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Aspen Times Weekly: Rag Man's Last Stand

by Andrew Travers

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Anna Stonehouse/The Aspen Times |
In Search of the Missing Mule, 1993, by John Outterbridge.

At first glance, John Outterbridge's work in ["Rag Man" at the Aspen Art Museum](#) seems a rough bricolage of junk and industrial materials — a sort of funky folk art of wood and hooks, string and steel nails, human hair and worn fabrics joined together to become more than the sum of their parts. Combined, they're given life and many become human-like sculptures.

But spend some time with the show — spanning 40-plus years of the Los Angeles-based artist's career — and you'll find a sharp commentary on the African-American experience.

Though the work dates back to 1970, it resonates powerfully and undeniably

with today's headlines and our Black Lives Matter moment.

"Rag Man" opened in July in a basement gallery at the museum. The exhibition closes Oct. 16.

A native of rural South Carolina, Outterbridge is the son of a "rag man" and junk collector, who piled found materials high in the yard and salvaged textiles for use as rags. The young Outterbridge was surrounded by art in this community, where everyday detritus was put to use for aesthetic purposes.

"He learned at a very young age the value of re-instilling a life into an object and reusing it," the Hammer Museum's Anne Ellegood, who curated "Rag Man" for the Art + Practice in Los Angeles and brought it to Aspen, said during a walk-through of the show this summer. "You can see how that, of course, comes into his practice through time."

Rags, bags and the like take on figurative, human form and are imbued with spiritual symbolism — some are tacked on the wall on wooden, crucifix-like mounts.

Outterbridge moved to Los Angeles in 1963, just two years before the Watts Rebellion and the riots that changed the city forever. Active in the civil rights struggle, Outterbridge fell in with the artists of the California Assemblage movement and their work became inextricably linked to their activism and their fight for equality.

"They believed in the power of art to implement change — that art can be an agent of social change," explains Ellegood.

Outterbridge looks to history in much of his work. The earliest piece in the show, "Case in Point," is a piece of luggage that whispers of the Great Migration (and can't help but remind today's viewer of the ongoing global refugee crisis). The luggage tag reads, "Packages travel like people."

His "In Search of the Missing Mule" potently articulates the false promise of the U.S. government to give 40 acres and a mule to former slaves. The assemblage of steel and wood becomes a man, arms raised, with a hitching rope hanging from one arm and a ragged American flag draping from his side.

"This is his way of saying that the America that was promised is still being searched for," says Ellegood. "Here is this figure that is out searching for the mule he never got and thinking, 'What is America? What is American identity?'" American flags run as a motif throughout the show. Seeing those flags in Outterbridge's work, in the context of ongoing protest of the national anthem by Colin Kaepernick and a growing legion of athletes, "Rag Man" couldn't be more current.

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