

Thornton Dial: From Bessemer to the Cosmos

16 January – 14 March 2026

Opening reception | Thursday 15 January, 6–8pm



Edel Assanti is pleased to present *From Bessemer to the Cosmos*, the first U.K. solo exhibition of large-scale paintings and assemblages by late American artist Thornton Dial (1928–2016), organised in collaboration with MARCH Gallery. Coinciding with the ten year anniversary of the artist's death in 2016, the exhibition brings together a selection of major, mostly unseen works produced during a pivotal decade of Dial's career, from 1988 to 1998.

In the late summer of 1987, artist Lonnie Holley introduced his friend and collector, William S. Arnett, to Thornton Dial, marking the beginning of the first stage of Dial's artistic career. Conversational in tone, the earliest works in *From Bessemer to the Cosmos* emerged from the rhythms of everyday life in Pipe Shop, Dial's neighborhood in Bessemer, Alabama. This local grounding imbued his paintings and assemblages with an authenticity that resonated beyond Dial's immediate audience, quickly attracting attention from a broader and increasingly diverse viewership. Six years after that first meeting, *Thornton Dial: Image of the Tiger* opened simultaneously across the New Museum and the American Folk Art Museum in New

York, U.S. (1993). Curator and art historian Lowery Stokes Sims noted in the exhibition's brochure: "As Dial continues his artistic journey, following his own agenda, it will be increasingly difficult to classify him simply as 'folk,' or 'naive,' or 'outside,' and thus Dial will forcefully challenge the hierarchical language that we bring to the discussion of various genres of art."

By all accounts, Dial's artistic trajectory was unusual, especially considering the complex realities of class and racial disparities in America. Working since the age of five, Dial, in his own words, undertook almost "every kind of work a man can do": he spent three decades as a metalworker for the Pullman Standard railroad plant in Bessemer, Alabama, and worked in a variety of skilled trades such as house painting, brick-laying, pipe fitting, and carpentry. These experiences, together with vernacular traditions that elude formal institutions – the yard shows of the American South, patchwork quilting, and the gospel church – coalesced into a visual lexicon uniquely his own. Through Dial's incisive mark-making, *From Bessemer to the Cosmos* narrates the African-American experience across the twentieth century and beyond: from share-

cropping in the Black Belt and the Great Migration, to the struggles and triumphs of the civil rights movement and complexities of identity in a rapidly shifting post-modern America.

Despite inherent obstacles and persistent misunderstandings, over the ten years charted by this exhibition Dial's work grew in scale, material complexity, and thematic ambition, employing animistic symbols and evocative titles to convey both his personal life and the broader history of Black experience. *From Bessemer to the Cosmos* depicts the critical period of Dial's practice where his gaze – previously focused on his immediate community and surroundings – expanded to encompass the broader world from his home in Bessemer, Alabama to the edges of the cosmos and the confines of life itself.

ABOUT THORNTON DIAL

Thornton Dial (b.1928, Emelle, AL, U.S., d.2016, McCalla, AL, U.S.), lived and worked in Bessemer, Alabama, U.S. Dial has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions at museums and institutions, including the Abrams-Engel Institute for the Visual Arts, University of Alabama, Birmingham, AL Samford University Art Gallery, Birmingham, AL and Wiregrass Museum of Art, Dothan, AL (2022–23); Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, OH (2020); High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA (2016); Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN (2011); New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA (2011); Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX (2005); New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY (1993); American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY (1993); and was included in the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum, New York, NY (2000).

Dial's work is held in the collections of many prestigious institutions, including at the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; de Young Museum, San Francisco, CA; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Pérez Art Museum, Miami, FL; Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture, Washington D.C.; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, among many others.

ABOUT EDEL ASSANTI

Edel Assanti was founded in 2010 by Jeremy Epstein and Charlie Fellowes. Having been located in London's Fitzrovia since 2014, in 2022 we opened our 4,000 square foot gallery in a renovated Grade II listed building on Little Titchfield Street.

Edel Assanti works with international artists whose practices engage with the complex realities of the moment in which they live. The gallery stages 4-5 ambitious, narrative driven exhibitions per year, tending towards interdisciplinary, research-led work. Biannual, expansive group exhibitions provide a platform to bring together non-represented artists in explorations of emerging themes of artistic interest.

Our premises play host to a dynamic events programme in parallel to gallery exhibitions, encompassing performance, talks and live music. The gallery's digital presence includes a series of short films and artist interviews published to accompany exhibitions. In 2021 Edel Assanti founded London Gallery Weekend (LGW), an annual celebration of London's diverse gallery community bringing together 130 contemporary commercial galleries. Now in its fifth year, Edel Assanti remains at LGW's helm. Chief amongst LGW's initiatives is a wide-ranging partnership with Art Fund, enhancing the relationship between London's galleries and regional museums across the UK.

We are proud to support several public arts institutions each year, and are currently members of Modern Art Oxford's Director's Circle, Gold Patrons of the Royal Academy of Arts and Patrons of Camden Art Centre.

CONTACT US

For further press information and high-res images, please contact: athena@edelassanti.com

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Thornton Dial, *Cover of the World (People Ask For Flowers While They Live)*, 1997. Carpet, plastic flowers, Splash Zone compound, enamel, and spray paint on canvas over wood, 62 x 85.5 x 5 in. © Thornton Dial. Courtesy Edel Assanti.