WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY

Press

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The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

The Missing Klan Room

By **Paul Richard**
March 17, 1979

The burglary took place between New Year's Eve and Jan. 6 Before stealing away with a haul of pointed hoods, satin robes and dolls, the thief, or perhaps thieves, who broke into the Connecticut Avenue studio of artist William Christenberry locked the door behind them.

They left a blood-red window, drawings and a neon cross, but they took 64 small objects -- all components of a complex, highly controversial work of art on which the sculptor has been laboring for more than 15 years.

Christenberry, an Alabama-born professor at the Corcoran School of Art, is distraught. He is also frightened. Now, after weeks of waiting for a ransom note or clue, he has decided to go public with the stroy of the theft.

It is the subject of the stolen art that makes this case unusual. The multi-part environment that was carried off is a detailed portrayal of the rituals and costumes of the Ku Klux Klan.

Walter Hopps, a former director of the Corcoran who is now a curator at the National Collection of Fine Arts, is organizing a Christenberry retrospective for the Museum of Fine Arts of Montgomery, Ala. He believes Christenberry to be "one of Washington's most important artists," and says the stolen Klan Room may be the artist's major work -- and worth as much as $50,000.

Hopps does not suspect that proift was the motive, however.

The work was never shown, though curators from New York had come to town to see it, and officials of both the Corcoran and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden had hoped to display it. Nor was it for sale.

"This is not a conventional art theft," Hopps said yesterday. "The thieves stole it on purpose. They went after a sequestered, unique, highly idiosyncratic work of art," said Hopps. "What could have been the motive?

"It might have been jealousy directed against Christenberry. It might have been the action of someone who's disturbed. We know there are collectors who like forbidden objects -- voodoo dolls or shrunken heads or Nazi paraphernalia. Perhaps one wished to own this portrait of the Klan. Or, perhaps the thief was angered or disturbed by the existence of the work." Another possibility, Hopps said, is that the art was stolen by the Klan itself.

"I've wracked my brain," said Christenberry yesterday, "trying to figure out who stole it -- and why. They were so orderly, so precise. They didn't break the padlock. I have the only key, Perhaps they took the door off, but they didn't scratch the hinges. My greatest satisfaction would be to find out that the Klan was not involved.

"If my art was stolen by a member, or a sympathizer of the Ku Klux Klan, I've got a problem -- a real problem," Christenberry said.

Meeting with the press in the office of his lawyer, Mark B. Sandground, the artist said publicity might induce the thief to change his mind, or lead to the recovery of the stolen objects. Sandground is hoping to negotiate with whomever has the contents of the Klan Room. A reward, its amount undisclosed, is being offered.

Christenberry, 42 is a photographer and sculptor whose works for many years have been frankly autobiographical. Their subject is the South, its people, hobbies, buildings, its virtues and its sins.

"Most of my photographs, most of my sculptures, celebrate the positive side of where I come from," said Christenberry. "The Klan Room stressed the negative.

"I was brought up on the Bible. I believe in good and evil. I see the Ku Klux Klan as evil."

But Christenberry knows that those who saw the room might have misjudged its message. "There is a chance that someone thought that I was paying homage to the Klan."

The piece had been installed in its own locked room beside Christenberry's studio at 2625 Connecticut Ave. NW. The colored plastic on the windown in daytime filled the Klan Room with red light. Twenty-six G.I. Joe dolls -- all dressed in Klan robes -- were arranged in the space. Seven of these dolls were arranged in a circle around a small pine coffin. Three more were incarcerated in a small barred jail the sculptor had constructed. Among the other objects stolen were a Klan parade car (covered in white saitn with red trim and red sequins); a blue neon sign spelling "KKKK" (for Knights of the Ku Klux Klan); miniature bombs, guns and knives; a Klan jack-in-the-box; two authentic Klan Kostumes; Contederate flags, a Klan campaign button with the legend "KIGY" (for "Klansmen I Greet You") and, beside a Klan doll dressed in miniature armor, a cigarette lighter that played Dixie and bore the legend "Forget Hell."

"The Klan Room was sheer hell," said Christenberry. "I couldn't stand it long in daylight. Gleaming on the satin the red light made me nauseous. At night, when it was lit by the white neon cross, that deathly sterile light was almost as bad."

Over the years more than 100 people -- Corcoran students, Hirshhorn docents, critics and collectors -- had visited Christenberry's studio and seen the Klan Room there. "The D.C. police asked me for a list of people who had seen it in the past six months. It read like a Who's Who of the Washington art world," he said.

"Though none of them condemned it to my face," he added, "I am sure that some of them found the work disturbing." At least one viewer, a black woman, a collector from Chicago, was so upset by the Klan Room that she left it in tears.

Attorney Sandground said that although fingerprints were found in the emptied Klan Room, they do not match any in the files of the Washington police. "We had a few suspicions, but our leads have not checked out. We are stymied," Sandground said.

Daring to look behind the curtain

'Klan Room,' whether art or not, evokes reaction

By David A. Maurer
dmaurer@dailyprogress.com | 978-7244
Thursday, October 25, 2007

The hooded dolls, dressed in Ku Klux Klan regalia and laid out in finely crafted wooden coffins, waited for their creator to place them just so.

The dark, heavy drapes one must intentionally pass through to view William Christenberry's "Klan Room Tableau," on exhibit at the University of Virginia Art Museum, add their own sinister touch.

Recently while setting up the tableau, the artist was pleased by an observation made by a visitor. After looking at the room from afar, the visitor remarked that it gave him the chilling sensation of dread one might feel before entering the viewing parlor of a funeral home.

"You're not too far off," Christenberry said when he heard the comment. "The Klan Room is not a morgue, but it is an inner sanctum of sorts. It is an environment, a tableau. If you take those pieces singularly out of there, they can't function as well.

"When you walk into that room, you will sense, I hope, what I'm about. It is an intense experience, an evocative experience, that some people can relate to and respond to and other people can't. Some people don't get it, but even worse for me, a lot of people, very seldom to my face, say that it's not the subject matter for an artist or for art.

"I'm not going to sit here and tell you what I've created in the 'Klan Room Tableau' is art. Time will tell that. But I will say it's something that was absolutely necessary, and I had no idea it would become what it is."

"The Klan Room Tableau" is

part of the exhibit "William Christenberry: Site/Possession," which runs through Dec. 23. According to Jill Hartz, director of the museum, it's one of the most important exhibitions the museum has ever undertaken.

"Bill is primarily known for his photography of Hale County, Alabama, but what most people don't know is that he paints and draws every day," Hartz said. "A lot of these drawings, which are in ink and pencil, have never been seen.

"The curator of the show, Andrea Douglas, writes in her essay that to really understand Bill's processes as an artist you need to see what he does with his drawings. All his ideas are there, and everything comes out of that.

