

REFLECTIONS ON JOHN OUTTERBRIDGE

*Deep within the spirit and flesh of my being,
the fretting breath of ancestors' guides the burning faith.
Sacred are the visions engrained like gleaming sermons,
preached far beyond the faith of my nights.
Give me the courage to know the things of light that I may be worthy of my place
Above all, teach me to share the gift.¹*
- John Outterbridge

A. M. Weaver

During the month of August 2013, I had the opportunity to conduct a series of conversations with John Outterbridge. He exudes such feelings of calm and resolute that you are inclined to listen quietly as he conjures in words the details of a life lived with an awe-inspiring respect for and understanding of the universe. In this fast-paced era of internationalism and globalization, Outterbridge's languid and poetic words resonate with the collective wisdom of the elders and ancestors. He discusses the perils of racism as effortlessly as life events and, of course, his art.

Now eighty years old, with his sobering ideology Outterbridge exudes a sense of humility—humility built on a noble life. In Yoruba culture and art the essence of *iwa* (character) is a valued ideal; character trumps appearance because it is considered to be everlasting, in contrast to physical beauty, which fades.

Rather than working within or outside the context of fine art concepts or movements, John Outterbridge creates art as a natural outgrowth of his environment. Early in life he had a predilection toward making things. Born in Greenville, North



John Outterbridge, *Rag and Bag Idiom I*, 2012. Mixed media, 14.5 x 15.75 x 3.5 in.
Courtesy the artist and Tilton Gallery, New York



Let Us Tie Down Loose Ends, 1968. Mixed media, 13.25 x 14.5 x 1.75 in.
 Courtesy the artist and Tilton Gallery, New York

Carolina, his Southern environment provided great source material. “We came from a village; the elders, aunties all around you taught you the use of herbs; the fields were important to all of us. We allowed the vegetation to grow. Bottle trees were in every yard to keep away evil spirits, because you could see that haunts were everywhere.”²² These were all signs of African retention in black Southern culture.

Also of note is the artist’s recurring use of “asfinity” style bags in both older and more recent works. Enlarged and dramatically painted by Outterbridge, the origin of these forms is based on satchels that decorated the fences of every home in North Carolina. These were used to ward off evil spirits and, when worn, had medicinal purposes. They often contained earth and various herbs, a tradition still carried on in the Caribbean (e.g., Trinidad) today. Thus Outterbridge has perceived his work to be about the conditions of self-hood, from the empirical to the ontological.

He also recalls the Great Depression. Smiling as if reminiscing, he states, “White folks had a hard time... [as evidenced in the photos of Dorothea Lange from the WPA]...so you can imagine what is what like to be colored.”²³ His father, a fireman, gardener, and handyman, could make or fix anything and carved a living doing so. He collected everything, finding creative reuses for discarded materials. From him John learned very early that nothing is to be wasted. The community’s survival depended on that fact. “Our community didn’t lock doors. Moving from south to the North and north to the South looking for work. It’s difficult to put all of this into the artwork. It says that we were moved by all of those events. They were very important influences on forging who we were.”²⁴

This is the premise upon which Outterbridge’s aesthetic is based—art out of necessity.

To date, as an artist Outterbridge refuses to work with assistants (although at the prodding of Betye Saar, he is considering it). He works in his studios with manageable dimensions and has created an entire oeuvre that is handmade by him exclusively. His creativity is based on this impulse—the coordination of mind, eye, and hand.

His current works, as seen recently at Jack Tilton’s gallery, recapitulate earlier investigations in assemblage, such as *5 Pieces* (2011) and *Game Board*

(2009), which are stripped versions of *Let Us Tie Down Loose Ends*, *Containment Series* (1968) and *Captive Image #1*, *Ethnic Heritage Series* (1971–72). In the recent pieces, his wood goes untreated with no stains or signs of wear and are flawlessly constructed. In *Dread* (2011) phallic references can be found—for example, the handle of what appears to be a mallet is shaped like a penis. Such inferences, as in his earlier sculpture, are folded seamlessly into the work and, according to Outterbridge, allude to the concept of passion. *Game Board* (2009), a playful portrait of photographer Willie Middlebrook, has actual tufts of hair placed strategically in rows on a wooden play board with wheels resembling a child’s toy. *Ritual Console* (2009) is a curved piece of stripped wood shaped like a bull’s horn.

