

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thornton Dial
Handwriting on the Wall

Blum & Poe, Los Angeles
April 29–June 10, 2023
Opening reception: Saturday, April 29, 5–7pm

Los Angeles, CA, April 17, 2023—Blum & Poe, in partnership with the Estate of Thornton Dial, is pleased to present the gallery's first solo exhibition showcasing the work of late artist Thornton Dial—his first major presentation in Los Angeles.

Renowned for his innovations, Dial developed an unprecedented style by fusing gestural virtuosity with a spiritual commitment to found materials—a panoply of cast-off goods and items considered valueless or broken. Drawing on traditions not taught in formal institutions—the yard shows of the American South, patchwork quilting, and the gospel church—he created a visual and narrative language that reframes important moments in world history and encapsulates the Black experience in the American South during the artist's lifetime. The resulting works balance personal, cultural, and universal meanings to give voice and imagery to systemic inequities both past and present. This retrospective exhibition takes viewers on a journey backwards in time through twenty-eight years of Dial's career painting venerated retellings of Black American history—from slavery to Jim Crow and through the election of the first Black president.

Like many of the works presented in the initial gallery, *Garden of Eden* (2015) is making its first ever public appearance. Painted in the artist's last year of life, this work provides valuable insight into Dial's reflections on his own mortality. As indicated in its title, *Garden of Eden* is a rumination on death—the Judeo-Christian Bible tells the story of Adam and Eve, the first humans, becoming mortal only when expelled from the garden. Painted in a contrasting palette of lilac, yellow, and grey, life's impermanence is depicted here as neither good nor bad, but a swirl of both. Layering a single piece of fabric atop the spraypainted enamel on canvas over wood—an exercise in succinctness compared to the found-object assemblages from Dial's earlier career—*Garden of Eden's* construction also indicates the artist's perception of his body's mobility. Key symbols in the biblical tale include the tree of life, which allowed Adam and Eve eternal life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which produced fruit whose consumption resulted in Adam and Eve's expulsion from divine paradise. *Garden of Eden's* composition is primarily abstract, except for a single, nearly indiscernible houseplant. In the artist's oeuvre, it is common to see seemingly mundane objects imbued with great meaning—as with this plant of humble origins that, here, represents both eternal life and the pathway to death. Ever an optimist, even while considering his own imminent passing, Dial creates a new allegory with this painting. He alludes to his own origins—born in a cornfield to an unwed teenage mother and working a half-century building highways, houses, and boxcars—to convey the great contributions that he and other Black voices have made in the realms of racial advocacy and culture despite having faced innumerable challenges along the way.

In an adjacent room, a midcareer work titled *Hot and Cold (Life in the Rolling Mill)* (1995–96), exemplifies a through line from *Garden of Eden* to the artist's earlier interest in the tenderness and humanity found in unlikely places. Representational of the artist's signature assemblages, *Hot and Cold (Life in the Rolling Mill)* is an impressive symphony of scrap metal, wire mesh, fabric, clothing, carpet, a fly swatter, a toy tractor, twine, artificial hair, Splash Zone compound, spray paint, and enamel on canvas over wood. In this case, a steel mill acts as a lens through which to examine romantic relationships. Before becoming a full-time artist,

BLUM & POE

Los Angeles, New York, Tokyo

Dial held a series of industry jobs, most notably working at the Pullman-Standard plant in Bessemer, Alabama for thirty years making boxcars. *Hot and Cold (Life in the Rolling Mill)* uses the steel forging process, in which the metal is heated to a very high temperature to make it malleable before being dropped into water to quickly cool and retain its shape, as a metaphor for the unpredictable nature of love. A man, constructed from scrap metal and bearing a mustache that resembles the facial hair Dial wore for much of his life, reaches toward a woman of the same material constitution wearing lipstick and a dress. Frozen in their move toward one another, the two never fully touch—a stance that recalls Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* and prompts a reconsideration of the nature of partnership.

