

## **Noah Purifoy by Abby Wasserman**

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The first two things Noah Purifoy did after moving to the desert 10 years ago were to plant a cactus garden near his front stoop and build an adobe wall for his workshop. Then the long-time Angeleno cast around the great expanse of brown open space for his art material of choice-junk.

But the town of Joshua Tree, Purifoy found, is a serious recycling community. No plastic, aluminum or glass clutter streets or backyards, and the local dump is slim pickings, having its local recyclers and scavengers who guard it as their turf. The paucity of materials was an unpleasant reality-he had to buy all new materials, which meant living from paycheck to paycheck. The monotonous brown stretching for miles oppressed him; the silence was eerie after the city's noise; he missed the architecture of Los Angeles, especially the skyscrapers; the ceaseless wind knocked down his sculptures; and, though he's not a colorist, he yearned for green. He had visited Joshua Tree many times in previous years, but moving there caused a kind of root-shock.

Months passed, and slowly he became acclimatized to his new home. The depression lifted. Now he thrives in the quiet and the open space of the desert, and he has achieved the productivity he yearned for, the space and quiet to concentrate on his art that he sought.

The retrospective exhibition Noah Purifoy: Outside and in the Open, was organized by the California Afro-American Museum in Los Angeles and has been on the road since January 25, 1997; the Oakland Museum of California is its final stop. The curator, Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins, writes that the title was inspired by Purifoy's statement about his creative process, "Whatever comes up, comes out."

"Inside out," she writes, "also refers to the sense you get. . . that the artist has peeled back the skin of a piece to reveal its interior life. In the more open works, through which you can see the landscape, you feel as though he has broken down the artificial barriers that in cities literally separate the indoors from what is outside. Instead he creates structures that seem to breathe the pure high desert air."

Eventually, his depression went away. He now sees in his brown surroundings "just brown" and there's junk to spare. After a reporter wrote a feature about him for the local paper, "people started to bring stuff faster than I could catalog it," he says. He buys a few things, still-paint and cement, staples, brushes, - the occasional treated post-things he can't get any other way.

In the sixties, an era friendly to the radical imagination, Noah Purifoy made huge changes in his life, including the conscious choice not to use draw and not to use new materials. Used and discarded objects with histories, surfaces eroded or attacked by time and circumstance, appealed to him. Junk is plentiful, cheap and evocative, and the used object gathers resonance as it passes from owner to owner. It was a political statement, of course. Now, he is aware the irony of choosing to work with salvaged materials while those who are poor use throwaways from necessity.

Noah Purifoy's place is five minutes from town. Each road goes a certain distance, then turns into dirt and trails off, disappearing into the desert. His place, on such a road, announces itself by the sculpture that rises like Joshua trees from the desert. Long brown hills bump along the horizon. The weird forms of Joshua trees, looking like T'ai Chi practitioners (the Mormons, passing through, claimed they looked like Joshua praying), grow no other place on earth. It's early May, and they're blooming now, as are

## **Noah Purifoy by Abby Wasserman**

yucca and cactus plants. Winter rains have caused a high-desert flowering, a carpet (with lots of bare patches; it's not the flowering of the century) of low-lying yellow, red, purple and white blooms.

Noah Purifoy walks down his driveway to greet me, with a strong and calloused handshake. He sizes me up and says, "Call me Noah." As we sit sipping cold water in his double-wide mobile home, he wants to know what I am interested in, which is to spend a couple of days with him, talking and observing. He nods, reflects, and suggests a tour around the sculpture garden and then lunch at the Country Kitchen. He likes to work alone-it's a matter of concentration; so it's unlikely I'll be able to observe him working, but I can ask him anything I want to know. He's self-contained but friendly, with the courtesy and soft accent of a southern gentleman, which he is; he was raised in Alabama. It seems he's stripped away the extraneous from his personality, and there's little wasted motion.

As we walk purposefully around the garden, Purifoy's ideas jump out to greet us. There are dozens of sculptures in the garden lying on the ground, suspended, free-standing. Many are anchored by guy wires or set in concrete to counter the wind. The array of materials is astounding: glass bricks, Astroturf, cardboard, newspapers, chicken wire, sticks, old windows, burned wood, adobe, aluminum, bowling balls, clothing, foam rubber, iron, shoes, tribute plaques, bicycle parts, tires-he seems comfortable with everything. Oddments combine with oddments, old with new, and each time I look in a new direction there is a changing kaleidoscope of forms.

At 80, Purifoy is a teacher and philosopher. He has three college degrees--two in social work, one in art from Chouinard Art Institute, and from the beginning, his artwork has always connected with community. He believes creativity is a gift everyone has; art is a process of problem-solving, of finding new solutions for old problems, and in that way art is at the heart of education, he feels. He also believes the journey to being an artist is won only through hard work, and perhaps one never becomes entirely worthy of the name.

He works on three or four sculptures at a time, small assemblages and large installations, inside and outside. "I get bored easily," he says. He is in good health and strong, doing work that would daunt many a younger man-lifting and pouring buckets of cement, hoisting heavy posts, working on ladders-but the new ideas flow quickly, and each new one must be given form.