During our extensive conversations, Outterbridge waxed poetic in discussing his philosophies.

“We still run from tsunamis! In North Carolina everything is so pristine environmentally. There is land around the house; there is a lot to be appreciated. My daughter and I witnessed a deluge, a fantastic thunderstorm in which the lightning and thunder shook the house. Lightning struck one of the homes [in the area]; it caught fire and burned.... This tells me a lot about the power of nature in the universe.... Earth is a tiny grain of salt and we are an expanded part of the universe. It tells me I belong to the universe and not just the moment. We run because we are not in charge of anything.”²⁵

Last fall, walking through the group exhibit *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980* at MoMA PS1, there were only a few works that resonated for me. Of that group, John Outterbridge’s sculptures stood out. I felt a familiarity with the works that is hard to articulate. Outterbridge’s use of materials is masterful; his transformation of canvas, metal, found objects, and wood into salient pieces that address issues pertinent to the 1960s, ’70s, and beyond. His process, which is seamless, melds one material into another. Master of bricolage, Outterbridge creates work that harkens back to a period in American art when the investigation of ordinary/found objects became the source material for artists such as Rauschenberg and Kienholz. Outterbridge mentioned during one of our conversations that Rauschenberg was inextricably influ-

enced by Southern vernacular culture while attending Black Mountain College from 1949 to 1952. This invariably impacted his decision to branch out into making “combines,” as he called them, along with the urban grit of New York—a trademark that bolstered him into stardom.⁶ Working with assemblage was a passing phase for artists such as Rauschenberg and Keinholz, who were several years Outterbridge’s senior. However, for Outterbridge it was and is a way of articulating his worldview: “The way we put our lives together, art expresses life. Art is conclusive of all things...in assemblages [I] use found objects that I shape or form... to redefine the use of [those] materials.”⁷

In the declared era of pluralism, which is now forty years old with no end in sight, assemblage and collage have provided fodder for many artists, in particular artists of color. Even in the midst of high tech and the persistence of a minimalistic aesthetic, Outterbridge’s voice and visual lexicon prefigure artists such as Shinique Smith, who, like Outterbridge, uses discarded garments and rags; Amber Robles-Gordon, an emerging Washingtonian; Terry Atkins, known for his *Arte Povera* monumental sculptures and installations; and even Theaster Gates, who mines found objects, transforming them into tableaux imbued with political significance.