" 'The Klan Room Tableau' has only rarely been seen. It consists of more than 200 pieces, and Bill is the only one who can install it. There are places that wouldn't take the show because of its content.

"We think one of the roles of the art museum is to be able to explore provocative, controversial issues in art. It's nice looking at beautiful pictures that make you feel good. But when you have an artist who is so amazing in terms of his aesthetic practices and social consciousness, it's great to have an opportunity

to show that as well."

Christenberry has received national and international acclaim for his photographs of Hale County, which he has taken during a span of several decades. Born in Tuscaloosa, Ala., in 1936, he became familiar with the county while spending summers there on his grandparents' farms.

Since moving to Washington in 1968, Christenberry has made an annual pilgrimage back to Hale County during late summer to take photographs of familiar places and buildings.

"For a long time I wasn't conscious of it, but I'd go back to the same places year after year and make new pictures of them," said Christenberry, who since 1968 has been a member of the art faculty at the Corcoran College of Art and Design. "Unfortunately, only a few of those places still exist.

"But I will deliberately go back and make the annual picture of it. They're beginning to be exhibited in sequence, and it's pretty interesting. You can see nuances have changed. You can see massive and major changes. And then, sadly, the last picture in the sequence nothing is there - it's gone.

"What really triggered so much of that, especially in terms of photography, was one day years ago in my studio in Washington I laid out a bunch of pictures. I was looking at them, especially the sequence of things, and thought, 'My goodness. I don't think one can record in any form of expression the passing of time, but this comes pretty close to it.' "

The extensive exhibit features about 50 drawings as well as paintings, photographs, constructions, dream buildings and the "Klan Room Tableau." In one way or another, the artist's work always reflects the southern county where he spent his formative years.

During the artist's youth, Hale County had been a bastion for the KKK. An incident in 1960 compelled Christenberry to use his creative gifts to strike back at racial prejudice and injustice by revealing through his art the terror embodied in the hoods and burning crosses that have come to symbolize the organization.

Christenberry just had finished graduate school at the University of Alabama. He had concentrated his studies on painting and sculpture and was trying to find a way to come to grips with the pervasive racist attitude of the time through his artwork.

A small item on the lower front page of the Tuscaloosa News caught Christenberry's attention. The terse announcement set him on an artistic course that has been satisfying as well as controversial.

"In the left-hand bottom corner of the front page was this little thing that said, 'Klan rally tonight, Tuscaloosa county courthouse,' " Christenberry said. "I said to a friend, 'Ed, let's go down and check this out.'

"He agreed, and we went down there. The white stone courthouse was all lit up inside and out, but no evidence of any Klansmen. I suggested we go inside but Ed said, 'I'm not going inside, I'm Jewish.'

"I went into the lobby, and there was no sign of anything. I started up these old marble steps to the second floor. Nothing. I went up to the third level, and as I made the last step, as close as I am to you, was a Klansman standing at attention in front of a closed door.

"It was eerie quiet and that Klansman didn't turn his body toward me, he turned his eyes. There is a big, intentionally ugly drawing in this exhibit of what I saw that night. It scared me to death, just those eyes moving like that behind the hood. I can't verbally describe it. I think this drawing, for me, captured it. I literally ran back down those steps, and that was my first encounter with a Klansman."

Douglas said she has been intrigued with Christenberry and his work from the moment she first met him two years ago. She praised his ability to create suggestions that allow viewers to come to a point where they are making associations based on their own cultural sensibilities.

"This exhibit is particularly important because much of what we're showing is work that has yet to be really critically discussed," Douglas said. "Bill is of the tradition of art history that comes out of

abstraction where the kind of relationships between paintings, drawings and other medium are all blurred.

"He is a virtuoso in the way he is able to manipulate so many different kinds of material toward a singular subject. What attracted me to his drawings is their visceral quality.

"It's all perception. It's all sensory, and you feel it. The marks are decisive, not tentative. So you also get the sense that this person is working from something he understands very well."

If not for the input from his dear friend and famous photographer, Walker Evans, Christenberry might only be known for his drawings, paintings and sculptures. Evans gave him a bit of advice back in 1960 that helped Christenberry see his photography as something more than a fun thing to do.

"I've been told I have something of a reputation as a photographer," Christenberry said. "I started off with this Brownie camera that Santa Claus brought me.

"Walker and his wife befriended me during the year I lived in New York. I had mentioned to him that I had made some color snapshots, and he said he'd like to see them.

"I kept putting him off, because the idea of him looking at my snapshots made me nervous. But finally he went though every one of them, slowly, slowly. I didn't think he would ever finish.

"When he finally finished he looked at me and said, 'Young man, there's something about the way you use that little Brownie camera. It has become a perfect extension of your eye, and I suggest you take these seriously. Shoot, man, I was about as interested in photography then as I was in physics - zero. But I continued making those little pictures when I went to Alabama. My pictures are very pedestrian, but it's where my heart is."

BOX:

"William Christenberry: Site/Possession," will be on display at the University of Virginia Art Museum through Dec. 23. The museum is at 155 Rugby Road. For information call 924-3592 or visit www.virginia.edu/artmuseum.

SWEET HOME ALABAMA - William Christenberry's new exhibit "Site/Possession," originally created for the University of Virginia Art Museum, stretches through his early works looking at the deep South and extends to his more recent multimedia efforts. The artist's work is now showing at the AU Museum through May 11.

Artist branches out in Katzen exhibit

Legendary multimedia artist William Christenberry tackles a history of hate, examines Klan infamy

By: Kristen Powell

Posted: 2/7/08

Artist William Christenberry is no stranger to odd looks from store clerks. During a tour of his new exhibit "Site/Possession," which opened Tuesday at the AU Museum, the artist recounted one such instance.

"'I have to ask, sir,'" Christenberry recalled the cashier saying, "'What are you going to do with 20 G.I. Joe dolls?' And I said, 'You wouldn't believe me if I told you.'"

It is hard to believe what Christenberry can do with those dolls, or paint or ink for that matter. The exhibit features 50 of Christenberry's multimedia tree drawings, which use high-quality German ink, pencils taped together in bundles and other mark-making materials. His diverse work features unusual, graceful lines flared across the page, while he also chooses to use less traditional media, like G.I. Joe dolls.

Much of Christenberry's art education focused on abstract expressionism. An early painting from his days at the University of Alabama greets visitors to the exhibition and shows this influence at its strongest. Though Christenberry's work diverged from the style as he matured, there is no doubt his drawings are still strongly informed by this early study.

After an eye operation in 1960 that left him hospitalized for a period, Christenberry completed his first tree drawing. He said he finds it striking how much his drawings still resemble this first tree.

