



John Outterbridge

February 7 – April 6, 2024
Opening Wednesday, February 7th

Tilton Gallery is honored to present an exhibition of works by John Outterbridge. This is the artist's fourth solo show at the gallery and the first comprehensive exhibition since his death in 2020. There will be an opening reception on Wednesday, February 7th from 6:00 to 8:00PM. The exhibition spans his groundbreaking career and includes examples from the 1960s through the 2010s.

An artist, philosopher, thinker, community activist and mentor to other artists, John Outterbridge was born in 1933 in Greenville, North Carolina. He moved to Los Angeles from Chicago in 1963. In Los Angeles, he soon became a central and outspoken figure in the art community that included Noah Purifoy, David Hammons, Betye Saar, John Riddle and many others. He was co-founder and Artistic Director of the Communicative Arts Academy in Compton, CA from 1969-1975 and Director of the Watts Towers Arts Center in South Central Los Angeles from 1975-1992, succeeding his predecessor Noah Purifoy, and continuing to bring the arts and art education into the African American community.

Outterbridge's work reflects both his experiences in the segregated South of the 1940s and 1950s and his involvement in the Los Angeles Black Arts Movement during the civil rights era. He grew up in a house and community where the re-purposing of discarded materials and objects was a given. His father moved "junk" for a living, storing the objects he collected in the family backyard till they found a new use. In Los Angeles, Simon Rodia's Watts Towers, adjacent to the Watts Towers Arts Center, represented a powerful example of how fragmented, found materials could be repurposed into an object of beauty.

Outterbridge from early on assembled materials, found objects, and fragments of fabric into works of art that spoke to the human condition. Abstracted from their original uses, these materials became a language of both poetry and politics, commenting both on the history of African Americans in this country and the specific conditions of Black life. Outterbridge's work evolved from abstraction to figuration and back to abstraction and in all cases found meaning both in the materials he used and how he used them. More often than not, his work spoke through symbolism and poetic metaphor, with titles adding historical references and word play endowing the work with twists of humor.

Throughout his career, Outterbridge worked in overlapping and at times intertwining series, many of which are represented in this exhibition.

Beginning in the 1960s, Outterbridge created a large group of works he named the *Containment Series*. These works were made of hammered and assembled sheets of metal, often combined with wood and leather. He gathered fragments of metal throughout LA, often walking by the railroad tracks with other artist friends, such as John Riddle. He worked the metal by hand till Mark di Suvero, who he met when he worked at the Pasadena Art Museum as preparator and educator, lent him his tools for working with metal when he left the city. Although visually abstract, this body of work speaks to the constraints of slavery and the continuing contemporary containment of Black Americans from freedom.

This was closely followed by the *Rag Man Series*, works made of sewn and painted canvas, stuffed with fabric to create literal and abstract three-dimensional stuffed and painted canvas "bags", some with disjunctive American flag images painted on the surfaces. Unfortunately, many of these works have disappeared, but three major works remain: *Case in Point, Rag Man Series*, 1970 in the collection of the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, *Plus-Tax: Shopping Bag Society, Rag Man Series*, 1971 in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., and *Jive Ass Bird, Rag Man Series*, 1971 in private hands.

Outterbridge's *Ethnic Heritage Series*, roughly 1971-1982, is more directly figurative and addresses the question of ancestry. Complex, often abstracted figures reference African sculpture and ethnic effigies. These works extend the early "Rag Man" stuffed canvas shapes, turning them into representations of human figures such as *Broken Dance* in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Many of the figures from the *Ethnic Heritage Series* are personalized. Outterbridge carved their heads, placing them atop figures and wood structures that are clothed in colorful scraps of fabric. *Urban Man*, 1981 shows the head of a man peering out of a large almost space-age entrapment.

Other of these figures are individualized by braided hair and bear beaded necklaces, anklets and other charms, such as in *Untitled*, 1975 in the present exhibition, a sculpture of a female figure with ornate garments and beads carrying a bucket filled with black eyed peas that especially speaks to her African ethnic heritage. *Tribal Figure, Ethnic Heritage Series*, c. 1978-82 is a male figure that carries his assembled and ethnic garb and painted features regally.

