

Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada

Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada celebrates the career of a true American original. As the subtitle hints, Purifoy embraced dichotomy and sought to explore seemingly disparate juxtapositions in his work. Born in Alabama in 1917 to sharecropper parents, Purifoy knew firsthand an aesthetic of junk that was contrary to the general perception of the word. “Making something out of nothing,” as his practice is often characterized, would have been part of everyday life in Birmingham before 1950, when Purifoy left for Los Angeles. It was here at Chouinard Art Institute (now widely known as CalArts) that he would see—via prewar artists like Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp—how “junk,” or vernacular art, related to assemblage and was a vital part of the Surrealist and Dadaist moment in art history.

Like Simon Rodia, who saw his towers in Watts as *Nuestro Pueblo* (Our Town), and of equal importance to Purifoy’s position as a pioneer in postwar sculpture, Purifoy was (due as much to the circumstances of American segregation as to his own desire) a social worker and a believer in the power of art to effect change. As the founding director of the Watts Towers Arts Center, Purifoy was ideally positioned to both make art and teach art to a new generation.

Purifoy’s deep interest in urban life and its inhabitants eventually gave way to a longing solely to make art. In 1989, with the help of friends, he moved from the city to the desert of Joshua Tree, California, where he remained and created artworks for the rest of his life. Lying on ten acres, Purifoy’s Joshua Tree Outdoor Museum has become an international cultural destination. Questions about “high” or “low” art disappear in the face of his grand achievement of installations, paintings, and sculptures.

66 Signs of Neon

“We watched aghast the rioting, looting, and burning during the August happening. While the debris was still smoldering, we ventured into the rubble like other junkers of the community, digging and searching, but unlike others, obsessed without quite knowing why. By September ... we had collected three tons of charred wood and fire-molded debris ... We gave much thought to the oddity of our found things. Often the smell of the debris ... turned our thoughts to what were and were not tragic times in

Watts and to what to do with the junk we had collected, which had begun to haunt our dreams.” —Noah Purifoy

On August 11, 1965, the Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts erupted in one of the most violent race rebellions in American history. A reaction to decades of oppression, economic disenfranchisement, and racial profiling endured by the African American community, the revolt left 34 people dead and devastated Watts, which was engulfed by fire for a week. In the riot's wake, Purifoy, the founding director of the Watts Towers Arts Center, gathered a group of artists including Deborah Brewer, Judson Powell, Ruth Saturensky (currently known as Charu Colorado), and Arthur Secunda. Together, they created *66 Signs of Neon*, an exhibition of works constructed from the debris Purifoy and Powell had collected. In keeping with his fascination for the street and its objects, Purifoy's collaborative art project evoked a Neo-Dada approach to the fire-ravaged alleys of postriot Watts with a peculiarly American spirit of making use of the material at hand. Titled in reference to the crystalized lead drippings from burnt neon signs the artists used in their assemblages, *66 Signs of Neon* traveled to nine venues across the country between 1966 and 1969. Installed here for the first time since the 1960s is a selection of surviving works from this landmark exhibition that, in Purifoy's words, set him on his path as an artist.

Purifoy and the Desert

In 1989, at the age of 72, Purifoy left Los Angeles and moved to Joshua Tree, California. Over the next 15 years, Purifoy would transform a barren ten-acre parcel of desert, punctuating it with more than 120 large-scale sculptures composed entirely of junk. The profound silence of the desert, where, as Purifoy put it, “the rabbits, the birds . . . the lizards, all run quiet,” nourished his enduring interest in phenomenology and oneness, in finding what he referred to as “the source of the creative process.”

Many of the works created in the Mojave take the form of whole rooms. “I always wanted to do environmental sculpture,” he reflected. “It only became possible when I moved to the desert.” Purifoy was fascinated with how nature interacted with his artistic process, devoting significant attention to the subject. “Because of the extreme climatic conditions in the high desert,” he wrote, “it was interesting to watch the pieces as they weathered.” Over time, heat, wind, and erosion transformed his site, gracing it with a poetry all its own, as reds turned to pinks, thick rags to translucent threads. Six of Purifoy's large-scale works created in Joshua Tree are installed in this

exhibition, where, transplanted from the desert to the center of Los Angeles, they take on newly charged meaning.

Purifoy and Popular Culture

After the Watts Rebellion, Purifoy dedicated himself both to the found object and to the idea of using art as a tool for social change. His assemblages frequently commented obliquely on cultural and social history, and he seemed especially inspired by cultural figures, including jazz musicians. Purifoy referenced jazz in numerous works from the late 1980s.

Rags and Old Iron II (After Nina Simone) is a collage of tattered clothing, frayed burlap, and fur that evokes the “secondhand dreams” for which Simone wails in the song “Rags and Old Iron.” In *Black, Brown, and Beige (After Duke Ellington)*, a nearly ten-foot-wide triptych, tall jagged slabs of wood reach up toward the sky like royal crowns or gigantic fingers playing a piano. *For Lady Bird* alludes equally to the jazz standard “Lady Bird” and to Lady Bird Johnson, the politically progressive first lady of the United States from 1963 to 1969. Purifoy’s *Pianos* suggests his brother Clarence Purifoy, who played piano with blues musicians Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith during their youth in Birmingham, Alabama. Purifoy also appropriated the keyboard as readymade in *Earl Fatha Hines*, a quilted anthropomorphic construction that honors the jazz pianist of the same name. Many of these flat works were created around 1989, a prolific period that followed Purifoy’s resignation from the California Arts Council.

Art and Activism

In 1972 Purifoy dropped out of the art world to become director of community services at Central City Mental Health, a facility started by Dr. J. Alfred Cannon in 1968 to address the psychological issues affecting Los Angeles’s African American community. Confronting teen pregnancy, unemployment, and an emerging gang culture, Central City also funded the Malcolm X Center for cultural initiatives. Purifoy managed the center, which attracted jazz musician Horace Tapscott and poet Quincy Troupe, among others.

In 1976 Purifoy was appointed by Governor Jerry Brown to the California Arts Council. “I was looking for a vehicle by which I could find ways to use art as a tool to change people,” Purifoy explained. “We designed programs that attempted to integrate the arts into the learning process.” Purifoy would devote 12 years of his life to the council, chairing the Art in Education subcommittee and developing programs

such as Artists in Schools, Artists in Communities, and Artists in Social Institutions, which brought art into the state prison system. As Purifoy recalled, “The results were phenomenal, particularly in prisons.”

Purifoy at the Brockman Gallery, 1971

In March 1971 Purifoy created a controversial environmental installation at the Brockman Gallery in the Leimert Park section of Los Angeles. Intended as an indictment of poverty and humanity, as it related to race in America in the 1960s, Purifoy constructed a tableau from refuse and urban junk and titled it *Niggers Ain't Gonna Never Be Nothing—All They Want to Do Is Drink and Fuck*. The work replicated a shotgun-style house occupied by a working-class African American family. Purifoy's dimly lit scene included live roaches, a fetid toilet, and piles of soiled clothes. Dirty dishes and remnants of a fried-chicken dinner lay strewn atop the dining table, and the refrigerator gave off an odor. Ten mannequins, representing family members, were sprawled on mattresses that dotted the floor. The mother and father figures were robotic; shrouded under blankets, they moved up and down as if copulating, while a baby slept beside them. At the exhibition's opening reception, Purifoy prepared black-eyed peas and corn bread and played a cassette of himself singing hymns. A *Los Angeles Times* review described the work as “Purifoy's most chilling work to date” and compared it to the environments of Ed Kienholz.