"I'll never grow tired of trees," he said.

Christenberry's drawings are a look at part of the Alabama landscape. Although a D.C. resident for many years, the artist was born and raised in Tuscaloosa, Ala. The deep southern state is the driving force behind a good deal of his pieces.

"Klan Room Tableau," a rare and personal piece clearly shaped by Christenberry's Alabama experiences, stands as the centerpiece of the exhibit. The repetition and volume of pieces in the tableau overwhelm the viewer with the horror of the Ku Klux Klan. The installation is best viewed alone.

So just what did Christenberry do with those G.I. Joe dolls? He, with the help of various old girlfriends and their mothers, transformed them into tiny Klansmen. Those 20 dolls were the first of many intricately dressed in precise Klan regalia, including one Imperial Wizard doll dressed in purple.

"You'll notice I've punished some of them," Christenberry pointed out. It's true-some are encased in wax, others stuck with pins, and one even wrapped in lead. The tableau features a series of drawings, a cloth doll Christenberry had made to his specifications and even a holograph. Repetition of the cross and the colors red, white and blue unite the pieces. The artist noted that these are the things the Klan abuses in their imagery.

Though never secret, the "Klan Room Tableau" began as a personal expression of Christenberry's anger and disgust for the group.

"I'm no collector of Klan memorabilia," he said, "but people found out and started sending me things."

Friends also began supplying him with old G.I. Joe dolls. It is the personal nature of this work that makes it such an important part of the exhibit's overall comprehensive look at Christenberry's work.

The exhibit was originally created for the University of Virginia Art Museum. The museum's director, Jill Hartz, said of "Klan Room," "Without [it], Christenberry's work cannot be understood or appreciated fully."

Indeed, Klan imagery shows up in many of Christenberry's pieces, particularly his "Dream Buildings." The structures, topped with hood-like spires, appeared to the artist in a dream. He has built many, the tallest of which is featured in "Site/Possession."

Christenberry's repetition of somewhat disturbing, Klan-related imagery is true to his artistic ideology. Smiling, he quoted Pablo Picasso, as saying, "Art isn't just something you hang on the wall-it's a weapon of offensive and defensive war against the enemy."

Whether the enemy is Klansmen or the blank page, Christenberry fights hard, uses his weapons wisely and often wins.

G-ALLERIES

'Assembled Memory' nods to Southern roots

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"ALABAMA WAU.': William Chrlstenbern-'s 197.5 plecefeatures32 found metal signs. The repetition of Images by the D.C. resident Is e,,-ocath-eofAnd)' \Varhol's 1,0l1 an. Also on hiblt is a silk-s n of thes1J111s,rearrangedandcom11letedwlthhand-palnteddetalls.The al'llst's less f'Jmlliar Ink palnting.s can also be seen at Hemphlll.

Hemphill relrospective melds photos, painlings and sculpture

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William Christenberry has lived in Washington for more than 40 years, but he still regularlysift;;1hesoilofhischild-hood home, niral Alabama. Toe south nurtures, i11s11ires and 11robably terrifies him, as it has other noted.artist.'; d writers from the region. Chnste ben:Y5 curre,?t show at Hempht!l me :'-rts, Assembled Memory; nnxes it all together, much i com-bmes 11hotography, pamting and sculpture.

The retrosJ'e<;,t.I\'e opens w 1h :Alabama Wall, assembl m ::r. 1 3i} 1 1 f a!: 10\"e|y ways. Every sign peddles Tops Snuff, and the repetition suggests a down-home Warhol. Sodoesasilk-screenofthesame signs,arrangeddifferentlyand finished with hand-1-.aimed de. tails.

Christenberry'sphotosofrust-ed,misalignedorlong-unpainted facades have been shown often, but they still look great. They're alluringsimplyfortheircolors andoo 11ositions, but are also suggestiveofaplacewheresome-thing's just a little off. The artist makes that explicit \\ith work basedontheiconographyofthe Ku Klux Klan, whose hoods he sometimes melds with the simple shapesofthewhiteframehouses he constn 1ts. This show includes tv.·o Klan pieces, one an eerie, red-tintedi983hologram.

LessfamiliarareChristenl>er-ry'sinkpaintings, mostly made since 2004. An untitled piece from 1959 mixes acrylic and ink with a fluidity that l)resa.e;esthe tater work. More recently, the anist has IJ.een experimenting withbackdro1»aswel1asmedia and forms: One painting was doneonsand1:-a1>@r,andtwoem-ploywhiteinkato11ablueacrylic-pigment field. Stark yet delicate, the latter also summon images from memory, ai; is made explicit by the presence of a high-contrast 1962photogrn11hwhosebasicror-mat resembles that of the 1-aint-ing:s. All three show Southern = seemingly fragile yet deeply

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FINANCIAL TIMES

October 4, 2013 7:32 pm

William Christenberry, Fundación Mapfre exhibition, Madrid

By Francis Hodgson

William Christenberry's photographs (top and below) of a home near Akron, Alabama, It is part of a series of photos of the structure taken between 1978 and 2005

William Christenberry is recognised as a pioneering colour photographer, now well-known in the United States but still relatively obscure in Europe. So it was brave of this fine exhibition at the Mapfre Foundation in Madrid to ignore the 77-year-old artist's much-admired dye transfers to give an excellent overview of his core practice in simple little colour prints.

Christenberry is a painter, too, and he knew colour from the outset. But his start in photography came as a result of one of the more famous sets of black-and-white pictures, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the collaboration between film critic James Agee and photographer Walker Evans on the conditions endured by poor sharecroppers of the American South during the Depression.

"Some of the photographs were astounding to me because I knew the people in them," he says. "Some of them had worked occasionally for my grandparents. When I showed the book to my grandmother, she said, 'Oh, yes, that's Mr So-and-So,' and called out their names."

The quality of the book and the coincidence of its being set in precisely his part of the world, Hale County, Alabama, triggered something in Christenberry. He sought out Evans, who became a life-long mentor and friend, and he started to photograph some of those same places. Once he started, he never stopped.

Christenberry's concentration is on the passage of time. In a number of series he revisits a particular place year after year, chronicling (and rhapsodising on) decay and decline. His predilection is for weathered wooden structures, the shacks and shops and churches of the sharecroppers.

He makes detailed sculptures of these, of which a number are in the exhibition, elegiac in the affectionate recording of advertising signs and of every mend in the fabric.

There is no condescension in his pictures of these modest structures; he photographs them normally front-on, avoiding any folksy vernacular. When his buildings get overwhelmed in the end by woodworm or fire or the kudzu vine, he visits them one last time and photographs the square concrete foundation on which they stood or the pile of timbers that is all that's left.