He's also making up for the 20 years of time lost to his own art when he worked fostering creativity in others as a teacher and member of the California Arts Council. The word "lost" isn't quite right. It's true he wasn't doing his own art during those years, and likely he would be better known now if he hadn't dropped out. At the same time, those years were a time to fill up with ideas and re-acquire the passion that characterized him as a younger artist to find new ways to give them form. Purifoy explains his decision to step off the track: "People often commissioned work, then they wanted to participate in the making of a piece. It became so serious that the only way was to drop out," he says. More likely, the artist and the social worker in him collided for awhile, and he chose to let the social worker and educator have primacy.

The wind is light, but we're immersed in sound, a persistent flapping like clothes on a line, high and low-frequency clinks and thuds, like wind chimes of glass, tin, wood and rubber, coming from moving parts all around the yard. Some sculptures lay so parched on the desert floor, parts bleaching and being dislodged by wind and animals, that one wants to offer them shade and lemonade. Others are right at home outside: Two Similar Belief Systems Face To Face-three tall crosses facing off three spindly voodoo fetishes,

## **Noah Purifoy by Abby Wasserman**

for example, or Igloo, a shelter of twigs and sections of white siding, or Indian Burial Ground, which shows, like dissimilar mirror images, the traditional versus modern burial customs—one above ground, the other below.

The sculptures form their own open-air community. The desert has adopted them. Birds build their nests in them and jack rabbits make them home. Erected in open space, they are open to the elements of wind, sun, and rain and they are wide-open to interpretation; they reveal the craft of their construction as the materials display their previous lives as usable objects. They suggest the inner space of Purifoy's intellect, which creates structures of intricate revelation and concealment.

Cathedral seems to personify this contradiction, as it has no door. Purifoy's keen interest in architecture is apparent in this beautiful small structure with a creased roof of weathered wood. So, in another way, does The White House, which is as big as a cabin and open to the sky. All but one of the glass windows that line one wall are closed off with boards or stuffed with clothing, and the one window offering a view to the interior/exterior is "x'ed" with tape.

In contrast, Mondrian is a drawing in space of aluminum door-frame parts. The joke to the piece is that lot of the lines are crooked. "I wanted to kick the Mondrian habit," Purifoy says. The wind has brought down Mondrian five times, and each time he reconstructs it differently. Other sculptures fall, and he leaves them be. "I do my best to make it stable, but if it falls apart"—he smiles—"I'm sorry."

Because he has so much space in which to work, many of the newest pieces are environmental in scale. We walk through a one called Shelter. "It looks like a homeless shelter," I remark as we walk through it. "It's more like a blind pig," he replies, explaining that a "blind pig" is a basement casino "where people hang out and drink." We emerge into the sun, and he adds quietly, "It's a common experience for black people to be homeless. My family of 11 lived in two rooms, and we moved many times. So this is a replica of what I've seen and lived with."

Collage, a 30 x 60 prone collage of clothes bleaching in the sun, looks like it would be particularly interesting from the air, and indeed, helicopters of tourists sometimes circle overhead. Clothes provide the only color in many of the sculptures; following Duchamp's principle of "ready-mades," Purifoy doesn't try to manipulate color, but lets it be itself. When he was painting, in Los Angeles, he painted mostly in black. "I prefer the natural appearance of things, so I accept whatever color I get," he says. "I'm interested in observing how nature participates in the creative process. I do what I can to preserve the material; whatever else happens is not my concern. I observe the changes as the year goes by." We walk on, and he adds, "Changes are an integral part of life itself. You have some rather unexpected events and have to make an adjustment to it."

We enter Carousel, which resembles its namesake and, uncharacteristically, brightly painted. A mourning dove is nesting in the eaves; she is utterly still, as though this will keep us from seeing her. "I made this for a seven-year-old who is one of my favorite artists in the community," Purifoy says of Carousel, referring to the color. Fawn, the child, is the granddaughter of artist Debby Brewer, Purifoy's good friend for 30 years, who owns this land and lives next door. Brewer was involved in 66 Signs of Neon, a collaborative project organized by Purifoy and Judson Powell after the Watts riots of 1965. Purifoy and Powell watched the riots from the Watts Tower Art Center (which Purifoy founded and where both men taught). Afterwards they went out into the streets, picking up pieces of still-smoldering rubble. They gathered friends, African-American and white, and in a month 66 Signs of Neon was complete, possibly the first art of its kind—an ode, a dirge and a phoenix rising. "We wanted to tell people that if something goes up in flames it doesn't mean its life is over," Purifoy says.

## **Noah Purifoy by Abby Wasserman**

66 Signs of Neon traveled to nine California state universities and abroad. In California it was displayed in student unions, not art galleries, Purifoy says, for the first time an edge coming into his voice. "It was before its time," he says philosophically, but I hear the bitterness in his voice. In those days, and for a long time afterward, assemblage and black political art were not regarded as "true" art and were marginalized. It didn't prevent viewers from responding to the work with raw emotion, however. At each stop, Purifoy and Powell asked viewers to write down their comments:

"Scrap metal salad. Shredded newspapers. 400 frenzied orangutans hurling paint cans. Demented junkman's paradise."

