

William Christenberry: Land / Memory

The Sarah Moody Gallery of Art's hosting of this exhibition of works by Alabamian William Christenberry places a selection of his artwork into the geographical foundation of a native son. Growing up in Hale County, Alabama, and pursuing his education in studio art at the university in Tuscaloosa by itself is merely interesting, but William framed his artistic ambitions early on with his unique sense of place, which emerged in paintings such as *Moundville*, 1959. He lingered in the painting genre of Abstract Expressionism long enough to develop an attraction to a rich, thick painting medium and expressive, energetic mark making before moving towards a more constructionist (with found objects) strategy: paintings which reflected a response to the emergence of Pop Art in the mainstream of the art industry. Taking snapshots with an inexpensive Brownie camera was his means of examining local color which he used to inform his paintings. Who would have guessed that these studies in photography would propel Christenberry into the belly of the art world? These were after all source materials, studies that were to be translated into traditional art media.

Another artistic practice that Christenberry has maintained throughout his career is the medium of drawing. The spirit of drawing in his work reflects an active mind that is reaching back and recalling an Alabama past. However, his drawings engage with the rich vocabulary of line and form that has developed in art over many centuries. His skills as a draughtsman and attraction to self-expression combine to produce intriguing works executed in a variety of wet and dry mediums. Christenberry often uses beautifully prepared laid paper for his ink drawings, but he is just as likely to carry on drawing on business stationery or brown wrapping paper he might find around the house or studio. In an ongoing series of works he refers to as 'Trees,' William appears to enter these works at some sort of internal starting point that continues until the session with a single drawing is settled. As someone who loves to tell a good story he has learned the value of a relationship with something good and returns to this specific subject matter time and again. This is how one becomes masterful, wielding control, maintaining balance and finding a command of timing. The more elongated artistic process is found in William Christenberry's sculptural works. These pieces are very well planned and quite exacting in their composition. Many choices create a complex of procedures which are sometimes carried out over several years' time. In the studio William may return over and over to the relationship he has with the sculpture in progress, and can be found experimenting with the assembly process or his approach to finishing a form. In the end, his completed sculpture conveys a profoundly simplistic idea (several pieces included in this exhibition are reductive in detail and color). His reference to some of these sculptural works as 'Dream Buildings' affirms an engagement with his memory of such sites found either in Alabama, or within his imagination of Alabama. At this point William has such a rich vocabulary to work with that he perhaps no longer has to

rely on his ritualistic annual journey back to Alabama. His command of poetic recollection stands in for the capture of his idea for the next work. His patrons find his artwork accessible, in part, because William is undertaking a process that is somewhat familiar to all of us. While his experiences and imagery are uniquely his, the art work asks something of us that is familiar and basic to our own notions of place, an idea that is largely an internal concept with rudimentary external underpinnings. Over time our cultural amenities have acquired and adopted many means of expression that serve as transformative devices for us. William's work is employed in this manner by many. One need not have felt of living in the poverty of a Hale County sharecropper's shack to understand that it was and is a real part of our humanity in America. Perhaps we would prefer not to think about what it means that this sort of existence was tolerated. William Christenberry brings it to the foreground for both consideration and acknowledgement. His frequent use of the term 'monument' strengthens his intentions with his artwork. The wealth that comes with having nothing is a component of what William's work celebrates about the Regional South. His work stands in for the proverbial voice of a region that has suffered from social inequity, poverty, racism, and barbarism, which scores of authors, musicians, artists, architects, chefs, and scholars have found in war torn countries across the globe. Many who live in the South love to drive through its landscape to get a ringside seat along the roadside that is a lot like a plowed field row where one can look and look again for the artifacts of a past civilization. It is horrible looking in many places but it may be worse to just look away. William Christenberry does not look away. His art work brings a southern-based subject matter to us and it is impregnated with both natural and unnatural beauty which lives in the rhythm of things, and the dance that plays back and forth like a pendulum between one's land and one's memory.

-W.T. Dooley

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