



**Title**

Curating and photographing art and resistance in the American South

**Author(s)**

Hannah Collins

**Article DOI**

<https://doi.org/10.31452/bcj3.wlak.collins>

**Url**

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/journal/journal/curating-and-photographing-art-and-resistance-in-the-american-south>

**ISSN**

2631-5661

**Cite as**

Hannah Collins: 'Curating and photographing art and resistance in the American South', *Burlington Contemporary* Issue 3 (June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.31452/bcj3.wlak.collins>

**About the author(s)**

is an artist who makes photographs, films, texts and books. Her works are embedded in historical and social frameworks with a wide range of subjects and geographical locations, and her involvement in a body of work often continues over many years. Examples of her work can be found in many public and private collections including Tate; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and Sprengel Museum, Hannover.

Cover image:

# Curating and photographing art and resistance in the American South

by Hannah Collins • June 2020 • Article commission

*We Will Walk – Art and Resistance in the American South* opened in February at Turner Contemporary, Margate. The exhibition brings together art by African American creators made in Alabama and neighbouring states since 1950, a period shaped by the Civil Rights movement. The work takes many forms, from ephemeral environments made from salvaged materials to sculptural assemblages, paintings, musical instruments and quilts, and is contextualised through photographs documenting the Civil Rights movement between 1954 and 1968. The exhibition's title reflects the fact that during this time walking came to the fore as an act of courage and protest, in such vast communal acts as the widely documented marches from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. The artists in this exhibition are linked to a history of Civil Rights that is both activist and hidden.

This exhibition began with a body of work I produced over a long period of time, working with African American artists from the American South and with local collections of their work. In particular I was looking at the work of artists whose work had been seen little outside of the contexts in which they were made. This article explores how my work as both curator and artist developed during this time. The exhibition has taken over three years to realise. It was in many ways a familiar process, similar to making a film. To bring everything together in one place at the same time, many substitutions and changes are made, the final visible project looks miles away yet remains faithful to the original impetus.

## Encounters

When I was introduced to the work of these artists I was moved that such a legacy of innovative creativity had come from such troubling times. In a new era of protest, against huge inequalities, the climate emergency and other global issues, bringing their work into a contemporary context seemed important. I began to make journeys to visit the artists who had made the works, and to make photographs of sites that were threatened with disappearance in the near future. I made the images as works of art, as keys to understanding activity and as representations of art that has no way of making it into a gallery. In the widest sense this work follows my own path of making visible and re-contextualising that which

would otherwise not be seen.

Three encounters led to *We Will Walk*. The first was my visit to the vast sculpture site in the California desert created by Noah Purifoy (1917–2004); the second was a work by Lonnie Holley (b.1950), *Him and Her Hold the Root*. The third encounter was with Emmer Sewell (b.1934), an artist who found forceful expression in her yard on the highway out of Marion in the Alabama Black Belt. All three artists were born in the segregated South. Their childhoods were lived under a regime of racial terror, and all three reached adulthood during the Civil Rights period.

## **i. Purifoy**

Noah Purifoy's work draws on traditions of yard art, with which he would have been familiar growing up. He was born to a sharecropper family in Snow Hill, Alabama, and his works are filled with references both to segregation and the Afro-Atlantic traditions – cultural inheritance that had come from Africa under slavery. Purifoy moved to California, where he earned four degrees and, working within the radical movements of the 1960s, became a leading exponent of assemblage art. He made many of his key works during his final years, spent at Joshua Tree, in common with such artists as Bill Traylor, who also made his major work at the end of his life. Using found materials Purifoy created visual references that stretched back to his childhood – the shacks, churches and graveyards of the South, the segregated washrooms and buses, the burned buildings left by the Watts Rebellion in 1965. The monuments are placed around the Joshua Tree site to create a map. The detritus of technology is piled up and abandoned, in contrast to the sparse landscape of the surrounding desert. When Purifoy met visitors at his site, he asked them a question: 'What are you going to do about it?'





**FIG. 1** *The Interior and the Exterior - Noah Purifoy, No 5*, by Hannah Collins. 2014. Gelatin silver print, 139 by 83 cm. (Courtesy the artist).



**FIG. 2** *The Interior and the Exterior - Noah Purifoy, No 9*, by Hannah Collins. 2014. Gelatin silver print, 139 by 83 cm. (Courtesy the artist).