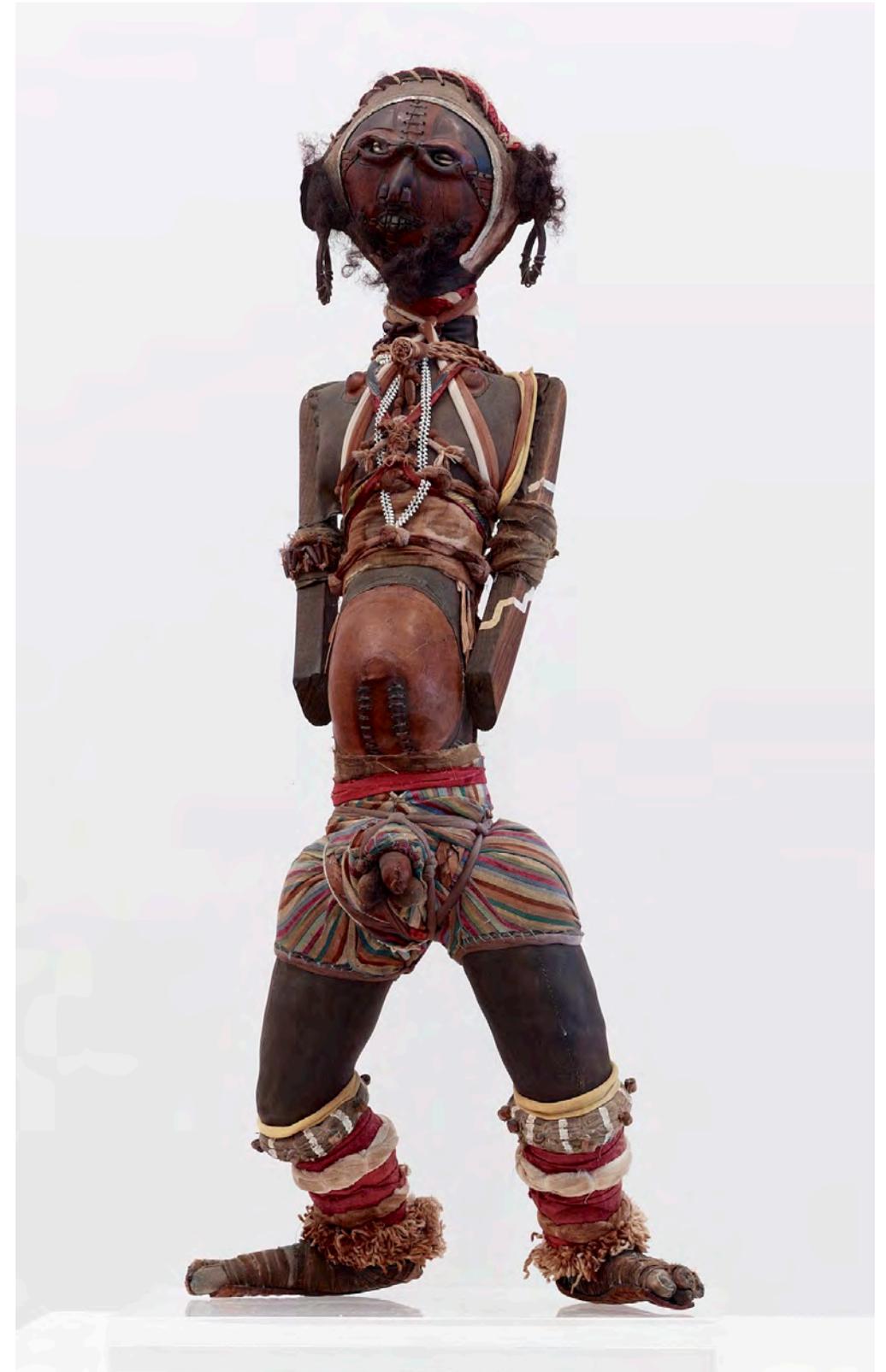
Recycling and using available materials predates modern Western art traditions; even before Duchamp, man’s tendency to “make special” has been an integral part of diverse cultural practices throughout history. I may need to qualify this statement somewhat. Duchamp’s immersion in parody and the game of using found material, and thus his formulating early theories of anti-art, differs greatly from Ellen Dissanayke’s overarching theme in her 1992 publication *Homo Aestheticus* to “make special,” to control or enhance nature.

Particular to Outterbridge’s work is his retention of Africanist sensibilities and his use of materials to transcend their ordinary signification. His bricolage sculptures are reminiscent of any number of traditional African sculptures and Southern vernacular art. The scholar Robert Douglas in his essay “Formalizing an African-American Aesthetic,” argues vehemently for the legitimacy of a black aesthetic.⁸ He contends that an aesthetic directly connected to

diverse cultures from Africa is evident in the work of black artists featured in the 1991 traveling exhibition *Black Art/Ancestral Legacy*. He cites the principles of AfriCOBRA, using the urban colloquialism “jam-pack and jelly tight” to describe multivalent elements typically associated with an African aesthetic. Multidominant visual elements—bold color, complex composition and design, and patterns—for years connoted black art in the Americas and the diaspora. In some instances, this holds true; however, Outterbridge’s work floats inside and out of these principles.