"You people, citizens of Watts, Los Angeles, USA did it--saw art in a calamity or made it so. You found good where only destruction and oppression prevailed and prevail still...The highest form of the artistic spirit is here in abundance."

"Sure they may be interesting to look at but who the hell can honestly say it took talent or a unique insight into life to pick up something of [sic] the ground paste onto something else and tell you you don't understand art & its deepest meaning if you don't like it. . . ."

"Mr. Purifoy's #30 is for me the most expressive item here; birth, life, and death--people treated as no more valuable than empty bottles, kicked out of the way, smashed for the fun of it, utterly ignored--with no feelings of remorse--as long as they are out of sight..."

Following years of attempts to find a permanent home for 66 Signs of Neon, Purifoy finally consigned it to the trashman, and so it returned to its origins as junk. It lives in after-images, imagination, photographs, reviews and comments; and in one re-created piece that is traveling in Outside and in the Open: the sculpture Sir Watts II. "We wish to establish that there must be more to art than the creative act," Purifoy wrote in the catalogue for Neon, "more than the sensation of beauty, ugliness, color, form, light, sound, darkness, intrigue, wonderment, uncanniness, bitter, sweet, black, white, life and death. There must be therein a ME and a YOU, who is affected permanently. Art of itself is of little or no value if in its relatedness it does not effect change. We do not mean change in the physical appearance of things, but a change in the behavior of human beings." Later, I'm surprised and pleased when Purifoy changes his mind and allows me to assist in the workshop, where I pry out staples from a work in progress, and hold posts steady as he pours cement. I feel absurdly useful. He says that he's considering hiring someone to help with the heavy work. In Los Angeles he might easily enlist an art student, but in Joshua Tree it's more difficult. He adds soil to the post hole and pats it firm with the back of a hoe. The cement oozes up like hot lava.

"I've come a long way because I believed in my own ideas," he says the next day. "To have my own idea was a triumph but I arrived not knowing what it was. Before, all I was was somebody else. One day, when I was 40, I realized I didn't know who I was." He describes some of the long process of becoming authentic, finding his true self, which he set about doing with absolute determination. "When I revised my life story, I turned over every goddamned stone that I could find," he laughs. "Every experience was valuable. Back then, I knew the truth, but it was not applicable to me. People have to be provoked into telling you you have made a mistake. At a confrontation, you provoke someone to tell you the truth about yourself. That was my charge. I tried my friends sorely."

"Now I am a person I like. I don't make an effort to have others like me; if they don't like me, I'm sorry." He stops, backtracks: "I am sorry. I never expect to become the person I'd like to be, but I'm close as I can be. The next stop is non-being-and I'm not ready to face that."

The Country Kitchen on 29 Palms Highway is a funky place, shabby but homey, with found-object decor, a handful of tables and tiny a counter, where they serve breakfast all

## **Noah Purifoy by Abby Wasserman**

day. Purifoy's a regular there. We tuck away quantities of pancakes, sausage, eggs and coffee as the sun streams in the windows. He reflects further on art as a problem-solving device. "On television we see a problem solved in an hour and a half in front of our face," he says. "Writers reach into their bag of tricks to find a new way to solve a problem we're all familiar with. The writer gets his pay by coming up with a new way of solving it. Each time we see it solved we get a charge out of it. Purists say it contaminates art to say it's something anyone can do, but we do it without even thinking about it. We use it every day."

I suppose that one of the beauties of assemblage-the putting together of found objects-is that anyone can do it. Because art is a process of problem solving, material is almost incidental. Why gnash one's teeth over materials when-as art and architecture critic Benjamin Forgey told me years ago-the irreducible minimum is the idea?

That night I take a little book containing three of Noah's poems and the comment sheets from 66 Signs of Neon to the motel in Twenty-nine Palms. "Poetry is pouring out your insides," he says. The poem Seeing (1967) suggests why his work has influenced younger artists, including John Outerbridge and Betye Saar, for it reads like a credo for the socially-conscious artist Purifoy is, as well as a rationale for assemblage:

As always a new way of seeing things But what and how?

There were no lakes or ponds No oceans or streams with seagulls soaring. No beach sand or sailboats Or bright buildings or broad streets.

But there was junk-piles of junk All bundled up and neatly packaged; Scattered out down the railroad track Glowing brightly in the absence of sunlight And thus not glowing brightly. Neat bright bundles pressed hard, piled high; Beer can, shattered glass, bottle tops flat-out, Foreign object lying there without relationship To self or any other, aged forms, Banked up inactivity. Meaningless existence?

If I could see it differently For what it is or is not Still flat out and piled up In another way yet the same way I'd offer it up. Then Free I'd be from guilt for letting it pile up And scatter out, and separate itself .....from itself.

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