**FIG. 3** *The Interior and the Exterior - Noah Purifoy, No 18*, by Hannah Collins. 2014. Gelatin silver print, 139 by 83 cm. (Courtesy the artist).

Visiting some years after his death, I felt this question – a call – in his work. The exhibition would be, in part, my response to it.

## ii. Lonnie Holley



**FIG. 4** *Him and Her Hold the Root*, by Lonnie Holley. 1994. Rocking chairs, pillow and root, 116 by 185 by 77 cm. (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco).

I saw Lonnie Holley's work *Him and Her Hold the Root* (1994) during my first visit to Alabama, where I had gone to find Purifoy's birthplace. It is made from two old wooden rocking chairs sitting side by side. One is smaller and leans against the other, and together they support a huge tree root laid across them. The root once provided a tree's sustenance, but it could also be seen as the roots of inheritance overwhelming the chairs even when the strength of both is combined. I was driven both to look harder and to search out ways to look differently after seeing

*Him and Her Hold the Root*. Soon after seeing Holley's work I met him and we created a series of photographs together. Working in



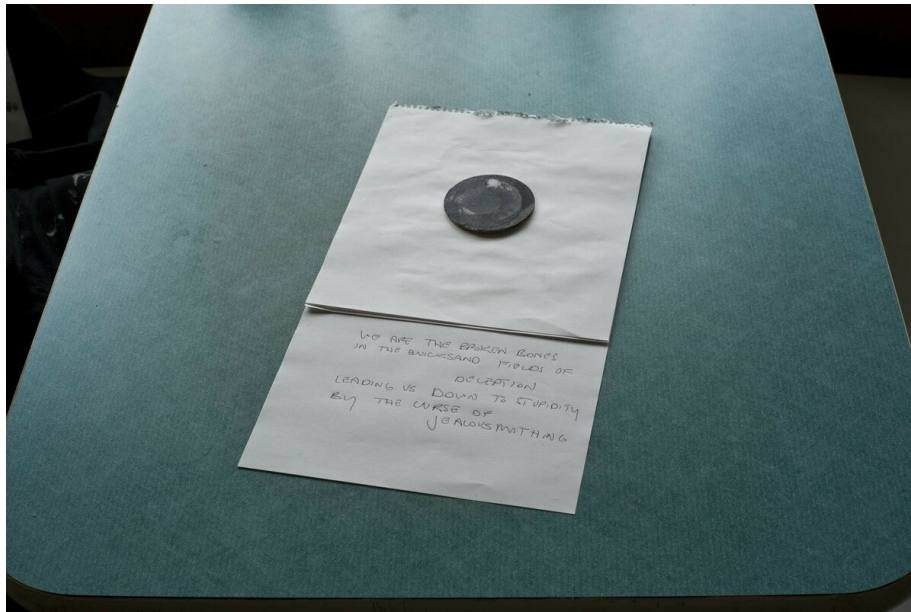
his local café, Holley became my teacher using sauce bottles to demonstrate the harsh nature of American race relations and I photographed his transitory statements.



**FIG. 5** *Education by Lonnie Holley*, by Hannah Collins. 2017. Giclée print, 30 by 40 cm. (Courtesy the artist).



**FIG. 6** *Education by Lonnie Holley*, by Hannah Collins. 2017. Giclée print, 30 by 40 cm. (Courtesy the artist).



**FIG. 7** *Education by Lonnie Holley*, by Hannah Collins. 2017. Giclée print, 30 by 40 cm. (Courtesy the artist).

### iii. Emmer Sewell



**FIG. 8** *Untitled*, by Emmer Sewell. Early 1990s. Car tyre, plastic chair and cinderblock, 109.2 by 72.4 by 55.9 cm. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; courtesy Souls Grown Deep, Atlanta).

The third encounter was with Emmer Sewell's work. I first saw an assemblage by Sewell in Alabama, shortly before the piece was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 2014 from the collector William Arnett. In the work, a white plastic chair and piece of grey concrete balance on a black rubber tyre daubed with white paint.

Abstract white sits on abstract black. Sewell is not aware that her work is shown in the museum, almost a thousand miles from where it was created, and she has no relationship with the institutions that now pay homage to her practice. Sewell's creativity is fugitive in form, disguised yet obviously political. In her yard, each element had a specificity

in the way it was placed and an intensity close to animism. A fridge surrounded by trees was painted with abstract signs; sharp farm implements swung from some low branches, almost invisible until I

bumped against them – violent and silent. In a window to the side of Sewell's house a collage of Barack Obama and his family at the time of his presidency was displayed.