He is as comfortable with abstracted forms as with figurative constructions. His works range from congested, dense compositions to more minimal layouts, as evidenced in *Together Let Us Break Bread* (1969). In most instances his compositions exist at a midpoint between complexity and straightforwardness. Color is used both as a flourish to enhance work and as a tool to explore painterly ideas. One parallel to African art is the convergence of diverse materials in single works. *Tribal Piece, Ethnic Heritage Series*, c. 1978-82 could be a nod to both traditional Yoruba and Ekoi sculpture based on the facial expression of the figure. Further, the arms are placed in a downward position, yet the bent knees imply movement. The wrapping of fabric and cords around the figurine’s torso and limbs may indicate masquerade costumes from the Cameroon, and the outline of a vitrine on the belly made of leather alludes to Nkisi from the Congo. The swathed phallus evokes sheaths worn by the indigenous people of New Guinea, although I think Outterbridge’s intent here is ironic, meant to imply sensuality and passion, as well as to play on Western stereotypes pertaining to black sexuality and discomfort with any reference to frontal nudity.

With regard to whether there is an African influence in his work, Outterbridge states, “European art is the art of many cultures; however, I don’t call it white art; is there a color to art? We hear about black art and I think about how the art of Ghana... Nigeria...Mali is treated as if it’s all alike; it’s all black, but these are very different cultures. This has become acceptable and registers because this is the way business is done in the world. During the time of slavery there were many many influences of the African. [Their] gifts in so many areas have been



Tribal Piece, Ethnic Heritage Series, c. 1978-82. Mixed media, 34.5 x 16 x 10 in. Courtesy the artist and Tilton Gallery, New York

diluted.⁹ In other words, black cultural expression is a hybrid, an amalgam of many things, as evidenced in black vernacular culture in the United States.

Aware that he has been pigeonholed as a creator of work derivative of Western traditions in collage and assemblage,¹⁰ Outterbridge sees his work as an outgrowth of a quotidian reality, the materials he selects representative of political concepts and personal narratives, infused with a mischievous edge.

