THE STATIONS OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN PASSION

Charles Russell looks at Joe Minter's extraordinary constructed environment, African Village in America
African Village in America, a dense quarter-acre constructed art environment in Birmingham, Ala., is comprised of dozens of rough-hewn sculptures and installations commemorating 400 years of African American history. Created over the past 20 years by Joe Minter, a self-taught African American artist, the site is an intensely personal artistic statement and expresses an epic historic and cultural vision.

The site is designed to testify to the endurance of Africans through the centuries of slavery and racism in America and is imbued with political and religious challenges to the viewer. The environment represents a spatialisation of history, for by confronting successively its individual works one is led through a record of pain and struggle. At the back of the site, overlooking the cemetery lying behind Minter's yard, is a group of figures at the base of a large tree stump symbolising an ancestral African village – the 'motherland and culture taken away.' Out from this clustering, we are led to a work that invokes a slave ship and the horrors of the Middle Passage, which in turn brings us to the main section of the yard, the dense interweavings of constructions that bear witness to the history of lynching, slave and peonage labour, and the generations of black soldiers who fought and died for the country. Other pieces commemorate key moments in the civil rights movement such as the Montgomery bus boycott, Dr Martin Luther King Jr's incarceration in Birmingham Jail and the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Church in Birmingham. Each work acts as a station of reflection and remembrance of a people's passion, sacrifice and deliverance. The timeline of historical testimony extends into the present as the artist continues to address the moral and political crises of our days – whether the wars in Iraq, 9/11, the Indian Ocean tsunami or Hurricane Katrina. Throughout the site, painted signs identify and comment on what is being commemorated and challenge the viewers to affirm the nation's foundational political ideals and the Christian values of mercy, forgiveness and humility before God.

African Village in America is the creation of Joe Wade Minter, Sr, born in Birmingham in 1943. Raised under the South's Jim Crow laws, Minter vividly remembers the civil rights struggle in his city. Having graduated from high school and spent 2 years in the army (1965–1967), Minter laboured for the next 28 years in jobs including metalwork, painting, construction and road work before retiring in 1995. Although he knew that the civil rights movement had given blacks the means to fight back against oppression, he felt deeply that the white man had not changed at all. On the advice of a fellow 'African brother,' who he sensed was sent by God, Minter set out in 1979 to write his personal meditations on the '400 year journey of African-American people in America,' but soon lay his pen down. (26 years later, he would complete this work by self-publishing To You Through Me: The Beginning of a Link of a Journey of 400 Years.) But he continued to reflect on the situation of African Americans in America and in the 1980s, when the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute was established, Minter grew concerned that a significant part of the story of the black experience would never be told. He believed that the contributions of ordinary citizens who battled for human rights – who he called the 'foot soldiers' – would be disregarded in favour of the nationally known figures. Asking God for a vision, he received a mission to tell 'the story of the African people lost here in America.' (1)

In 1989, Minter began to construct African Village in America from his expansive vision. He started by carving the three trees that would become the core of his ancestral African Village. The largest tree represented a tribal griot who preserves the wisdom of the past elders.
'USE THAT WHICH HAS BEEN DISCARDED, JUST AS WE AS A PEOPLE HAVE BEEN DISCARDED'

References
1. Toll, Through Me: The Beginning of a Link of a Journey of 400 Years. Joe Minter, self-published, n.d., 84 pp. Available for $7.75 plus $2.00 postage from Joe Minter, 531 Nassau Avenue, SW, Birmingham, AL 35211, USA.
3. 'Joe Minter in Art.' p. 594.

below
Different views of the African American Village photos: Charles Russett
opposite
key photo: Ted Degener

(suggested by the cemetery behind them) for people who live today, whose connection to the 'motherland' and the culture of the past have been severed by slavery and its legacy. It is telling that he commenced with an artist figure, for Minter clearly conceives of himself as a contemporary griot whose mission is to 'bring back' an awareness of what has been taken away.

His lessons are told primarily through sculpture, although written texts are placed throughout the site. While he originally worked in wood, Minter soon became concerned about the durability of the work and switched to metal-work constructions where he was able to draw upon his skills as a worker with metal, stone and paint. He found his signature method by constructing his sculptures from cast-off objects, reclaims metal, and inexpensive materials and objects acquired from outlet stores. At times, his work can be quite visually literal, such as when he constructed a wood structure that suggests a bridge and placed a manikin with a raincoat and a helmet labeled 'Alabama State Trooper' crouched over supine dolls of black babies, to memorialise the 1965 confrontation in Selma. More frequently, however, he allows visual clues and paintings words to invoke the specific moment or condition. Minter draws upon the wide-spread African American self-taught aesthetic strategy of recycling found objects to create artworks that enact their transformative vision. 'The whole idea handed down to me by God is to use that which has been discarded, just as we as a people have been discarded, made invisible. That what is invisible, thrown away, could be made into something so it demonstrates that even what gets thrown away, with a spirit in it can survive and grow. A spirit of all the people that has touched and felt that material has stayed in it.'

Primary among Minter's materials are old rusty tools and chains. The tools are embedded in anthropomorphic figures, calling forth memories of their original users, and are combined in powerful abstract constructions as testimonials to slave labour. Minter argues that because Africans were brought here to work, if these tools were allowed to rust and return to the earth the past would be lost and the lives of all who had touched those tools could no longer inform the present. Indeed, the work of art both commemorates the past and transforms it so that the past, as well as the present, may be redeemed. Similarly, the chains that Minter uses throughout his works are both the brutal reminder of slavery and the metaphorical links that connect the past, the griot and the contemporary viewer in an act of reclamation and healing.

As Minter obeyed his divinely inspired mission and followed his historical vision, the number of works in his yard steadily grew, leading him to purchase more land, then to purchase an abandoned house across the street that he filled with interior installations. With each year, African Village in America becomes more dense, more intense.

The intensity of his elaborated yard recalls the work of other African American artists, such as Lonnie Holley, Reverend George Komegay and Dr. Fred Smith, who filled their immediate environments with artworks that bear witness to the history and condition of their people in America society. Their works are manifestations of the African American cultural tradition of the yard show. Within the great global variety of constructed environments, three characteristics are fundamental: they are manifestations of the formidable sense of self displayed by many vernacular and outsider artists; they are expressions of a primal interaction between the individual and the physical surround that the artist seeks to shape; and they reveal the dynamics of that individual's relationship with the immediate social community. As such they articulate the psychological, spiritual and communal or political dimensions of experience through aesthetic action, though they clearly bear more than solely aesthetic significance. Art, for creators such as Joe Minter, has an existential function: 'Art is the one way man can have a common thread that would connect the hearts of all people. Art is for universal understanding.'

As a Southern black, Joe Minter draws from African American yard shows to ground his vision of personal being and universal connection. Although Minter's environment is far more elaborate than many, it embodies the broadly recurring behavioural patterns that the scholar Grey Gundaker has observed in yard displays both large and small. She notes, in particular, four themes of creative intention in the yard show: establishing a circumscribed space of protection, healing, and safekeeping; displaying the artist's creative virtuosity; didactically addressing or communicating with the creator's local and broader community; and memorialising and honouring family and ancestors. (4) African Village in America is definitely such a place of personal and collective healing created through one man's sustained effort to reforge the links to four centuries of ancestral struggle to bring peace and spiritual enlightenment to all peoples in America.