



Royal Academy of Arts

# Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers

Black Artists from the American South

## Press Release

**Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers: Black Artists from the American South**

**The Gabrielle Jungels-Winkler Galleries**

**17 March – 18 June 2023**

*Supported by*



Brooke Brown Barzun and Matthew Barzun

*Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers: Black Artists from the American South* will showcase unique African American artistic traditions and methods of visual storytelling. The distinctive creativity of the artists in this exhibition has brought about artworks whose subjects and materials often reverberate with the South's painful history - the inhuman practice of enslavement, the cruel segregationist policies of the Jim Crow era, institutionalised racism as well as the Civil Rights Movement.

The exhibition will bring together around 64 works by 34 artists from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to the present, in various media including assemblages, sculpture, paintings, reliefs, and drawings – mostly drawn from the collection of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, Atlanta, Georgia. Although these artists are now well known in the United States, most of the works in this exhibition will be shown for the first time in Europe. The exhibition will also feature quilts by the celebrated quiltmakers of Gee's Bend, Alabama, and the neighbouring communities of Rehoboth and Alberta. Artists in the exhibition will include Mary Lee Bendolph (b. 1935), Thornton Dial (1925-2016), Ralph Griffin (1925-1992), Lonnie Holley (b. 1950), Ronald Lockett (1965-1998), Joe Minter (b. 1943), Loretta Pettway (b. 1942), Nellie Mae Rowe (1900-1982), Mary T. Smith (1905-1955), James 'Son Ford' Thomas (1926-1993) and Purvis Young (1943-2010), amongst others.

The majority of these artists acquired their art-making skills by learning from family members, mentors and friends, as well as through experimentation. Their challenging economic situation and lack of resources - a result of systemic racism in the South - pushed their creativity into a specific direction. Artists would use local, recycled materials and found objects to realise their artworks. They respond to issues that are global in nature: from economic inequality, oppression and social marginalisation, to sexuality, current affairs, the influence of place and nature and ancestral memory.

As most of the artists did not have access to formal art spaces, often the only place they could display their work was in their yards. The "Yard Show" is a deeply rooted Southern tradition where artists would arrange their sculptures, paintings, and assemblages on their property. Joe Minter (b. 1943) is best known for creating one of the largest examples in the American South called 'African Village in America' near Birmingham, Alabama.

The intergenerational transmission of art-making knowledge can also be found in the quilt-making community of Gee's Bend. A selection of works by the Gee's Bend Quiltmakers from the 1930s to 2021 will feature in the exhibition. The Gee's Bend Quiltmakers are a community of women artists living in Gee's Bend, officially known as the village of Boykin, Alabama, a remote hamlet on a U-turn of the Alabama River. This isolation fostered a unique environment for their artistic practice. The residents are almost all descendants of enslaved people who worked on the original Pettway plantation and many bear the enslaver's name to this day. Conceived out of necessity, these vivid, multi-layered textile works are now viewed as an important chapter of modern art in America.

### **Souls Grown Deep Foundation**

*Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers: Black Artists from the American South* is made possible through the work of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Based in Atlanta, and with offices in New York City and Paris, the Foundation advocates the inclusion of Black artists from the South in the canon of American art history and fosters economic empowerment, racial and social justice, and educational advancement in the communities that gave rise to these artists. The Souls Grown Deep Foundation derives its name from a 1921 poem by Langston Hughes (1902-67) titled *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, the last line of which is "My soul has grown deep like the rivers." The Foundation stewards the largest and foremost collection of works by Black artists from the Southern United States, encompassing some 1,000 works by more than 160 artists, two-thirds of whom are women. The Foundation advances its mission through collection transfers, exhibitions, education, public programs, and publications.

### **Organisation**

Exhibition organised by the Royal Academy of Arts, London in collaboration with Souls Grown Deep Foundation, Atlanta. The exhibition is curated by Raina Lampkins-Fielder, Curator of Souls Grown Deep Foundation, and Axel Rüger, Secretary & Chief Executive, Royal Academy of Arts.

### **Accompanying Publication**

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with texts by Maxwell L. Anderson and Raina Lampkins-Fielder.

### **Dates and Opening Hours**

Press view: Tuesday 14 March 2023, 10am-1pm  
Dates: Friday 17 March – Sunday 18 June 2023  
10am – 6pm Tuesday to Sunday  
10am – 9pm Friday

### **Admission**

From £13; concessions available; under 16s go free ([T&Cs apply](#)); Friends of the RA go free.  
25 & Under: 16 to 25 year olds can access a half-price ticket ([T&Cs apply](#)).

### **Tickets**

Advance booking with pre-booked timed tickets is recommended for everyone, including Friends of the RA. Tickets can be booked in advance online ([royalacademy.org.uk](https://royalacademy.org.uk)) or over the phone (0207 300 8090).

## **Images**

Publicity images for *Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers: Black Artists from the American South*, can be downloaded via this [link](#). By downloading the images, you acknowledge and accept the terms and conditions. These images can only be reproduced to illustrate a review or criticism of a work or report as defined by section 30 (i) and (ii) of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

## **Social Media**

Join the discussion about the exhibition online at:

Facebook /royalacademy

Instagram @royalacademyarts

Twitter @royalacademy

#RASoulsGrownDeep

## **About the Royal Academy of Arts**

The Royal Academy of Arts was founded by King George III in 1768. It has a unique position in being an independent, privately funded institution led by eminent artists and architects whose purpose is to be a clear, strong voice for art and artists. Its public programme promotes the creation, enjoyment and appreciation of the visual arts through exhibitions, education and debate.

The Royal Academy is an independent charity. It does not receive revenue funding from the government so is reliant upon the support of its visitors, donors, sponsors, patrons and loyal Friends.

**For public information, please print: 020 7300 8090 or [www.royalacademy.org.uk](http://www.royalacademy.org.uk)**

**Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1J 0BD**

**For further press information, please contact Annabel Potter on 020 7300 5615 or [annabel.potter@royalacademy.org.uk](mailto:annabel.potter@royalacademy.org.uk)**

**07.12.22**