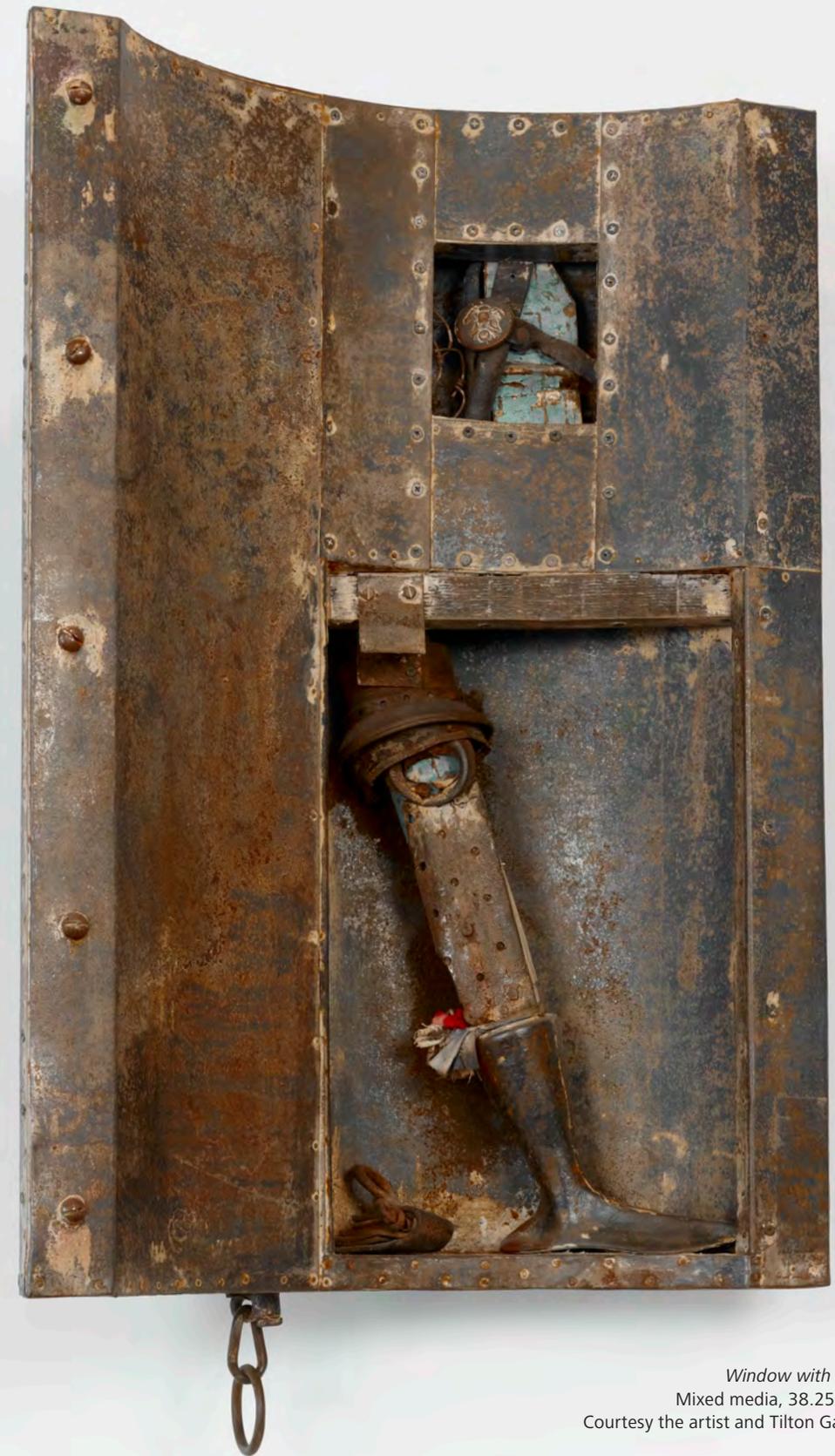
The artist's *Containment Series* has been well received for the most part. These low-relief works contain vitrines, with each element serving as a signifier for a multiplicity of ideas/concepts. One example is *Window with Footnote* (1991). Its curved encasement is forged out of metal; inside is a leg made of wood with an antique metal foot, and an old rusted metal connector serves as the kneecap. The foot is possibly from the turn of the century; in its previous incarnation it may have been a support for a shoeshine stand. Above is a smaller recessed area inlaid with an engraved emblem of the American eagle etched onto a disk, perhaps a military buckle, and a leather belt wrapped around an aqua piece of tin. On the left side of the piece is a delicate overlay of wire shaped into semi-circles. Juxtaposed to the foot, resting on a shallow ledge, is a leather pulley. Outterbridge relies on the natural colors of the found objects; except for a confection of grey, red, and yellow rags separating the neck of the metal foot from the wooden calf, there is little color. The simplicity of the work is fascinating, and the composition and construction allude to parts of a broken doll or puppet.¹¹ Yet the complexity of wood attached to metal and the sheer fortitude of the entire form evoke a presence like a wall, or even a bulwark. Outterbridge relates his *Containment Series* to how in life there is only the pretense of absolute freedom; we all live in a constant state of confinement on some level or another. According to Outterbridge, we are not as free as we think.

After discussing the origin of his work and bits of philosophy about life and living, we meandered onto the subjects of black art and racism within the art world. An event that happened early in his career would impact his decision to use art as a political tool.

As a young man I went into the service during the Korean War and got out in 1955. In coming back to the states, I [boarded] a segregated Greyhound bus; it was crowded so I was instructed to go to the back.... I was so glad to get back to the USA. I had worked with the Germans instead of being stationed on the front line, which enabled me to come home.... Being in a foreign country speaking their language makes you think about all of your friends. When you get back from that kind of experience you feel like kissing the ground.... I was a trained ammunition specialist and had on my uniform...and the guy (the bus driver) kept saying 'Move it back'; I hesitated and finally sat down and cried. And from that day on, I became an activist...my involvement in music and art, anything to do with art, was life itself.¹²