**FIG. 9** *Emmer Sewell's yard*, by Hannah Collins. 2018. Gelatin silver print, 140 by 170 cm. (Courtesy the artist).

Sewell's yard is a performative space. When I called ahead of my visit she asked for my precise arrival time, and when I arrived four spotless white sheets were hung carefully at the entrance. They seemed both to accommodate my presence – and possibly to protect from it.

Sewell remained living precariously beside the highway, where I visited her, photographing her yard several times, across a two-year period. The last time I went to see her, in early 2019, the yard show had gone and Sewell had disappeared. The art had been vivid and safe in

her hands, but once she had been moved on from her vulnerable position, the yard was also gone.



**FIG. 10** *Emmer Sewell's porch*, by Hannah Collins. 2018. Chromogenic print, 120 by 150 cm. (Courtesy the artist).



## The yard as witness

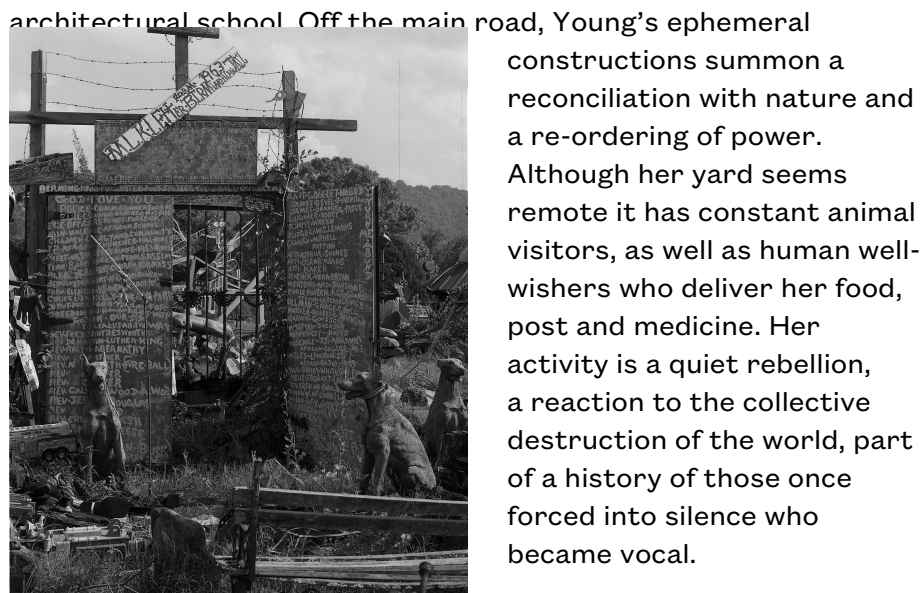
Through these encounters the yard emerged as sanctuary, an expressive space and a place of resistance, at once domestic and part of the landscape. The art encompassed many themes, including traditions of Nkisi – objects that embody spirits, which originated in Kongo (part of modern-day Angola) and travelled to the United States with the Atlantic slave trade. There are common objects and symbols in many of the yards, including painted tyres, used shoes, roots and chairs. Yard shows might offer a visual equivalent to jazz music: improvisation and abstraction are key elements.



FIG. 11 Joe Minter's monument to those incarcerated in Birmingham Jail by Hannah Collins. 2018. Gelatin silver print, 140 by 170 cm. (Courtesy the artist).

I made two images of Joe Minter's monument to protestors incarcerated in Birmingham Jail. His huge yard project, *African Village in America* in Birmingham, provides Minter with his own space where he can speak freely, offering an alternative to controversial Confederate monuments common in public spaces in the South. In Minter's yard I photographed a monument, intending to clearly transmit his own certainty of events.

On my first visit to rural Alabama I also visited and photographed the woodland space of Dinah Young (b.1932), an artist living in Newbern, a few miles away from both Sewell's yard and Gee's Bend. Newbern is a preserved white plantation town and the location of the Rural Studios, an internationally renowned



**FIG. 12** *Joe Minter's monument to those incarcerated in Birmingham Jail*, by Hannah Collins. 2018. Giclée print, 170 by 140 cm. (Courtesy the artist).



**FIG. 13** *Dinah Young's yard*, by Hannah Collins. 2018. Giclée print, 120 by 150 cm. (Courtesy the artist).





**FIG. 14** *Dinah Young's yard with structure*, by Hannah Collins. 2018. Giclée print, 140 by 170 cm. (Courtesy the artist).