A particularly strong and mysterious example of these figures, also in our exhibition, is the early *Captive Image, Ethnic Heritage Series*, c. 1971-72, one of a larger sub-series with this title. This figure exhibits two masklike heads attached to an abstracted torso, symbolic of conflicting public and interior personalities, a forced duality that was part of African American life in days of captivity and still in the present day. Another work from this subseries, also called *Captive Image, Ethnic Heritage Series*, 1978-82 displays the torso and legs of a figure, thrown across a wooden cart, directly referring to the history of captivity.

Another cart in this show, entitled *Missing Mule, Ethnic Heritage Series*, 1993 speaks to another theme Outterbridge often returns to in both content and title of numerous works. This cart, missing a mule to draw it, calls attention to the artist's continuous search for the freedom symbolized by the mule and forty acres promised to slaves upon emancipation and not received; Outterbridge reasserts his claim for all African Americans.

The mule, usually missing, literally appears, along with more scraps of torn or discarded materials, in an elaborate, otherwise abstract, *Untitled* wall sculpture of 2006. The long twig in this work, wrapped in these rags, including bits of the American flag, represents family lineage to the artist, referring again to history, both personal and that of the human race.

Outterbridge's incorporation of the American flag in his work, almost always partial, but recognizable, is another recurring theme throughout his work, from early examples to his very late work.

In the 1990s, Outterbridge returned to working with metal and wood, all the while continuing his use of discarded bits of fabric, including bits of torn American flags, important in his works from all periods. *Window with Footnote*, 1991, a metal wall construction with a recessed "window" in which sits a wooden leg, wrapped in fabric strips, as if to heal an injury. From 2009 to 2012, Outterbridge made a large series of smaller wood and metal sculptures that refer back to instruments of containment as well as healing. *I Mus Speak*, 2012 in this show contains a small, but complete American flag amidst its otherwise abstract assembled parts.

Rag and Bag Idiom IV, 2012 belongs to one of the last series of works Outterbridge made. Harking back to the early *Rag Man Series*, they are made of canvas, sewn to construct multiple small irregular three-dimensional shapes, stuffed to maintain these shapes. Smaller than most of the earlier *Rag Man* works, these are painted in bright multi-colored hues. Remnants of other colored fabric or rags are attached and hang loosely. Dynamic and forceful for their size, these works convey Outterbridge's inner optimism and add a fresh, new dimension to contemporary abstract art.

Finally, we are delighted to present a re-installation of *Rag Factory III*. Outterbridge's series of *Rag Factory* installations was first conceived for an exhibition in 2011 that was part of the Pacific Standard Time Los Angeles initiative, then a second configuration was shown at The Studio Museum in Harlem, and subsequently a third at our gallery and then at the David Zwirner Gallery in London. Not seen in the U.S. since 2012, this exuberant and playful installation takes the artist's lifelong interest in the use and re-use of colorful fabric that he always called "rags" to create something akin to a May pole that takes up an entire room.

As expressed in a statement Outterbridge wrote for the initial installation at LAX, "I see a rag as an object of many vibrations...you can't escape the importance of the rag, no matter where you go or what you do...because of the colors, because of their previous lives and their histories, rags are pretty much a statement about our social position in the world and the importance of the cast-off. I like using metal a great deal too, or really any material that has a voice...I feel good about the use of rag as an expressive element, but I don't see it as different than other aspects of my life...Rags have always been in and around the environments I've been a part of. With me, art has the audacity to be anything it needs to be at a given time. Anything. Because the creative process is the beginning of all things, no matter what we're doing or where we are going."

Outterbridge has exhibited widely since the late sixties. His work was included in the Pompidou Center's groundbreaking 2006 exhibition, *Los Angeles, 1955-1985: The Birth of an Artistic Capital* and in New York at Tilton Gallery in *L.A. Object & David Hammons Body Prints*, also 2006. His work was represented in six of the Pacific Standard Time 2011-12 exhibitions in Los Angeles, including in *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980*. More recently, it was included in the traveling exhibition organized by the Tate Modern, *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*; in *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* that originated at the National Gallery, Washington, D.C.; and in *West by Midwest: Geographies of Art and Kinship* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, among a multitude of other important museum group shows. Outterbridge also participated in the 2015 Venice Biennale. He had a solo exhibition, *John Outterbridge: Rag Man*, at Art + Practice, organized by the Hammer Museum in 2015 that traveled to the Aspen Art Museum. His work is in the collections of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, among many others.