

# ARTnews

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## reviews: new york

### UP NOW

## John Outterbridge

MoMA PS1  
Through March 11  
Tilton Gallery

John Outterbridge – artist, civil rights activist, and director of the Watts Towers Arts Center from 1975 to 1992 – was a central figure during the formative years of the Los Angeles black art community. His work is featured prominently in the exhibition “Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960 – 1980,” a standout among last fall’s Pacific Standard Time and now at PS1, where it looks terrific.

Outterbridge’s show at Tilton offered a broader view of his art. It highlighted the rag-and-scrap figure sculptures he made between the 1970s and ‘90s, with many examples from his “Ethnic Heritage Group” series. A dancer – with massive thighs and a bomblike scrap-metal torso with readymade hardware breasts – perches on one toe as she balances on an ammunition box, extending her other leg with its missing lower portion. Formally and conceptually, *Broken Dance, Ethnic Heritage Group* (ca. 1978-82), as the sculpture is titled, qualifies as an under-known masterpiece. The artist’s very first rag figure, *Sister Mamie*, which set off the series, was made as a doll for his daughter in 1971: that figure was here too, dressed in its Sunday best – a fur-trimmed cloth coat, a hat, and pumps – and clutching a tiny purse.

The tribal figures (also a part of the series) offered a direct link to African origins. Outterbridge’s work is filtered through the cultural turmoil of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, the civil rights movement, and a visceral awareness of slave history. His work *The Missing Mule* (1993) refers to the custom of giving former slaves a mule and 40 acres of land, while *Crack in the Road* (1990) is a scrappy found-metal car trailing colorful bits of rag, with one big headlight and one tiny bare bulb.

On the main floor, a selection of brand-new works made with African American hair, phallus-shaped wood, and traditional dangling sacks of healing herbs brought us up-to-date with the artist. One room featured the third version of his festive yet sorrowful 2011 installation, *Rag Factory*, which festoons rags, sacks, ropes of hair, and their shadows around a columnar pole. It’s no wonder Outterbridge (born in 1933), whose mother was a poet who took in laundry and whose father found jobs as a junkman and a musician, has inspired such contemporary artists as Betye Saar, David Hammons, and Senga Nengudi. **–Kim Levin**



John Outterbridge, *Broken Dance, Ethnic Heritage Group*, ca. 1978-82, mixed media, 34 x 29 ¼ x 33".  
Courtesy Tilton Gallery, New York