The South may in some aspects be a thriving modern contributor to national prosperity but it is also the broad seat of the most plaintive nostalgia in the US. There is the hankering for an imagined idyll of gentlemanly courtesy. There is the blues. There is the more recent resentment at the way the South has felt abandoned by the rest of the country in the wake of such disasters as hurricane Katrina. Christenberry is not coarsely nostalgic but he is deeply involved with the observation of time passing.

He sometimes photographs faint traces of antebellum architectural grandeur, a thin pilaster still discernible, never much more. He looks longer at those stoops on which the blues were first put together, as if aching to hear the plaintive call of an old Sears-Roebuck guitar. Whether Christenberry is photographing black churches and shacks or white ones, not the least of his subtleties is his determination that it makes no difference.

The few passers-by who sparsely populate his pictures are usually black; yet one of his subjects is the former Christenberry home, a wooden structure no different in type from the others. Christenberry is a white man.

This nonsectarian stance becomes important when considering a body of work included in the exhibition that will jar with everybody who sees it. The artist has for many years had an obsession with the Ku Klux Klan. He has a studio devoted to his works on the subject, which include drawings, photographs and a variety of sculptures. That studio, known as the Klan Room, has been partially recreated in Madrid, and it is disturbing. Not for Christenberry the chill horror of Andres Serrano's great Klan portraits. Christenberry wallows in the Klan, in the very textures of their robes and hoods. He makes dozens of model Klansmen and locks them up in jails like miniature churches or in boxes like coffins. He ties them up, herds them. It's an odd thing to say about an artist as acutely aware of his own proceedings as Christenberry certainly is (he is an art professor as well as a practitioner) but the Klan work is close to outsider art – an incomprehensible, almost savage obsession. Yet the Klan is of the essence of the South too. Other artists have avoided the Klan. Christenberry cannot and will not.

This is a fine and moving exhibition, although – because of the Klan works – not an easy one. Christenberry reminds us that the South is haunted by its own past, and its own former dreams. His clear-eyed and modest practice allows us to see how much we don't see.

'William Christenberry', Fundación Mapfre, Madrid, until November 24 fundacionmapfre.org/fundacion/en

the PARIS REVIEW

My Step Is South

By Drew Bratcher December 8, 2016 IN MEMORIAM

Discovering William Christenberry.

WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY, *RED BUILDING IN FOREST, HALE COUNTY, ALABAMA, 1994.*

One of my first days in Washington, having just arrived from Tennessee, I wandered into the Smithsonian American Art Museum. I found myself surrounded by Kodak Brownie photographs of barns, country stores, Baptist churches, metal signs, family graveyards—striking reminders of the Southern landscape I'd left behind.

Starting in the 1970s, the artist William Christenberry had photographed the same places in rural Alabama year after year. In one picture, a shack with false brick siding commanded the landscape; two decades later, kudzu had swallowed it whole. Their continuity gave these images a neurotic but documentary quality. There was loss in them. There was deep and complicated love.

The photographs were accompanied by Christenberry's sculptures of the same structures —withdrawn from nature now, miniaturized, and presented on pedestals in a haunting, idealized form. If the photographs reveled in the mortality of things, the sculptures beatified them, turning those tumbledown haunts into totems: what Christenberry, who died last week, at eighty, called "Dream Buildings," "Southern Sculptures," "Memory Forms."

I was hooked. On lunch breaks from work, I returned to the show day after day, unsure as to whether I'd chanced upon a kind of homecoming or a home burial or something else, but homing in on the work all the same. What the pictures said was that the rural South was decaying. Yes, yes, the sculptures countered, but on the imaginations of its exiles the place retained an irrevocable hold.

To be sure, the South, or at least my Middle Tennessee sliver of it, had never had more of a hold on me. On the metro, between white spells of motion sickness, I was reading Randall Jarrell, who had, like me, grown up in Nashville, and who, for one reason or another, had hit the northern road.

"Turn as I please, my step is south," Jarrell wrote in a poem called "90 North." Before, I had taken the line as a metaphor for the inevitable letdown that attends great accomplishment —in Jarrell's narrator's case, reaching the North Pole—but now I wondered if he wasn't making a more fundamental statement about home. It tugged at you, turned you around. Only once you self-consciously extracted yourself did it assert its claim. In a sense you weren't really "from" there until you moved away.

As I blew about D.C., not yet knowing if I wanted to settle in, I found myself reaching for Christenberry's work like an aide-mémoire. I knew those barns. They dotted the hillsides north of Nashville. I had cashed checks in those country stores, had sat in the back pews of those old churches. To be honest, I'd never thought much about them and, to be more honest, I had spent a lot of time trying to move on, and now suddenly they struck me as beautiful—as subjects deserving, even possessed, of art.

Until then, I'd regarded art as a portal to another place, a generic elsewhere. In my high school, let alone in my house, we didn't have pictures or paintings of the South on the walls. We didn't have many pictures or paintings at all. What we had were posters and reproductions of Paris scenes by the French impressionists—those and a few abstract expressionist prints that could have been about nowhere or everywhere and yet somehow were definitely not about anywhere I knew.

Christenberry, on the other hand, was giving me something of my own backdrop and experience. He was calling attention, to quote the poet Patrick Kavanagh, to the "backward" places, the places where "no one important ever looked."

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Even though he had lived and worked in D.C. since the early seventies, and had spent time in New York with Walker Evans before that, Christenberry had remained intimately connected to his native Hale County. With the encouragement of Evans, who had traveled to Hale County with James Agee in the 1930s to take pictures of sharecroppers for what would become the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Christenberry began making yearly pilgrimages to chronicle the ravages and renewals wrought upon his homeland by nature, migration, and time.

The intense ritualism of Christenberry's process, the perpetual return to and revivification of the same material, extended into his most controversial work, a collection of more than four hundred Ku Klux Klan–related paintings, sculptures, textiles, and pictures he brought together under the title "The Klan Room."

In 1960, Christenberry was walking through the Tuscaloosa County Court House when he came upon a Klansman dressed in full regalia. The man, standing guard over a Klan meeting, turned to face Christenberry, who was twenty-four at the time. "I'll never forget that as long as I live," Christenberry later recalled. "I immediately turned and rushed out of the building."

I recognized that reaction. In the back office of a small business where I'd worked one summer in Nashville, I'd opened a drawer to find a knife with a KKK insignia on the handle. I recoiled at the sight of it, jerking my fingers away and backing out of the room. The knife might have been a brown recluse, a scorpion, a rattlesnake. I was scared that whatever idiocy and evil had carried such a hateful object into that office might also reside in me by virtue of my presence there, by virtue of growing up where I grew up—by virtue, more worryingly, of my humanity, which, if the knife was any signal, included a capacity for great inhumanity, too.

