

Exhibition: *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*

On View: June 7–September 27, 2015

Location: BCAM



Image captions on page 4

(Los Angeles—February 3, 2015) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*, the first monographic exhibition dedicated to California-based artist Noah Purifoy since his passing in 2004.

Co-curated by Franklin Sirmans, Terri and Michael Smooke Department Head and Curator of Contemporary Art at LACMA, and Independent Curator Yael Lipschutz, *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada* examines the work of a seminal American artist who is still little known. Purifoy, a founding director of the Watts Towers Arts Center in Los Angeles, created an early body of sculpture constructed out of charred debris from the 1965 Watts rebellion. The resulting exhibition focusing on the riots, *66 Signs of Neon* (1966), traveled to nine venues between 1966 and 1969. In line with his fascination with the street and its objects, Purifoy's *66 Signs of Neon* evoked a Duchampian approach to the fire-ravaged alleys of post-riot Watts with a peculiarly American spirit of making use of the material at hand. This strategy profoundly impacted artists such as John Outterbridge, Maren Hassinger, David Hammons, and Senga Nengudi, then emerging in Los Angeles and beyond. Purifoy dedicated himself to the found object and to using art as a tool for social change in the 20 years that followed the rebellion, after which he relocated to California's Mojave Desert, where he spent his final 15 years creating large-scale installations.

“At the core of Purifoy’s lexicon is the desire to work with or find beauty in what has been discarded—to give new life to an object by changing its context, transforming it from junk to artwork,” says Sirmans.

Michael Govan, CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director of LACMA, states, “Purifoy’s assemblage resonates with early 20th-century European works in LACMA’s collection,

such as Kurt Schwitters's *Construction for Noble Ladies* and Marcel Duchamp's *With Hidden Noise*, but imbues the practice with a distinctly American narrative of struggle, destruction, and rebirth."

About the Exhibition

Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada is arranged in loose chronological order, with an emphasis placed on distinct stylistic periods of Purifoy's career. The artist's landmark exhibition *66 Signs of Neon* is represented through approximately one dozen assemblage works by Purifoy and other artists, including Judson Powell, Debby Brewer, and Arthur Secunda. To Purifoy, the term *assemblage* referred to three-dimensional works that might serve as standalone sculptures (not as elements of an installation), and *collage* described two-dimensional works. *Constructions* were understood to be larger assemblages involving major elements of juxtaposed parts. Purifoy occasionally used the word *combine* to define both two-dimensional collages and three-dimensional assemblages, echoing a term coined by Robert Rauschenberg. Having developed this lexicon he continued to employ these diverse ways of working through the remainder of his career.

LACMA's retrospective includes printed images from Purifoy's 1971 solo exhibition at the Brockman Gallery. The artist referred to the provocative large-scale gallery installation depicting a single-room apartment inhabited by 11 family members as "environmental art." Not long after this infamous exhibition, Purifoy withdrew from his art practice for over a decade, instead concentrating his energies on social work and as an arts advocate for the California Arts Council.

When Purifoy officially returned to art making in 1988, he began to incorporate discarded materials into his studio practice once again, prolifically adding 40 wall works to his oeuvre. In 1989, he relocated to Joshua Tree, where he spent the last 15 years of his life. There he took advantage of the desert's spaciousness, ultimately populating 10 acres of land with large-scale sculptures fabricated entirely from detritus. *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada* features eight large-scale assemblages rarely seen outside of the Noah Purifoy Foundation's Joshua Tree Outdoor Museum, including *From the Point of View of the Little People* (1994), *Ode to Frank Gehry* (1999), and *65 Aluminum Trays* (2002). Four of the large-scale works will be on display within the exhibition galleries, and four will be situated outdoors on LACMA's campus adjacent to the Resnick Pavilion and in the Los Angeles Times Central Court.