After returning to North Carolina in 1955, Outterbridge returned to his peripatetic lifestyle, first migrating to Chicago and ultimately moving to California in 1963. While living in Chicago, he attended the American Academy of Art and explored his musical aptitude. Trained as a classical vocalist during his high school years, he sang baritone in the jazz ensemble Vera and the Three Jays, while working as a trolley driver in the Windy City. John Esteridge wrote most of the material for the a cappella group and they even self-recorded and – distributed their music. The name of the group was eventually changed to Opus De Four because they thought it sounded more sophisticated. Outterbridge performed all over Chicago and met people like Sun Ra and John Coltrane. He chuckled and said, "This was the first time I met a person with a chartreuse suit and Fender row electric piano. Sun Ra had an indelible impact on many musicians and he loved our group."¹³ These were freewheeling days of performing, creating art, and hanging out. Many artists would meet at the house of the art maven, visual artist and activist Margaret Burroughs, who almost single-handedly started the DuSable Museum, the first African American museum in the country. Outterbridge met AfriCOBRA's Jeff Donaldson there, among other luminaries. He remarks, "Smoke filled rooms, that's what we did, we smoked and talked all night about art."

As much as Outterbridge's aesthetic can be credited to formal training and exposure to European art, at its essence it is based on his lived cul-



Window with Footnote, 1991.
Mixed media, 38.25 x 22 x 14.25 in.
Courtesy the artist and Tilton Gallery, New York



Broken Dance, Ethnic Heritage Series, c. 1978-82.
Mixed media, 34 x 29.25 x 33 in.
Courtesy the artist and Tilton Gallery, New York

tural experiences. Outterbridge was an activist. He arrived in Los Angeles, where he lived and worked at Tony Hill's studio as a technician, close to the portending Watts riots. From 1963 to 1971 a rash of riots swept the nation's black communities, along with various expressions of civil unrest, including the momentous march on Washington that resulted in the signing of the Civil Rights Bill. All of these converged to signal that attention needed to be paid to race relations in this country.

It was during the mid-1960s that Outterbridge met the Los Angeles art community. The most notables included David Hammons, Melvin Edwards, Dr. Samella Lewis, E. J. Montgomery, Noah Purifoy, Dale and Alonzo Davis, Betye Saar, and Dan Conchalar. But he also found another community immersed in the plastic arts that provided support for his development as a visionary artist. At this time Outterbridge was volunteering at the Simon Rodia Art Center because of the atmosphere. Simon Rodia was a handyman, who created the renowned Watts Towers. In the heart of this black hub in Los

Angeles was a tower made of found material—metal, chicken wire, and concrete, adorned with crockery and tiles. Watts was originally a farming community called Mud Town, cultivated by Japanese, Germans, Latinos, and blacks. It was renamed Watts by a wealthy real estate agent after World War II and at the time of Outterbridge's arrival, a second wave of blacks migrated from the South, causing the area evolve into a teaming hub. Centrally located near the airport, the harbor, and downtown, it was the nucleus of Los Angeles.

This was a difficult and exciting time in the city. Speaking of black artists Outterbridge says, "The only place we could show was in parking lots of supermarkets, libraries and community centers." Thus we were quite isolated. However, the black communities organized after the riots to enhance public programming within LA museums and institutions; these entities were just starting to recognize the black talent in the city. Ostensibly a segregated survey affair, the first major black museum exhibit was organized in the basement of The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), featuring twenty-five to thirty black artists, such as John Riddle, Tim Washington, Charles White, and David Hammons. Around 1970-71 Otis College of Art and Design, a fine arts school, gallery, and think tank, also organized a black survey exhibit. With limited opportunities to exhibit work in traditional venues, the black West Coast scene became riveted with tension as diverse groups of art professionals vied for positions within the mainstream. However, a collective environment of support and comradeship ultimately prevailed.

During this time, Outterbridge served as one of a few black museum professionals. The Pasadena Museum of Art had just opened a new building and hired Outterbridge as the director of education. These proved to be glory days, and Outterbridge hobnobbed with some of the most acclaimed national and international artists of the era. He recalls, "The most outlandish event was the opening of East Coast/West Coast. This exhibit featured artists Larry Bell, Donald Judd, Richard Serra, and Andy Warhol, who of course was the most ostentatious. He entered the opening in his signature white wig and his pale complexion powdered and beat to perfection, with an entourage of more than twenty.