### **The quilts of Gee's Bend**

On my first trip to Alabama, I visited Gee's Bend, around twenty miles from Snow Hill. Gee's Bend lies on a spit of land surrounded by the Alabama River, a rural community that has become famous for its quilts. Among many other quilt makers from the area, Mary Lee Bendolph (b.1935), Annie Mae Young (b.1928) and Loretta Pettway (b.1942) had created quilts that are immediately recognisable.



FIG. 15 *Alabama river to Gee's bend*, by Hannah Collins. 2016. iPhone photograph (Courtesy the artist).



FIG. 16 *Loretta Pettway with a recent quilt in her yard* by Hannah Collins. 2016. Chromogenic print, 30 by 40 cm. (Courtesy the artist).

The quilters' lives are clearly reflected in their quilts. Their work is fugitive, adapted to circumstance. Linked to their maker's poverty



and hard labour on the cotton plantation, the quilts are made from used materials such as used school clothes and blue jeans. They are made by tearing rather than cutting cloth and contain abstract visual languages that developed in isolation over a hundred years. The ferry that linked Gee's Bend to Camden, the nearest town, was removed in order to prevent residents from registering the right to vote and from voting during the 1960s. A quilt by Irene Williams (1920–2015) dated around 1975 is made from tape printed with the word 'Vote'. The quilt can be seen either as a call to action or simply as the result of leftover election tape being put to practical use.



FIG. 17 Detail of *Vote Quilt (Housetop variation)*, by Irene Williams. c.1975. Cotton, 227 by 198 cm. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

The emotional power of the object lies in its original purpose: to warm and protect the sleeper and to express beauty in houses where hardship is all around. By spending time with the quilters I looked at the quilts in numerous contexts – folded, hung over fences and piled together.



**FIG. 18** *Site of Emmett Till's abduction in 1955, Money, Mississippi*, by Hannah Collins. 2019. Gelatin silver print. (Courtesy the artist).

## Walk

When Emmett Till was murdered in 1955, portraits of the happy-go-lucky fourteen-year-old boy were published alongside photographs of his mangled body, beautifully dressed for his final resting. By allowing her son to be shown in this way Mamie Till had created a defining image for the Civil Rights movement that served as evidence of the multiple atrocities being heaped on the Black population by whites. I travelled to the site of Till's abduction in Money, Mississippi, and made an image in order to represent it in the present. I constantly asked myself, in these different contexts, what has happened, what will happen?

I looked closely at the way photographs had made the Civil Rights movement visible. Finding the images made by Doris Derby (b.1939) was one of the keys to the exhibition, as they directly linked the acts of protest and resistance including walking and the making of art. An African American activist and photographer, Derby went to Mississippi in her early twenties to assist in Civil Rights work staying to work for ten years. She photographed many local subjects, including groups of women learning to read, and a rural health clinic run by young African American doctors. The tenacity shown within her photographs – the fact that she was present to so many of these events – links them closely to art within the exhibition, which is the result of many years of endurance by the artists.





**FIG. 19** *Doris Derby, Grass roots Community Organiser*, unknown photographer. 1968.

The fight for voting rights was widely photographed, both by masters of the era such as Danny Lyon (b.1942) and Ernest Withers (1922–2007), who travelled to Alabama to document the movement, and by anonymous participants who made images of the events they attended. Subjects included activists signing up rural citizens to vote; the march from Selma to Montgomery; Martin Luther King Jr, pictured by Lyons in 1963 before he spoke at the funeral of four girls killed in the 16th Street Church bombing; and an image by Withers of King's funeral, his hearse pulled by mules from Gee's Bend. Other photographs highlight the

importance of music in making links between culture, events and the media during the years of the Civil Rights struggle, including James E. Hinton's image of Diana Ross and the Supremes attending King's funeral and Withers's photograph of Aretha Franklin performing after the Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, in July 1968.



**FIG. 20** *Montgomery, Alabama*, by Morton Broffman. 1965. Gelatin silver print, 27 by 35 cm. (High Museum of Art, Atlanta; © Morton Broffman).



**FIG. 21** *Martin Luther King funeral procession*, by Ernest Withers. 1968. Gelatin silver print, 36.2 by 36.2 cm. (High Museum of Art, Atlanta; © Dr. Ernest C. Withers, Sr).

