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FROM RAGS TO RENOWN

John Outterbridge and the Art of Assemblage

Hambone, hambone, where you been? Round the world and back again. The extensive resourcefulness of traditional, southern African American culture is expressed in this pithy ditty. Poor folks downhome passed a hambone from house to house to house to season each pot until the flavor was totally cooked out of the bone. Not only was nothing wasted in this culture, unusual creative expressions grew out of it -- whirligigs, bottle trees and crazy quilts that looked liked modern, abstract art. One of the great heirs of this culture is the Greenville, N.C.-born John Outterbridge, the son of a junk man, who transforms rags and scraps into marvelously eccentric assemblages.



John Outterbridge, *Crack in the Road*, 1990, mixed media, 17 ½ x 47 x 15

This life of resourceful ingenuity has been good for Outterbridge who next year becomes an octogenarian. His art is getting double exposure in New York City, with works appearing simultaneously in major exhibits in Manhattan and Long Island: his solo show from October 23 through December 21, 2012, at the [Tilton Gallery](#) (8 East 76th Street); and his participation in the group show, *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980*, October 21 through March 11, 2013, at [MoMA PS1](#) in Long Island City. Now Dig This! is the Pacific Standard Time exhibition that has traveled to New York after its run last winter at the [Hammer Museum](#) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).



John Outterbridge, Broken Dance, Ethnic Heritage Series, c. 1978-82, mixed media, 34 x 29 ¼ x 33

This is Outterbridge's second solo show at the Tilton Gallery. The current exhibition presents a large body of early works from the 1960s to the 1990s, plus a selection of new work done since his 2009 show. The exhibition also includes a site-specific installation, *Rag Factory III*. This is the third in a series of configurations of this piece. Previous installations were mounted spring 2012 at the [Studio Museum in Harlem](#) and fall 2011 at LAX in Los Angeles as part of the Pacific Standard Time (PST) exhibitions. Outterbridge has participated in five of these PST shows. Outterbridge's use of found rags is one of many threads uniting his work through the decades. He incorporates them in his assemblages, and has repeatedly used rags as the basis for larger installations. Rags can be found in his early "Rag Man" series, works made out of cloth; his "Containment" series, works primarily made out of discarded cut-and-hammered metal; and his "Ethnic Heritage" series. His use of rags spans from the time of his early dolls through many of his newest works.



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

John Outterbridge, *Dreads*, 2011. mixed media, 10 x 10 x 6

From the mid-1960s to the present, Outterbridge's assemblages of diverse salvaged materials address the human condition. Outterbridge transforms these materials -- whether metal, wood, or rag cloth -- into poetic statements that speak to his own personal history as well as to the history of African Americans. Symbolism and metaphor permeate each visual detail as well as the layers of meaning embedded in the works' titles.

SOUTH CENTRAL LOS ANGELES

When Outterbridge moved from North Carolina to Chicago to Los Angeles in 1963, he brought at least one documented early assemblage with him. He soon became a central figure in the Los Angeles art community that included David Hammons, Noah Purifoy, John Riddle and Betye Saar.



John Outterbridge, *Rag and Bag 6*, 2012, mixed media, 14 ³/₄ x 12 x 6 ¹/₄

Friends and other artists often refer to Outterbridge as a poet and a philosopher. He is an educator and an outspoken community organizer. Outterbridge co-founded the Communicative Arts Academy in Compton, California, and from 1969 to 1975 was its artistic director. From 1975 to

1992 he was director of the Watts Towers Arts Center, bringing the arts into the South Central Los Angeles community and educating generations of young African Americans.



John Outterbridge, *The Missing Mule*, 1993, 17 x 28 x 17

Praised Hereafter

The artist was profiled in an article in a 1998 issue of the *IRAAA* (volume 15.2): *Praised Hereafter, Three Contemporary Sculptors and Their Work* by Mark Richard Moss. The "Praised Hereafter" title refers to the enduring legacy of monumental art forms. Here is an excerpt from that article.

John Outterbridge, an "assemblage presenter," as he calls himself, molds and shapes unwanted detritus scavenged from the streets of Los Angeles into objects richly symbolic of the African American ethos, not unlike the enslaved blacks who transformed the master's discards into distinctive meals, instruments and decorative arts.



John Outterbridge, *No Time for Jivin'/Containment series*, 1969. Collection Mills College. Photo courtesy Tilton Gallery

Outterbridge created *First Poet Olivia*, the piece that adorns the cover of his catalogue, as a “blessing” for his new studio, and as a tribute to his ancestors, in particular his mother. Seven antique irons, one for each day of the week, sit atop the multi-colored surface of an ironing board, all of which is supported by an animal caught grazing. I’m thinking of some creature from the Motherland, but Outterbridge explains that the animal is “cantankerous” goat only Outterbridge’s mother had the will to tame.

During the Depression in Greenville, N.C., Outterbridge’s hometown, his mother took in washing and his father was a junk man. Pere Outterbridge was rarely paid in cash, so one day he brought home a goat, who didn’t take to Outterbridge and his siblings. Outterbridge didn’t say how his mother tamed the goat, but I would like to think that its source was the same as that which gave her the strength to stand 24/7 squeezing

out other people's wrinkles with a hot and heavy iron.

His second gift for his new space became *John Ivery's Truck: Hauling Away Traps and Keeping Yams*. It's a 50-inch long model of an old flatbed truck laden with animal traps and small white bundles holding the yams.

"I chose old animal traps as metaphors, or being symbolic of pitfalls. My father had so many ways of holding the ends together," he says, alluding to the yams. "He was the assemblage giant," he adds, laughing.

His third gift became the ambitious mixed media installation *The Lie, Lye Soap Conference and Seven Scarecrows*. A wall-breadth tribute to his grandmother, a Cherokee, the installation is an expressionistic scene of a time before washing machines and store-bought soap. In the foreground there's the black kettle for making soap, as his grandmother once did. It is surrounded by shiny, washboard-filled buckets, like so many children. School children, maybe, like you and I who need to hear about yesterday. Grandmother has just finished washing and hanging clothes on the clothesline. Scarecrows, hovering above in the background, ward off evil like good spirits.

"I painted on window shades when I was in elementary school," Outterbridge recalls about his first artistic experience." "I would say that I've always thought that maybe I was wounded with a blessing. Some people don't have an opportunity to choose. You get that feeling that you're somewhat chosen. You cannot avoid doing what you're doing."

He spent a year at North Carolina A&T University, then volunteered for the Army, which sent him to Germany. After a ranking officer discovered his painting ability, Outterbridge was given the opportunity to fine tune his talents. He was also given the chance to explore Europe's artistic treasures and he fell under the spell of the French Impressionists. "Renegade artists," he calls them.

After his discharge in 1955, Outterbridge moved to Chicago where he earned a living driving a city bus and became an active member of the local art scene. Painting remained his forte and when he moved to Los Angeles in 1963, he became a full-time commercial artist, working primarily for the movie industry. He was also paid well for duplicating the works of some of the masters, like Monet and Toulouse-Lautrec. Eventually, he became exasperated with painting and he "started to look at a three-dimensional way of working, rather than painting, to get away from feeling that I was in the studio when I came home."

"I had always been somewhat of a builder," he adds, "a person who enjoys putting things together. A sculptural three-dimensional approach gave me an opportunity to manipulate materials and form. I became a artist who was known here, on the West Coast, as an assemblage presenter."
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<http://iraaa.museum.hamptonu.edu/page/FROM-RAGS-TO-RENOWN>