Flanked by two provocatively dressed nymphs, one white and the other black, Warhol generously distributed marijuana to everyone in attendance."¹⁴ Needless to say, according to Outterbridge's account, it was a riotous affair.

As founder of the Communicative Arts Academy, and director from 1969-1975, Outterbridge was able to merge his love for all art forms, including music, dance, theater, and visual art, with his social political concerns. As an activist, Outterbridge made full use of his administrative acumen at the Communicative Arts Academy; it also allowed him the opportunity to not only affect change in the Watts community, but also to excel as a leader within the ranks of Los Angeles government. Responsible for establishing several festivals that continue to this date—Watts Summer Festival; Simon Rodia Watt Tower Festival; and along with Alonzo Davis, the Day of the Drum, a festival focused on rhythmic instruments—he had the unique opportunity to curate these art events similarly to how he made art.

In 1976, he was appointed director of the Watts Tower Art Center in the Municipal Cultural Affairs Department of Los Angeles. During the same year Jeff Donaldson came to the city to personally invite Outterbridge to Festac 77, the second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture. Outterbridge could not attend because of his new position; however, he arranged for several high school and college bands to attend the festival, and these black youth performed there with the renowned musician Fela, considered to be the "Black President" of Nigeria. Outterbridge's efforts to train black youth and provide unique opportunities for their growth paid off. For these young musicians this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Outterbridge's accomplishments as an arts administrator are commendable; in spite of a rigorous schedule, he lived among a cadre of artists, raised a family, and continued to make art. It wasn't until 1994 that Outterbridge began to receive acclaim beyond the sphere of West Coast artists and educators. Also in 1994, Lizzetta Lefalle-Collins sent a proposal to the State Department that was accepted, and Outterbridge was selected to represent the United States at the São Paulo Biennale in a show entitled *The Art of Betye Saar and John*

Outterbridge: *The Poetics of Politics, Iconography and Spirituality*. While in Brazil he visited Bahia, one of the states with the highest concentration of African descendents in the Americas, known for their retention of the Yoruba culture. The show then traveled to Johannesburg, South Africa during Nelson Mandela's initial term as president. Outterbridge recalls, "We had to fight to eat in restaurants where no blacks had dined." This auspicious year concluded with Outterbridge building a relationship with philanthropist and collector and founder of Norton Antivirus software, Peter Norton. Now, almost twenty years later a new generation is discovering his work, in part due to the *Now Dig This* show and his inclusion in the 2013 Venice Biennale.

Outterbridge channels the communities he lives and works in. His work serves not only as a vehicle for personal expression, but as a tool for broader commentary on the environment, society, and human interactions; these salient works are encoded with insignia that tell the story of who he is and of becoming. Outterbridge states, "I never saw [art] as a career...It's like life...experiences based in the unspeakable!"

A. M. Weaver is an independent curator and art journalist residing in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her most recent project is about a series of public art works presented in Washington, DC as part of the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities's 5 x 5 Project, entitled Ceremonies of Dark Men (CoDM).

Notes

- 1 John Outterbridge, poem recited during interview with author, August 24, 2013.
- 2 Outterbridge, telephone interview with author, August 18, 2013.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Combines are non-traditional materials and objects that are used in innovative ways, often by juxtaposing painting and sculpture.
- 7 Outterbridge, interview with author, August 22, 2013.
- 8 Robert Douglas, "Formalizing an African-American Aesthetic," *New Art Examiner* vol. 18, no. 10 (1991): 18-24.
- 9 Outterbridge, interview, August 18, 2013.
- 10 See Ken Johnson's review of *Now Dig This!*, "Forged From the Fires of the 1960s," *The New York Times*, October 25, 2012, C24.
- 11 Outterbridge made all types of dolls between 1967 and approximately 1991.
- 12 Outterbridge, interview, August 18, 2013.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.