In 1979, the entire contents of Christenberry's "Klan Room" were stolen from his D.C. studio, forcing him to restart the project from scratch. The culprit was never apprehended, the pieces never returned. Could it have been the work of a white-supremacist group? Had Christenberry indirectly induced the crime by creating, as some critics claimed, a troublingly ambivalent take on racial violence in the South, one that Klan sympathizers could have mistaken for approval?

Nothing, by my lights, could have been more specious. Set against the rest of Christenberry's oeuvre, the tableau has all the force, even ferocity, of a personal, if not a cultural, exorcism. Case in point, Christenberry's handmade Klansmen dolls. Constructed and costumed first with the help of William Eggleston's wife, Rosa, and later with the help of the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia, the finger-sized statuettes—dozens of which populate "The Klan Room"—are often posed like action figures, sometimes impaled on pins like voodoo dolls, sometimes peering out of wooden windows, sometimes standing in coffin-shaped boxes.

The pageantry employed by the Klan to dignify its devilry is here exposed as juvenile perversion. Seldom has an artist gone to such elaborate and individuated lengths (think Picasso, think de Goya) to deracinate the delusions at the dark heart of fanaticism. Christenberry was as affected by rural experience as Agee and Evans. His work could offer a solemn memorial or a prodigal embrace, yes—but when he wanted it to be, it was a wholesale repudiation of that culture, a caricature burned in effigy.

Even so, Christenberry's "step," as Jarrell put it, "was south." In Washington, my own "90 North," many miles removed from home, it was Christenberry who helped me see, appraise, reject, and reclaim that place as if for the first time. His barns and Dream Buildings, dirt roads and Memory Forms carried me straight back, made me feel known again and safe enough even as they issued an urgent call: not to do the South proud, no, nothing so provincial as that, but rather to think better and more brazenly about its radix, the very first place, no matter how backward, how beautiful, how depraved.

Drew Bratcher is a writer from Nashville.

THE BALTIMORE SUN

Homage and warning in William Christenberry's look at the Deep South

"Tenant House," 1996, oil pant stick on plywood, by William Christenberry. (Collection of the John and Maxine Seiger Fsmily Foundation/HANDOUT)

By Tim Smith • Contact Reporter
The Baltimore Sun

DECEMBER 29, 2016. 11:47 AM

William Christenberry didn't have perfect sight - the result of a serious eye injury when he was a teen - but the Alabama-born artist possessed extraordinary insight.

His primary focus was the Deep South, a focus that can be explored in a retrospective at the Maryland Institute College of Art: "Laying-by Time: Revisiting the Works of William Christenberry." That revisiting unexpectedly took on an air of memorial when, shortly before the show opened, Christenberry died from complications of Alzheimer's at the age of 80.

"I had hoped Bill would be involved with this exhibit, but when I first learned of his condition, it became clear that his work would speak on his behalf," says Kimberly Gladfelter Graham, the show's curator and a member of MICA's curatorial studies faculty. "I miss this wonderfully gracious, gentle man."

Although long based in Washington, where he taught at the Corcoran School of Art for 40 years, Christenberry returned regularly to Alabama to photograph modest structures in modest places. He painted or made sculptures of some of those images. He also framed found objects that seemed to have tales to tell.

An early encounter with a Klansman at a Tuscaloosa courthouse in 1960 left a lasting mark on the artist; he never forgot the sight of the eyes staring at him from behind slits of a hood. A couple of years later, Christenberry began work on what would come to be known as the Klan Room Tableau, a multimedia project that occupied him for much of his life.

"Bill just loved where he was from," says Sandra Deane Christenberry, the artist's Michigan-born wife of 49 years. "He didn't love the bad part, but he didn't shy away from dealing with it. He was a historian as well as an artist. I always felt he was very experimental in the way he dealt with his feelings about the South."

A portion of the Klan Room Tableau has been assembled for the MICA exhibit, located behind a curtain and a viewer discretion warning.

"Some students ask why this is here," Graham says, "or why we would show a white artist [addressing this subject]. But he was of a particular time, and he was haunted by his experience. Unfortunately, the material is even more relevant now, which is why it needs to be here."

Graham knew Christenberry well during her nearly decade-long tenure as director of the Washington commercial gallery Hemphill Fine Arts, which represented the artist.

"I miss this wonderfully gracious, gentle man," she says. "A lot of people have described him as being like a Methodist minister or a Sunday school teacher. There was something very patient about him. And his work has a great deal of patience and balance, which is what viewers are ultimately asked to bring to it."

Stepping into the Decker Gallery of the Fox Building on the MICA campus brings an almost visceral jolt from a large painting from 1963 of an African-American graveyard outside Stewart, Ala. - a very early work in Christenberry's career, before photography would become his best-known pursuit.

Created in bold strokes, the painting exudes compelling vitality. But, considering the violence in the South that year as the civil rights movement gained momentum, the painting takes on greater weight.

An adjacent wall holds two photographs of churches, separated by a poi$_{gn}$ant found object - a cross made of egg cartons, decorated with artificial flowers.

An adjacent wall holds two photographs of churches, separated by a poignant found object - a cross made of egg cartons, decorated with artificial flowers.

Graham devotes the next section of the exhibit to dwelling places and "people who make do with the little they might have." A particularly touching example is a well-worn little house that Christenberry photographed multiple times, including during winter - which makes it look even more run-down.

It seems abandoned, until you spot a paltry strand of Christmas lights hanging on the door and, in one poignant shot, the shadowy figure of a woman in the doorway, watching the artist as he watches her.

Although people usually are not in Christenberry's photos, the exhibit includes another striking example: "Lady Who Makes Egg Carton Flowers, Hale County, Alabama, 1983."

You can imagine a Truman Capote-worthy story being spun from the little details in this single digital print - the woman's placid-proud face and crossed arms; the Winn-Dixie bag at her feet on the weathered wooden porch; the fly swatter hanging from a vintage advertising thermometer on the cinderbrock wall behind her.

The passage of time is the common theme of the next section of the exhibit. Christenberry's interest in that subject is nowhere more compellingly revealed than in his "Bar-B-Q-Inn Series."

Framed in neat rows are 16 photos, some taken on a Brownie camera, of a humble commercial building in Greensboro, Ala., starting in the early 1960s when the structure housed Woods Radio-'IV Service. The remaining shots trace the fate of the building into the early 1990s; the last photo shows just a vacant lot.

Note the street sign that can be seen next to the crumbling property in later photos: Martin Luther King Dr. To see that name attached to such a desolate drive adds an extra layer of resonance to the whole series.

Many of the photos in this exhibit have a similar composition and similar lighting. There's a reason.