About the Artist

Born in 1917 in Snow Hill, Alabama, and raised in Birmingham, Purifoy grew up in the segregated South 50 years before the effects of civil rights were tangible. During World War II, he served in the South Pacific in the then-segregated military as part of the US Navy's Construction Battalion (Seabees). Following the war, Purifoy earned a master's degree in social work in 1949 from Atlanta University in Georgia. He later made his way west, enrolling in Los Angeles's preeminent art school, the Chouinard Art Institute, in 1951, where he became one of the first African American students. His exposure at Chouinard (renamed the California Institute of the Arts, or CalArts, in 1961) to movements like Dada and artists such as Marcel Duchamp, as well as his subsequent work as a designer of high-end modern furnishings in Los Angeles's flourishing mid-century furniture market, is evident in his body of work.

Purifoy went on to become an indelible part of the Watts community through his involvement with the Watts Towers Arts Center. There, among other things, he created art programs for underserved children. Relying on his social work training, he used art as a tool to inspire others. Though social work and artistic production were his life's loves, he never practiced both simultaneously.

Purifoy soon became an important figure associated with the assemblage movement in Los Angeles, a group of artists that includes Melvin Edwards, Ed Kienholz, Llyn Foulkes, David Hammons, George Herms, John Outterbridge, and Alison and Betye Saar. These artists treated the urban landscape and its byproducts—what others might call “junk”—as materials for art.

Eventually, Purifoy was drawn to relocate to the California desert by the quality of light and the potential for solitary creation. There he created his magnum opus, the Joshua Tree Outdoor Museum. Bringing assemblage into dialogue with Land Art, the site embodies the totality of Purifoy's vision, transporting his unique sensibility to the otherworldly landscape of the desert.

Catalogue

Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada is accompanied by a major catalogue with essays by Yael Lipschutz, Lowery Stokes Sims, and Kristine McKenna; Franklin Sirmans authored the preface. Additionally, the catalogue includes a Q&A with Purifoy excerpted from an earlier interview with C. Ian White; a chronology by Allison Glenn; and remembrances by Dale Brockman Davis, Judson Powell, Ed Ruscha, and Sue A. Welsh. The volume debuts a portfolio of new photography by Fredrik Nilsen. *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada* is available for \$39.95 at the LACMA Store [online](#) and at the museum.

Credit

This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and made possible by **The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts**, the National Endowment for the Arts, and LACMA's Director's Circle. Additional support is provided by Peter Morton, in memory of Gil Friesen; the Dedalus Foundation; and the Wallis Annenberg Director's Endowment Fund.



Image captions:

(Left) Noah Purifoy, *Earl Fatha Hines*, 1990, Sue A. Welsh Collection, © Noah Purifoy Foundation, photo courtesy Noah Purifoy Foundation, by Seamus O' Dubslaine

(Center) Noah Purifoy, *From the Point of View of the Little People*, 1994, Noah Purifoy Foundation, Joshua Tree, © Noah Purifoy Foundation, photo courtesy Noah Purifoy Foundation

(Right) Noah Purifoy, *Untitled*, 1967, John Outterbridge Collection, © Noah Purifoy Foundation, photo © Robert Wedemeyer

About LACMA

Since its inception in 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has been devoted to collecting works of art that span both history and geography, in addition to representing Los Angeles's uniquely diverse population. Today LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection that includes over 120,000 objects dating from antiquity to the present, encompassing the geographic world and nearly the entire history of art. Among the museum's strengths are its holdings of Asian art, Latin American art, ranging from pre-Columbian masterpieces to works by leading modern and contemporary artists; and Islamic art, of which LACMA hosts one of the most significant collections in the world. A museum of international stature as well as a vital part of Southern California, LACMA shares its vast collections through exhibitions, public programs, and research facilities that attract over a million visitors annually, in addition to serving millions through digital initiatives, such as online collections, scholarly catalogues, and interactive engagement at lacma.org. Situated in Hancock Park on over 20 acres in the heart of Los Angeles, LACMA is located between the ocean and downtown.

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