Relationships—between individuals, economic classes, genders, and races—have always been a key theme in Dial's oeuvre. In an oil on canvas painting titled *Running with the Mule, Running for Freedom* (1990), presented here alongside his earliest works, the artist paints a Black man riding a mule and flanked by onlookers. In his early work, Dial often used animals to embody the othering, everyday ordeals of Black Americans. For a Black factory employee working in Bessemer around the time of the second Selma march, expressing opinions on racial inequity could have resulted in a loss of livelihood—or life. In *Running with the Mule, Running for Freedom* the mule is a symbol of the historic associations of Black Americans with work animals, commodities, and disposable labor. The mule is also a reference to Dial's ancestors who, for generations, were sharecroppers on the plantation where Dial was born. The white figures in this work, not subject to the mule's associations, look on with expressions of shock and sadness, indicating that Dial held out hope for interracial collaboration to overcome Black oppression.

Dial was a documentarian and orator of his own lived experience at a time of great tumult and change in his community. Beyond his important insights into twentieth-century Black life and culture, Dial's work—from the beginning of his career as an artist to the end of his life—provides an astute and moving meditation on love, death, and the desire for more than one's allotment. Reflecting on his contributions to art and culture, Dial said, "Since I been making art, my mind got more things coming to it. The more you do, the more you see to do.... I believe I have proved that my art is about ideas, and about life, and the experience of the world."

Thornton Dial's (b. 1928, Emelle, AL; d. 2016, McCalla, AL) work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions at institutions across the nation, including the Abrams-Engel Institute for the Visual Arts, University of Alabama, Birmingham, AL; traveling to 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 represented in the permanent collections of the American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY; 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 more.

About Blum & Poe

Blum & Poe was founded by Tim Blum and Jeff Poe in Santa Monica in September of 1994 as a space to show local and international contemporary art in all media. Blum's extensive experience in the Japanese art world combined with Poe's keen knowledge of emerging artists in Los Angeles resulted in an international

BLUM & POE

Los Angeles, New York, Tokyo

program of influential artists. Throughout a twenty-seven-year history, Blum & Poe has shaped the trajectory of contemporary art by championing artists at all stages of their careers—cultivating the lineages that run between emerging and established practices and working with artist estates to generate new discourse surrounding historical work. Currently, Blum & Poe represents fifty-one artists and nine estates from sixteen countries worldwide.

In 2003 the gallery moved to a larger space in Culver City, and in 2009 Blum & Poe purchased and renovated its current 22,000-square-foot complex on La Cienega Boulevard. In this location the gallery has since staged museum-caliber surveys, examining the historical work of such movements as the Japanese Mono-ha school (2012); the Korean Dansaekhwa monochrome painters (2014); the European postwar movement CoBrA (2015); Japanese art of 1980s and '90s (2019); a rereading of Brazilian Modernism (2019); and a revisionist take on the 1959 MoMA exhibition, *New Images of Man* (2020). To produce these exhibitions, Blum & Poe has worked with celebrated curators such as Alison M. Gingeras, Sofia Gotti, Joan Kee, and Mika Yoshitake.

In 2014, Blum & Poe opened galleries in New York and Tokyo to focus on intimately scaled projects in new contexts. These expansions tie into the gallery's wide-reaching program that includes exhibitions, lectures, performance series, screenings, and an annual art book fair at its base in Los Angeles. Blum & Poe's publishing division democratically circulates its program through original scholarship and accessible media ranging from academic monographs, audio series, magazines, to artists' books. In 2020, the gallery launched Blum & Poe Broadcasts, an online platform showcasing artists' projects in conjunction with physical installations or as standalone digital endeavors.

Across the three global locations, Blum & Poe prioritizes environmental and community stewardship in all operations. In 2015, Blum & Poe was certified as an Arts:Earth Partnership (AEP) green art gallery in Los Angeles and consequently became one of the first green certified galleries in the United States. The gallery is also a member of the Gallery Climate Coalition, which works to facilitate a more sustainable commercial art world and reduce the industry's collective carbon footprint. Blum & Poe is committed to fostering inclusive and equitable communities both in their physical and online spaces and believes that everybody should have equal access to creating and engaging with contemporary art.

Press Inquiries

Nicoletta Beyer
Communications and Editorial Director, New York
nicoletta@blumandpoe.com

Christie Hayden
Communications and Social Media Editor, Los Angeles
christie@blumandpoe.com

Follow Blum & Poe

 [@blumandpoe](https://www.instagram.com/blumandpoe)

 [@blumandpoe](https://www.facebook.com/blumandpoe)