"Bill delivered papers as a boy," Graham says, "and the bundles were tied with vvire then. One day, a wire snapped and hit his eye. He was very self-conscious about how the injury affected his focus. Many of his photographs use the same horizon line and were shot between 10 a.m. and noon. He knew he could rely on a certain amount of light then."

Another portion of the exhibit contains ink drawings that seem to come from another artist entirely and, among a grouping of found objects, a hand-painted sign for Ebenezer Church that could not be more evocative of faith and need.

Finally, the Klan Room Tableau, viewable from behind a rope and bathed in the eerie light of a neon cross.

"It always created some sort of a storm," Sandra Christenberry says. "But Bill didn't create it because of its attention-getting aspects. Lots of times, there was controversy because people who had not seen it jumped to the wrong conclusions. Bill wanted everybody to look at his work in its totality, not just concentrate on one thing."

A superficial look at the scene, dotted with dozens of dolls wearing the Klan's signature satin robes and hoods, might suggest glorification.

"You're faced with this thing that is very theatrical, even seductive," Graham says. "But [Christenberry is] showing us how dangerous that seductiveness can be."

Closer inspection reveals that some dolls have pins stuck in them. Others lie in coffins. One group is confined to a jail.

Beneath the Klan outfits are GI Joe Action Figures, Christenberry's way of emphasizing that there is "an army of evil," Graham says, "but belittling them simulatenously. This [installation was] his way of exorcising his experience with the Klan, and part of the exorcism is that he brualtizes the dolls."

All of this makes for an unsettling experience. But it opens a window into a man trying to come to terms with the most troubling side of the world he came from and never really left behind. The rest of the MICA exhibit tellingly fleshes out this portrait of a sensitive and trenchant artist.

"I knew as soon as I met Bill that he was extraordinary," Sandra Christenberry says. "He was a pretty gentle man. He didn't like a lot of brouhaha. He was soft-spoken. He didn't swear. He was a great dad, a great husband and a great friend. Bill Christenberry was a good man."

In Hale County, Alabama, Two Visions of Place

Inspired by the pioneering photographer William Christenberry, RaMell Ross moved to the Deep South and found fertile terrain. Now Pace Gallery puts their art in conversation.

The photographer and director RaMell Ross with Sandra Deane Christenberry, widow of William Christenberry, at Pace Gallery, which is exploring the men's distinct contexts for their work in Hale County, Ala. "Desire Paths" includes William Christenberry's wood sculpture, "Green Warehouse, Newbern, Alabama," 1995, left. Right, Ross's "Yellow," 2013, focuses on daily life.Credit...Ike Edeani for The New York Times

By Siddhartha Mitter for the New York Times
Jan. 12, 2023

Hale County, Ala., holds a special position in American visual culture. This is where Walker Evans made his photographs of white sharecropper families for "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men"with James Agee's text, a core document of Depression-era poverty.

It is where William Christenberry, who grew up in nearby Tuscaloosa with roots in the county, returned each summer for four decades, beginning in the 1960s, making quiet images of desolate buildings in landscape that have become photography canon.

RaMell Ross is Hale County's latest visual chronicler and, as he puts it, "liberated documentarian." He moved to Greensboro, Ala., in 2009 and lived there continuously for three years, teaching in a G.E.D. program, coaching basketball and photographing. Though now a professor at Brown University, he has made the county a long-term home and the fulcrum of his art projects.

Ross's 2018 essay film, "Hale County This Morning, This Evening," was nominated for an Academy Award. Its patient pace and poetic tone, as it follows events, mundane and poignant, in the lives of a few Black families in the county, also infuse the photographs he has made there.

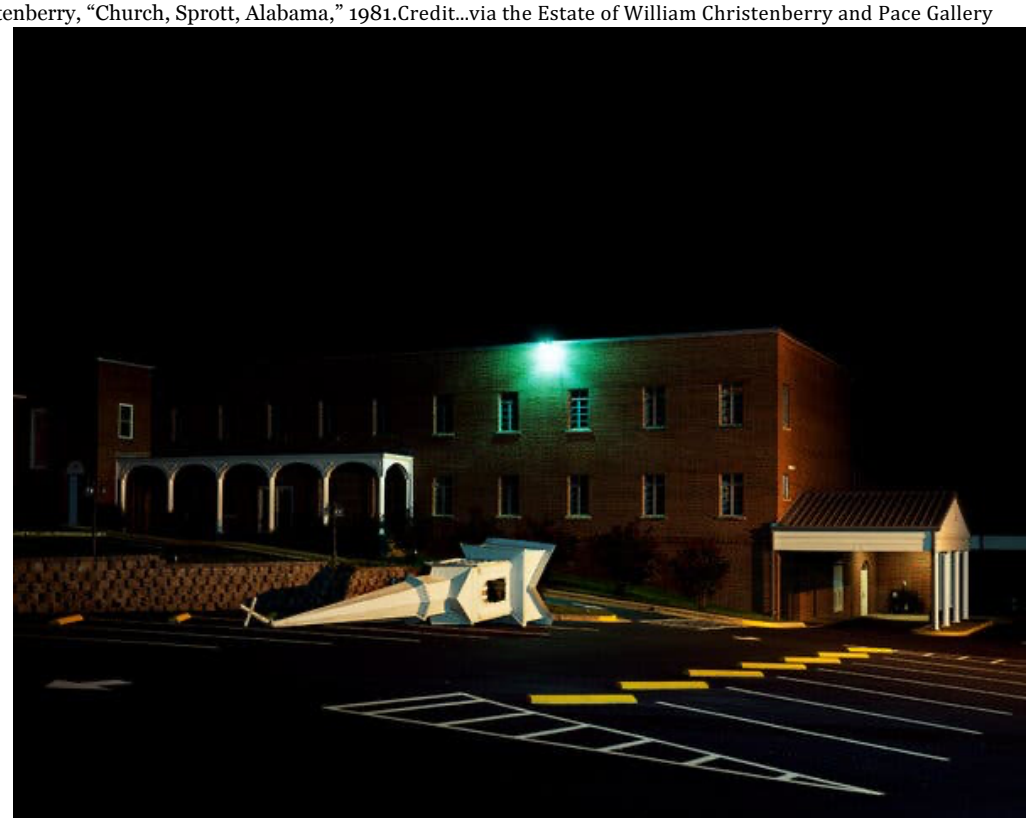
Ross, 40, holds Christenberry, who died in 2016, as a major influence, so it was logical to place their work in conversation, as the exhibition "Desire Paths," now at Pace Gallery in Chelsea, has done.

Ross's own photographs often carry an air of mystery but in fact arise from prosaic daily life. "Man," in which a young boy is draped on the tire in the wheel-well of a giant truck, arose from a day relaxing in a friend's yard. "Koo-See Mountain" shows another friend readying to install a length of pipe on the property Ross bought, yet reads like a magic pastoral.

