

Art in America

John Outterbridge

LOS ANGELES,
at Art + Practice

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John Outterbridge: *Rag and Bag Idiom IV*, 2012, mixed mediums, 32 by 12 by 5¾ inches; at Art + Practice.



Octogenarian John Outterbridge, who had a distinguished career in arts administration at the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum) and the Watts Towers Arts Center, is best known for his poignant assemblages that meld reminders of American slavery with reflections on family and personal history. His recent show “Rag Man” focused primarily on works made between 2008 and 2012.

In the front gallery, a dozen or so assemblages fashioned from reclaimed materials such as worn wood, rusty iron and faded rags were displayed on two adjacent walls painted a warm goldenrod. The first piece one encountered, *I Mus Speak* (2008), is a veritable self-portrait, with tangled human dreadlocks topping off an angular metal form that resembles a convoluted Cubist visage. A small American flag—a fraught symbol for a loyal U.S. citizen often subjected to second-class treatment because of his race—hangs from below like a badge. *Caged* (2008) conveys a similar ambivalence. A small wooden doll sits within a structure reminiscent of a hamster wheel made from twigs and bound by rag strips. The caged doll’s smile is droll yet grim.

Born in Greenville, N.C., in 1933, Outterbridge was first influenced by his father, who ran a mobile junkyard out of the back of his truck, and his mother, who played the piano, wrote poetry, made quilts and provided her son with used materials. In the early '70s, Outterbridge worked as an educator and installer in California, meeting artists such as Andy Warhol, Richard Serra, Robert Rauschenberg and Mark di Suvero (whose studio and machinery he sometimes borrowed).

Placed on a pedestal, *Case in Point* (1970) comes from Outterbridge's experience returning home from the Air Force. Brown sausagelike forms, wrapped into a bundle with army-issue canvas, bear a vintage luggage tag that reads "packages travel like people." In 1955, as he recounted to the *Los Angeles Times* some 50 years later, Outterbridge boarded a bus in full military uniform and was ordered by the driver to go to the back of the vehicle. He complied, then sat down and wept. For the artist, and for countless other African-Americans with similar experiences, the transport slogan is an ironic reminder that the inverse is often true—some people travel like cargo.

Contrasting with the assemblage works were colorfully painted, wall-hung fabric sculptures from Outterbridge's 2012 "Rag and Bag Idiom" series, which features drippy, Abstract-Expressionist flourishes. The sculptures were inspired by the sachets of medicinal herbs that some Southerners traditionally wear around the neck to protect against disease. Charming, whimsical and clownishly bright in hue, the works offer fleeting comic relief from the weight of history that Outterbridge's works typically carry.

Among the works in the back gallery was *Ragged Bar Code* (2008), which comprises small pieces of wood wrapped with rags and lined up in a straight neat row on the wall. Alluding to the Underground Railroad and its secret codes of communication as well as the homemade dolls owned by slave children, the piece is powerful yet intimate. The largest work in the exhibition stood guard at the end of the room. Confronting the viewer at over 7 feet tall, *In Search of the Missing Mule* (1993) takes quasi-human form, its arms-out stance mimicking the effect of a pillory. A looped rope, ominously evoking lynchings, drapes across the tall metal body from one arm to the other. The title refers to the failed promise of a Lincoln administration order from 1865 granting Confederate land to former slaves, with some also receiving loaner army mules to help till their new property;

the policy was overturned later that same year by Andrew Johnson. Outterbridge's sculpture seems to answer its own search—the mule is right there, in its stylized representation of the historical black male body.

Considering the current politically charged climate, where discussions of race and power are unavoidable and vital, Outterbridge's show was not just timely but necessary. The exhibition resonated with Art + Practice's setting in Leimert Park, a historically black neighborhood of Los Angeles once dubbed "the Harlem of the West."

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