



Noah Purifoy

February 2 – April 1, 2023
Opening reception: February 2nd, 6 – 8 PM

Tilton Gallery is delighted to present the second ever East Coast solo exhibition of work by *Noah Purifoy*, opening Thursday, February 2nd from 6:00 to 8:00PM. The exhibition will be on view through April 1st.

A pioneering artist of the California assemblage movement, Noah Purifoy was also a key figure in the Black Arts Movement in Los Angeles during the 1960s and '70s. For Purifoy, art and political activism went hand in hand. He believed that art is a powerful tool for social change and never ceased to combine advocacy with creativity.

Purifoy is known for his assemblages composed of found and recycled objects. As with John Outterbridge and other Los Angeles transplants who spent their early years in the South, repurposing of objects and materials was a way of living.

With a Master's degree in social work and an interest in psychology, philosophy and art history, Purifoy was aware of the Surrealist and Dada traditions and the work with found objects of artists such as Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp, both of whom had solo shows curated by Walter Hopps at the Pasadena Museum of Art in 1962 and 1963, respectively. Purifoy's own work applies the use of collage and assemblage to create both poetic and abstracted social commentary.

Purifoy's vision, particularly in the works included in this exhibition, all from 1987 on, exhibits a wide-ranging freedom of expression. Some, such as his very classic assemblage construction *Rags and Old Iron I (after Nina Simone)* and the somewhat more figurative *Earl "Fatha" Hines* reference two jazz greats. The importance of jazz to his work cannot be underestimated. He was immersed in this art form,

central to cultural life in South Los Angeles and he frequently gathered friends to listen to music and talk about art in his home. Jazz provided a model for structuring his view of the world in an abstract, syncopated way that challenges tradition while remaining structurally tight.

Other works, such as *Hanging Tree* and *Upstage* are more overtly political. The first is self-explanatory and the latter a deeply personal portrayal of two black abstracted men wearing masks that represent tragedy and comedy. They appear “upstaged” by a third figure carrying a cane, possibly a female, possibly an elder sage, a metaphor for history, a subject that cannot help but include the legacy of slavery and the plight of the black man as he saw it. Both are among the more graphic images in his oeuvre.

Clown Princess and *One White Paint Brush and a Pony Tail* embody the full and joyful use of objects in combination. The central image in *Clown Princess* again is a mask, weeping and smiling at once, placed atop a chair embedded in the painting surface and decked out in gold trinkets and pearls. All sorts of other objects are present, from a skull to spools of thread, small jars, wooden shoe inserts, a silver tray, and collaged pieces of fabric, both fragments of domestic gingham materials placed together to appear flag-like and actual flags, to name just a few of the many elements. Perhaps it is a comment on the absurdity of life’s façade, possibly a reference to Princess Diana or simply a comment on the many facets of life. *One White Paint Brush and a Pony Tail* is also chock full of a variety of objects, perhaps a commentary on art making, also a metaphor for a full life. Both of these works were made when Purifoy himself was more advanced in age and contemplating life itself from that older viewpoint.

Yet other works such as *Joshua Tree* and *River Runs Dry* are more purely abstract, the one reveling in color and paint and the other a graphic two-toned structure, both focusing on the environment, in homage to the desert milieu where he lived from 1989 until his death in 2004.

Rounding out this exhibition is a group of smaller assemblages mounted on board, framed by the artist, also late 1980s to early 1990s. Made of collaged found metal and wood and simpler in construct than his large works, they hark back to the kind of assemblages he first made in the 1960s at the time of the Watts Rebellion, focusing both on material and form.

Purifoy worked as a social worker in Cleveland in the late 1940s and as a furniture designer, among other occupations, after moving to Los Angeles in 1950. He was the first African American student to enroll at Chouinard (now the California Institute of the Arts or Cal Arts), where he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts. In 1964-1965, together with Judson Powell and Sue Welsh, Purifoy founded the Watts Towers Arts Center next to Simon Rodia’s legendary Watts Towers, itself a quintessential example of assemblage on a grand scale. He was director of the Center till 1975.

The Watts Arts Center was at the epicenter of the Watts Rebellion in August 1965. Purifoy and other artists created works of art from remnants collected in the resulting debris. With these, he organized the landmark exhibition *66 Signs of Neon*. First shown in 1966 at local festivals and high schools, it then travelled to institutions nationwide and even to Germany through 1972. With this exhibition Purifoy created a portrait of the community of Watts out of found materials charged with immediacy, understanding that he could use art as a vehicle for communication. Out of this connection between art and the social and political urgency of the moment, Purifoy, in his words, “became an artist.”

In 1976, Purifoy gave up making art to initiate community programs and arts organizations through his appointed position on the California Arts Council. Purifoy left the Council in 1987 to return to being a fulltime artist in Los Angeles. In 1989, he moved to Joshua Tree where he worked outdoors in the desert, creating over 100 sculptures spread across ten acres of land, now preserved as the Noah Purifoy Outdoor Museum. He continued to make indoor constructions as well, the focus of this exhibition, also still made from recycled found materials.

Noah Purifoy was born in 1917 in Snow Hill, Alabama and died in 2004 in Joshua Tree, California. He had a Bachelor of Science from the Alabama State Teachers College, a Master's in Social Service Administration from Atlanta University, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Chouinard Art Institute. His works are included in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery of Art and the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C., the Hammer Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum and the California African American Museum in Los Angeles, and the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin among many others.

Purifoy's work has been shown in exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Hammer Museum, and the California African American Museum, among other venues. His work was included in the travelling exhibition *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980* at the Hammer Museum and MoMA PS1 in 2011-12. The California African American Museum gave Purifoy a retrospective in 1997, *Noah Purifoy: Outside and in the Open*. In 2015, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art organized a major retrospective of his work, *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*, which travelled to the Wexner Center for the Arts. Both exhibitions are accompanied by in-depth catalogues. Purifoy's work was included in *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, organized by the Tate Modern and travelled to five other venues in 2018-2019. Extensive documentation on Purifoy can be found both in the *Now Dig This!* catalogue and in Tilton Gallery's *L.A. Object & David Hammons Body Prints*. Tilton Gallery included Purifoy's work in their exhibition of the same name in 2006; his first solo show with the gallery was in 2018.