Ross points out in a conversation how the vast bulk of circulating images of the South was made by white photographers. But to "desegregate Southern photography," as he puts it, is not just to be Black and making images today. It's a question of method, he said — being fully, patiently integrated in people's lives.

This is not just a photography show, however. It includes sculpture by both artists — and installations that attest, in different registers, to a kind of psychological unease in each artist's work, touching on racial history and violence in blunt ways.

William Christenberry, “Church, Sprott, Alabama,” 1981.Credit...via the Estate of William Christenberry and Pace Gallery



RaMell Ross, “Sleepy Church,” 2014.Credit...via RaMell Ross

Christenberry traced his fixation to a silent face-off with a hooded Klansman in a Tuscaloosa courthouse in 1960. In his tableau he wrought violence on some dolls, piercing them with pins or coating them in hot oil — but the project remains cryptic, even to his wife, Sandra Deane Christenberry, and his children, who have run his estate since his death.

Any depiction of Klan imagery is potentially volatile. But Ross said he was excited to resurface the tableau. He has paired it with his own endurance project, "Return to Origin," where he had himself shipped in a crate, loaded on a trailer, from Providence, R.I., to Hale County in 2021 — a nod to Henry "Box" Brown, who had himself mailed from enslavement in Virginia to freedom in Philadelphia in 1849. Ross's box is in the exhibition, along with video from his journey.

Installation detailing RaMell Ross's symbolic reverse migration back to the South, "Return to Origin," 2021. He shipped himself in a crate to Hale County from Providence, R.I.Credit...via RaMell Ross

During William Christenberry's childhood in Hale County, he had run-ins with the Klan that pervaded his work. His "Klan Tableau" (1962–2007) was assembled over years, and restarted from scratch when it was stolen from his studio in 1979.Credit...via the Estate of William Christenberry and Pace Gallery

Before the exhibition opened, Ross and Sandra Christenberry discussed Hale County, photography of the South, and the value of putting forward the "Klan Tableau" and "Return to Origin" in today's climate. Lauren Panzo, a Pace vice president who has long worked with the Christenberrys, and Jumoke McDuffie-Thurmond, a poet who is the gallery's manager of culture and equity, joined the conversation, which has been condensed and edited for clarity.

RaMell, what made Hale County such fertile terrain?

RAMELL ROSS If you live in Washington, D.C., as I did, and then you go to Greensboro [Ala.] and spend a long period, you get a sense for how genuinely slow the time is. That was attractive to me, as a person who loves being still and staring at things. I was like, I'll stay here, and maybe I can take photos.

How did the presence of Walker Evans and William Christenberry manifest itself there?

ROSS They're so influential. They propagated this way of viewing the South, of putting things in a very formal frame, having geometric structures — barns, houses — look the way that they do. It's profound to realize that what you think you're doing is actually in the same groove as someone in the past. It took me three years to make a photograph I was happy with, that felt like mine.

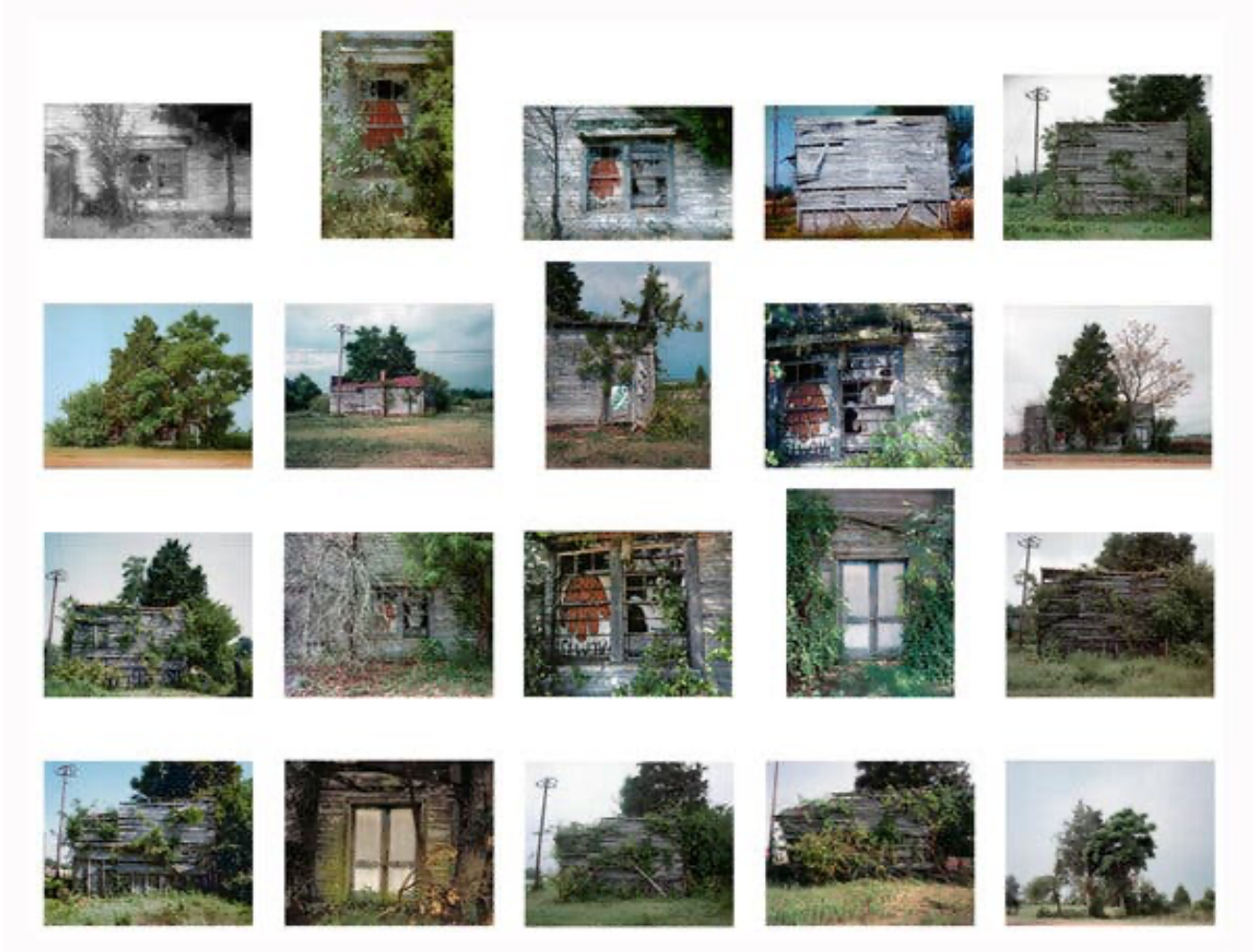
RaMell Ross and Sandra Deane Christenberry in conversation at Pace Gallery. On the wall, William Christenberry's "5 Cent, Demopolis, Alabama," 1978.Credit...Ike Edeani for The New York Times

What is Christenberry's influence on your photographs, such as "Yellow" or "Caspera," in which a young girl in a field has draped herself in a photographer's cloth, the kind you use when making your large-format images.