Looking through hundreds of images prompted new interpretations about the power of protest and how detailed the planning and execution of specific acts during the movement had been. The march from Selma to Montgomery could be seen from the point of view of a marcher, looking towards those standing along the route – sometimes the photographer was watching children willing the march, marchers continuing when rain poured down, or teenagers lying on the ground recovering from their walk. The disconnection from one image to another prompted me to consider how such disconnections might allow a viewer space to think and draw pictures of their own. Documentary photographs provided a key to the exhibition. They act as an anchor, a way to view history that prevents the art from floating in an abstract modern space.

### **Exhibition, geography and remembrance**

The disappearance of yards made my recording of them more urgent. Each time I photographed the actions of one of the yard



artists I became more aware of the wealth of womens' work that has already disappeared. Work by women made up fifty per cent of the exhibited works in *We Will Walk*. The Gee's Bend quilts were obvious inclusions. My concerns about exhibiting them, however, increased as the project developed: they had become iconic in a wider art context; hung like paintings, they were honoured for their distinctive aesthetic, but in ways which failed to link them to their makers, original purpose or origins.

In the exhibition we bridged the gap by making platforms that hovered over the floor so that the quilts were viewed horizontally, and by linking two quilts with works in other media – in the first room, *Roots and the Abstract Truth*, Annie Mae Young's quilt was hung between sculptural works by Holley and Dial, both of which referred to labour, and in the second room, *The Yard as Witness* – a two-sided quilt made in 1942 by Polly Bennett (1922–2003) – was hung between photographs of yard shows.



**FIG. 22** Installation view of *We Will Walk – Art and Resistance in the American South*, Turner Contemporary, Margate, 7th February–3rd May 2020.





**FIG. 23** Installation view of *We Will Walk – Art and Resistance in the American South*, Turner Contemporary, Margate, 7th February–3rd May 2020. Work shown *The Yard as Witness*, by Polly Bennett. 1942.

As the idea of presenting this work as an exhibition solidified, it became clear that other voices would be necessary. Two years into the project, the curator Paul Goodwin joined me in developing an exhibition. The High Museum in Atlanta agreed to lend images from their extensive collection of Civil Rights photographs. At the entrance is a mural-sized timeline featuring key events in African American life from 1522 to 2019, created by the law professor Eddie Bruce Jones and the archivist Kelly Foster.

The exhibition also includes biographies of each artist and creator, a slideshow of images made by the Arnett family with some of the artists during the 1990s, and wall panels with texts by African American writers, including Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. They speak about the power of roots in conjure traditions, the spirituality of Black women in the gardens of the South, and about making brightly coloured quilts as a source of joy in a bleak interior. A musical soundtrack curated by Calvin Forbes further layers the visitor's experience.

I hoped that these different layers and media would slow visits down, encouraging people to spend more time with the works and focus on the detail of the works and photographs. The exhibition left sparsely populated areas for people to imagine their own place among the objects and images, to find their own involvements and languages among what is displayed. Two screens in the exhibition show, respectively, an interview with Angela Davis in which she talks about her radicalisation following her childhood in segregated Birmingham, and Lonnie Holley's work *I Woke Up in a Fucked-up*

America (2018)



FIG. 24 *Untitled (Sun Ra on the Set of Space is the Place)*. Unknown photographer. 1972. Modern photographic print. (Collection of John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis).

In a final room recognising Purifoy's place in this project are works by artists who were born in the South and left as part of the many migrations by African Americans to other parts of the country. The Jazz musician Sun Ra (1914–93) spent many years in Chicago although he was born and is buried in Birmingham, Alabama. His film, *Space is the Place* (1974), a pioneering work of Afro-Futurism, imagines a utopian world for Black people, away from white supremacy. The critic and musician Greg Tate put it:

We should have asked about Ra's Alabama roots a long time ago, at least as far back as the 1960's, when Sun Ra

and Alabama's Negroes were both bent on bringing humanistic (and alienist) change to a Jim Crow America not ready for prime time, let alone Afrocentric space time... what other kind of extra-terrestrial brothers were they cultivating down there...

The art in the exhibition was made entirely from material remnants, put together in homage to the artists who made that work, pioneers of artistic practices that risk, question and change perceptions. These African American artists from the Southern States are finally gaining wider recognition, both for the languages they developed and as a history of experience. This is the tip of an iceberg.

THE  
**BURLINGTON**  
MAGAZINE

© The Burlington Magazine Publications Limited. All rights reserved  
ISSN 2631-5661

**The Burlington Magazine**  
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