted that his works had no underlying meaning or symbolism. This was, of course, patently false. Indeed, Dial had found yet another way to redirect the attention of too-eager eyes, shielding his thoughts through abstraction and visual misdirection. Indeed, there could be grave consequences for someone like Dial making bold critiques of the entrenched structures of power.

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While imbued with meaning, these early works are more conversational than all-encompassing in nature, the viewpoint of a man who is creating, at first, for a more immediate audience: the residents of Pipe Shop, his neighborhood in Bessemer.

*Thornton Dial, The Earliest Years: 1987–1989* provides the viewer with a glimpse into the mind of one of America’s most innovative artists, at the beginning of his artistic journey—a moment when he is in competition only with himself—learning and exploring his way into artistic greatness.

–Phillip March Jones

The exhibition is curated by Phillip March Jones and will be accompanied by a publication of the same title, with contributions by Jones, Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander, Paul Arnett, Richard Dial, Lonnie Holley, Nikita Gale, Kéla Jackson, Katherine Jentleson, and Leslie Umberger.

**Works by Thornton Dial (b. 1928, Emelle, AL; d. 2016, McCalla, AL) are included in the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, National Gallery of Art, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Brooklyn Museum, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Dallas Museum of Art, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the Whitney Museum of American Art, among many others.**