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LAST CHANCE

A Life, From a Southern Farm Town to Watts, in Castoff Objects

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It isn't easy for any one piece of art to stand out in the cattle-call atmosphere of an international art fair unless the work is large, loud or arrives with a blast of hype. Yet one of the memorable sights at [the Armory Show](#) in New York City last March was something so small, unobtrusive and unexpected that I nearly missed it the first time I passed by.



It was a wall sculpture as spare as a line drawing in the Tilton Gallery's booth. Made from wire and basically abstract, it had the shape of a horse's harness or a collapsible ladder. Or an open-work Xhosa beaded vest or even a human figure, a reading encouraged by the title, "Portrait of Willie," and by a tuft of dreadlocks sprouting from the top.

The artist was John Outterbridge, 76, who lives in Los Angeles. Three years ago he was in Tilton's eye-opening group show of 1960s West Coast art, "L.A. Object and David Hammons Body Prints." The Armory Show appearance was a warm-up for a New York solo debut at Tilton. That show is now on view. It is a delight, and long overdue.

Mr. Outterbridge was part of a close-knit group of African-American artists — Charles Dickson, Dale Davis, Melvin Edwards, Senga Nengudi, Elliott Pinkney, Noah Purifoy, John Riddle, Betye Saar and Mr. Hammons were others — in Los Angeles at the time of the 1965 Watts uprising. Most of them worked in forms of Dada-inspired assemblage, using the city, and specifically the distressed neighborhoods they lived in, as an open-air art-supplies store.

Certain members of the group moved east, but Mr. Outterbridge stayed in Los Angeles. Committed to developing community-based arts programs, he became the director of the Watts Towers Arts Center in 1975 and held the position until 1992. Only since retiring has he been able to make his own art full time, and he's been working fast. Everything at Tilton dates from the last two years.

It's subtle, beautiful work. "Portrait of Willie" is here, one of a dozen small ensembles of found objects or castoff stuff: old tools, rags, bits of wood, wire and hair. Sometimes altered through carving or wrapping, the components are joined in attenuated formations that merge modernist abstraction and folk art, Western and African influences, childhood memories and adult realities.

Mr. Outterbridge was born in Greenville, N.C., in 1933, where his father had a small business collecting and recycling metal machine parts and farm equipment. In high school he learned about art through visits to local crafts fairs, but for practical reasons studied engineering in college. After a year of that, though, in 1953 he dropped out to join the Army and was sent to Germany, where one of his officers recognized his talents as a painter and gave him a studio and free time to visit local museums and churches.

Back in the United States, Mr. Outterbridge headed for Chicago to study commercial art. While in school, he collaborated with other artists on opening a gallery on the city's South Side, and supported himself as a bus driver for the Chicago Transit Authority. In 1963 he moved to the West Coast, settling in South Central Los Angeles at a politically volatile moment.

He became friends with Mr. Purifoy, who, trained as a social worker, encouraged him to shift from painting to assemblage that incorporated ordinary objects and materials, things that people who lived in South Central and Watts, and who didn't go to art museums, would recognize.

Much of what the two artists ended up using was salvaged from burned-out buildings. The sculptures that Mr. Outterbridge called his "Containment Series" from the late 1960s were reliquarylike boxes hammered from cut and flattened tin cans with charred wood and rusted nails sealed inside but visible behind sheets of glass.

The result was "black art" that, by and large, avoided stereotypical markers of African-American identity and that was topically loaded without being overtly polemical. Mr. Outterbridge acknowledged Duchamp as an influence, along with contemporaries like Mark di Suvero and Robert Rauschenberg. And in the 1970s, when he introduced figures in his "Rag Man Series" and "Ethnic Heritage Group," African art decisively entered the picture.

He was doing fantastic things, as were his friends. But the chance to exhibit in mainstream galleries or museums was practically nil and seemed likely to stay that way. This reality, once he had fully grasped it, intensified his already passionate, principled immersion in community-based collaborations that operated outside market-approved models, redefined the term "artist," and blurred distinctions between art, education and social action.

In the early '70s he became director of the Compton Communicative Arts Academy in a poor and predominantly black inner suburb of Los Angeles. He then succeeded Mr. Purifoy as director of the Watts Towers Arts Center, built near Simon Rodia's sculptural-architectural monument. There he taught, organized projects and became friend and mentor to younger artists like Willie Middlebrook and Johnny Coleman, and to Mr. Hammons, who had been in Los Angeles since 1962.

These activities left Mr. Outterbridge little time for, or focused interest in, a conventional art career, though in recent years he has built himself a studio and resumed regular production of individual pieces. In his "Urban Blight" series from the early '90s he revisited the "Containment" format, turning the boxes into locked-down, graffiti-covered storefronts. Most of the new work at Tilton, by contrast, refers to his personal life in the present and to his childhood.

"Portrait of Willie" is named for the Los Angeles friend who brought a bit of hair and a lot of spirit to Mr. Outterbridge's studio one day. Other pieces allude to his mother's quilts, to his father's tools, to farm animals and folk amulets, with all of this individual history embedded in a broader one symbolized by manaclelike bracelets and astrological symbols.

"I don't think art is any special thing," Mr. Outterbridge said in an interview for the Archives of American Art in 1973, at a time when he was placing the value of group creativity before individual achievement. Yet over a long career devoted to community projects he has produced many special things. This small find of a show represents but a handful.

"John Outterbridge" remains on view through Saturday at the Tilton Gallery, 8 East 76th Street, Manhattan; (212) 737-2221.

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