ROSS He's interested in the present, the thing in front of you — the *thing* itself, phenomenologically. I naturally applied that honing of everything into the moment, the stillness that you see. The moments are pauses in a flow, a larger cultural time, a larger conception of Blackness that forces you to merge your attention with the moment when the image was taken and the space that it's in.

But while he photographs landscapes, you focus on people — Black people, Black life.

ROSS The way his landscapes exist to me, they are enormous castles for the American visual constitution, how America is unconsciously trained to look at itself. I do see people in his images, outside the frame. They're not empty. But for my part, I move toward people because I'm interested in using photography not to prove humanity, but to prove or infer complexity; to infer narratives, sort of restoring the way in which Black people have lost control over their narratives and have always been consumed by other peoples' interpretations.



William Christenberry, "Palmist Building," 1961-1988. In these 20 pigment prints, the photographer returned to a Hale County roadside building that he shot year after year as it decayed.Credit...via the Estate of William Christenberry and Pace Gallery

RaMell Ross, “Koo-See Mountain,” 2019.Credit...via RaMell Ross

You’ve written that Christenberry “does not leverage his social status to directly represent minority communities.” In other words, he does not use his race and privilege as license to gawk. It sounds like you find that refreshing.

ROSS There’s no white person that I know that would not be thrilled to go photograph a Black person on a porch in the South. And like, get really close to their hands. And be like, “These people restored me.” All the really easy modes of engaging with people through the camera. It’s always been white people going to the South, photographing white and Black people, then leaving. So it’s astounding to me that someone would have the restraint to not photograph what they know people would love. Christenberry’s images are not easily read. They look like nothing is happening, but they’re dense.

When you started making sculptural pieces like "Earth, Dirt, Soil, Land; Brown Flag Case," incorporating Alabama soil, was that in the knowledge that Christenberry had done this?

ROSS I learned how Christenberry once put a pile of red Hale County dirt in a show. There's no gesture that's more interesting to me than that in terms of thinking about what people want to carry as home. One could argue that the African American experience in the U.S., and the South is foreclosed in that sense because of the inequality of land ownership. So yes, it was because of Bill.

RaMell Ross, "Earth, Dirt, Soil, Land; Brown Flag Case," 2021. Credit...via RaMell Ross; Photo by Sesthasak Boonchai

SANDRA DEANE CHRISTENBERRY He loved that red soil in particular. He used it in a lot of sculptures, primarily in the bases. He would bring home boxes and boxes of red earth, and he had a screen that he made, so he would take it out in the back yard and sift it.

RaMell, what made you package and ship yourself in a crate? It feels dangerous.

ROSS Being in the South, in Hale County now, and seeing the accepted division of Black and white — like, "Things were so bad in the past that we're cool with how it is now" — and imagining how we deal with the good ol' boys, with the lack of property ownership, to me there needs to be a reverse migration to disturb this inertia. People are moving back. And

Henry “Box” Brown was the epitome of ingenuity to get out of the South, so why not use the same, almost time-travel, way to return?

He had to smuggle himself out, though. Why travel, even symbolically, the same way?
Image

Installation of “Return to Origin” at Pace shows text the artist wrote during his 59-hour journey. It is a deliberately absurdist project called “Black Dictionary” in which he copies entries from a child’s dictionary, placing the word ‘Black’ in front of each entry.Credit...via RaMell Ross; Photo by Sesthasak Boonchai

ROSS Now we get to make the choice. We get to do it in Teslas. I wanted to imply that there was risk, and to put myself at risk. So for me it was a personal thing: This is how much it matters. And I hope it’s conceptually rich for others.

JUMOKE MCDUFFIE-THURMOND The project is like an extension of ancestral recall. Thinking about Henry “Box” Brown’s methodology, the box as a vehicle for him to get closer to actualizing his own freedom on his own terms. And I think in the kind of migration that we’re seeing now to the South, among Black folks, there is an aspect of fugitivity. For example, to escape the increasing rent prices in cities.

Lauren, why resurface Christenberry’s “Klan Tableau” now, in the current cultural climate and in the wake of the controversy, for instance, about how to show Philip Guston’s Klan-themed paintings?

LAUREN PANZO We want to have those discussions, and this is a place where we can do it and are supported to do it. It will provoke discussion.

RaMell Ross, “Caspera,” 2019.Credit...via RaMell Ross

RaMell, when Pace suggested showing the “Klan Tableau,” you were enthusiastic. Why?

ROSS Because I think the power of the Klan is in our non-engagement, in the way in which we push them to a place of distant evil, not to a place of miniaturized dolls. Christenberry lets us engage the symbol, and shows how the Klan symbology is embedded across our culture. The first thing I did in the room, I took off one of the hoods. There was some soft doll underneath. I felt powerful when I did that. You can’t do that in the actual show, but it still happens conceptually when you go in.

Sandy, when Bill went to observe several Klan rallies in 1966, did you worry?

CHRISTENBERRY I don't even remember if he told me he was going! I was raised in Michigan; I wasn't that familiar with the South until Bill and I started going back and forth between Memphis and Tuscaloosa. Over the years I became more knowledgeable about how he felt. But it wasn't something we talked about much. Bill made his work, and I would not presume to make suggestions.

The "Klan Tableau" was a personal, obsessive project but a number of people were involved. I read that Rosa Eggleston, wife of the photographer William Eggleston, sewed some of the first robes and hoods for the dolls.

Detail from William Christenberry's "Klan Tableau" at Pace Gallery. For RaMell Ross, there is value in confronting the symbolism of the Klan, rather than "push them to a place of distant evil."Credit...Ike Edeani for The New York Times

CHRISTENBERRY Yes, there were lots of people involved in it. After the original tableau was stolen from the studio, a friend of ours named Julien Hohenberg in Memphis was behind the funds for Bill to start making it all over again.

The theft was never solved. Were you worried that it was a kind of warning?

CHRISTENBERRY All kinds of worries went through my head. But all these years nothing has happened, other than a Klansman leaving a calling card on a sculpture in a show. That happened in Philadelphia.

What do you hope that the show achieves?

CHRISTENBERRY It is that people will finally look at Bill's body of work as a whole. It all together expresses his love and dismay with where he was raised. I also wish that you all had the chance to meet.

ROSS Well, we're meeting in another way! For me, it may be too ambitious a desire but I hope it can recast Southern photography as something more than this formal pursuit.