

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

A Sculptor, 78, Becomes a Star in L.A.

December 31, 2011

The quirky, politically minded sculptures of John Outterbridge, a 78-year-old artist living in Los Angeles, have become the sleeper hit of "Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980," a rolling series of exhibitions throughout southern California this season.

Mr. Outterbridge is known for using everyday materials like rags, rubber and rusty scrap metal to make assemblages that hint at his childhood memories or address societal ills. His works can be seen in at least seven museums and art spaces in the regional survey, including the Hammer Museum and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.



John Outterbridge's 4-foot-long 'John Ivery's Truck: Hauling Away the Traps and Saving the Yams.' LACMA

Mr. Outterbridge's six-decade career is also a major subject of "L.A. Object & David Hammons Body Prints," a book published this fall that explores the overlooked role black artists like Mr. Outterbridge have played in L.A.'s art scene and civil rights movement.

Kellie Jones, curator of the Hammer's show, said Mr. Outterbridge's use of ordinary materials to address sophisticated issues feels "relevant" to audiences today. "A whole generation of younger artists love him for

making the point that art can take place anywhere, using anything," Ms. Jones added.

Growing up in Greenville, N.C., during the Depression, Mr. Outterbridge said he intended to pursue a career in aviation but was captivated by folk art—from the neighbors who hung glass bottles in their trees to his father, who turned the family's backyard into a gallery of mismatched truck parts.

A job installing exhibits at the Pasadena Art Museum threw him into the path of sculptors he admired, like Mark di Suvero and Richard Serra. Mr. Outterbridge settled in L.A. in 1963.

Opportunities proved frustratingly thin, though: Local galleries rarely showed work by black artists at the time, so he and peers like John Riddle would often create makeshift shows in supermarket parking lots. After a deadly riot roiled the city's Watts neighborhood in 1965, he joined a group of artists in making artworks from the charred debris.

These days, Mr. Outterbridge says he's still mulling ideas for activist-style artworks but says his favorite pieces are more sentimental.

One 1993 work owned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "John Ivery's Truck: Hauling Away the Traps and Saving the Yams," looks like a 4-foot-long rusty pickup but symbolizes his father, he says. "First Poet Olivia," a wooden work from the same year, looks like a grazing animal yet evokes his Cherokee mother and the goat she let him keep as a pet.

—Kelly Crow

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203391104577124802582434874>