

TILTON

GALLERY



NOAH PURIFOY

EAST COAST/WEST COAST:

Clark, Hammons, Outterbridge, Saar, Washington

September 11 – November 3, 2018

Opening Reception: September 11, 2018, 6 – 8pm

Tilton Gallery is honored to present *Noah Purifoy*, opening Tuesday, September 11th from 6 to 8 pm. This will be Purifoy's first solo exhibition on the East coast and will run through November 3rd, 2018.

Noah Purifoy is a pioneering artist of the California assemblage movement, as well as a key figure in the Black Arts Movement in Los Angeles during the 1960s and 70s. He is known for works he categorized as Collages, Constructions and Assemblages, two and three-dimensional works composed of found and recycled objects.

With a masters in social work, an interest in psychology and philosophy as well as art history, and experience teaching wood-working and later working in the design field making furniture and designing showrooms and store windows, Purifoy's own art focused on the use of found materials. Purifoy was aware of the Surrealist and Dada traditions and the work with found objects of artists such as Marcel Duchamp

and Kurt Schwitters. He had also spent his youth in the South where the re-purposing of objects of all kinds was a given.

Purifoy worked as a social worker in the early 1950s in Cleveland and in Los Angeles after moving there in 1963, eventually enrolling as the first African American student at Chouinard (now the California Institute of the Arts or CalArts) and receiving his Bachelor of Art in 1956. In 1964-1965, together with Judson Powell and Sue Welsh, he founded the Watts Towers Arts Center next to Simon Rodia's legendary Watts Towers, itself a quintessential example of assemblage on a grand scale. He was director of the Center till 1975, establishing multi-disciplinary arts programs and classes to draw in the youth from the Watts community. Art, Purifoy believed, was a powerful tool for communication and social change. He continued to espouse this belief for the rest of his life.

The Watts Arts Center was at the epicenter of the Watts Rebellion in August 1965. From debris collected from the remnants of this devastated community, Purifoy and other artists created works of art. Out of this connection between art and the social and political urgency of the moment, Purifoy, in his words, "became an artist." With the resulting artworks, he organized the landmark exhibition *66 Signs of Neon*, first shown in 1966 at local festivals and high schools; it then traveled to institutions nationwide and even to Germany through 1972. With this exhibition, Purifoy created a portrait of the community of Watts out of found materials charged with immediacy, using art as a vehicle for communication.

Appointed by the Governor to the California Arts Council in 1976, Purifoy gave up art making to return to working with the community, organizing and funding countless grassroots arts organizations and school and prison programs. Purifoy left the Council in 1987 and returned to being a full time artist in Los Angeles. In 1989, he left the city for Joshua Tree where he worked outdoors in the desert, creating over 100 sculptures, spread across acres of land, all made from recycled found materials.

The majority of works included in this exhibition are from the period when Purifoy was living in Joshua Tree and from the years immediately preceding his move. Together, the works reflect both years of refinement of the artist's vision and a newly found freedom of expression.

This exhibition focuses on works made for interior display. The outdoor sculptures that fill his Joshua Tree Outdoor Museum are meant to remain in the desert; only a few have traveled to museum shows on the occasions of his two retrospectives. Even so, these indoor works vary greatly, from the autobiographical small collages and large construction, *Snow Hill* that maps the Alabama town where he was born, to the politically charged *Strange Fruit*, a poignant and poetic assemblage on wood made with white feathers, black acrylic paint and a paint can and brush.

Restoration, Access and *Rags and Old Iron (After Nina Simone) I and II* are among his most iconic and major assemblages. While made in this later period, they hark back to the early 1967 *Untitled* work in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, (formerly Corcoran Gallery of Art). *Joshua Tree* and *Lace Curtain* emphasize more brightly colored painted elements and take these works and *Snow Hill* to a new level of abstract assemblage construction.

Rags and Old Iron (After Nina Simone) I and II, along with the large, elegantly designed wood construction *Black, Brown and Beige (After Duke Ellington)* and the colorful assemblages *For Lady Bird* and *Earl "Fatha" Hines*, illustrate the importance of jazz to Purifoy, as an art form in itself and as a model for an abstract way of seeing and reconstructing the world in art.

Accompanying *Noah Purifoy* is a small group show, *East Coast/West Coast*, of artists surrounding Purifoy in Los Angeles, also making distinct West coast assemblage: John Outterbridge, Betye Saar and Timothy Washington; each address the Black experience with different degrees of abstraction and figuration within this mode. East coast painter Ed Clark, a New York Abstract Expressionist, addresses the condition in entirely abstract terms. David Hammons bridges the two coasts, here represented by an early body print made in LA where he knew Purifoy and where he began his highly conceptual and poetic installations and sculptural works that he has continued since his move to New York in 1975.

Noah Purifoy was born in 1917 in Snow Hill, Alabama and died in 2004 in Joshua Tree, California. He had a Bachelor of Science from the Alabama State Teachers College, a Master's in Social Service Administration from Atlanta University, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Chouinard Art Institute.

Purifoy's work has been shown, among other venues, at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1971), The Studio Museum in Harlem (on numerous occasions 1972 – 2015) and at the Hammer Museum and MoMA PS1 in *Now Did This!: Art and Black Los Angeles 1960 - 1980* (2011-12). Extensive documentation on Purifoy can be found both in the *Now Dig This!* catalogue and in Tilton Gallery's *L.A. Object & David Hammons Body Prints*. The California African American Museum gave Purifoy a retrospective while he was still living and working, *Noah Purifoy: Outside and in the Open*, in 1997 and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art recently organized a major retrospective of his work, *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*, that traveled to the Wexner Center for the Arts, 2015-16. Both exhibitions are accompanied by in depth catalogues. His work is included in *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, organized by the Tate Modern and now on view at the Brooklyn Museum September 14, 2018 – February 3, 2019.