

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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VMFA to Exhibit *Cosmologies from the Tree of Life: Art from the African American South*
Exhibition Presents 34 Recent Acquisitions by Artists Such as Thornton Dial and the Gee’s Bend Quilt Makers



"Housetop" - fractured medallion variation, 1977, Rita Mae Pettway (American, born 1941), corduroy. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund and partial gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2018.73

Richmond, Virginia—The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts will debut recent acquisitions from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation in the upcoming exhibition *Cosmologies from the Tree of Life: Art from the African American South*, on view in the Evans Court Exhibition Galleries June 8–Nov. 17, 2019. The acquisitions from the Atlanta-based foundation are part of a gift-purchase program designed to strengthen the representation of artists from the African American South in leading art museums across the country. Adding to its significance, the exhibition coincides with American Evolution’s 2019 Commemoration, which recognizes the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved African people to Virginia, and celebrates the contributions that African American artists have made to art and culture since that time. The free exhibition is curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver, VMFA’s Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

“With this acquisition, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts joins the ranks of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and other institutions who have significantly increased their holdings of African American art through the Souls Grown Deep Foundation,” says Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Director Alex Nyerges. “We are proud to share these incredible works to help provide a more complete narrative regarding the history of contemporary American art.”

Featuring sculpture, painting, works on paper and quilts, among other media, the visually compelling works in the exhibition address some of the most profound and persistent issues in American society. Artists such as Jessie Aaron, Louisiana Bendolph, Thornton Dial, Lonnie B. Holley, Ronald Lockett, Rita Mae Pettway, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, James “Son” Thomas, Mose Tolliver and Purvis Young tell a powerful visual story that dissects issues of race, class, gender and religion in the American South. Some of the best-known works in the exhibition come from the famed multigenerational group of quilt-making women in Gee’s Bend, Alabama, who have long produced distinctive quilts made from recycled clothing, feed and flour sacks, as well as fabric remnants.

“We are so pleased that these artworks have found a new home in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts,” says Dr. Maxwell L. Anderson, president of Souls Grown Deep Foundation. He continues: “By their acquisition and this exhibition, the VMFA’s director and its curator of modern and contemporary are contributing significantly to a broadened understanding of the history of American art.”



Mountains and Pack-a-Mules Trees, and a French Bird and a Peko Bird, ca. 1980, Mose Tolliver (American, ca. 1921-2006), house paint on found poster print with wood frame. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund and partial gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2018.78



Foundation of the World (A Dream of My Mother), 1994, Thornton Dial (American, 1928-2016), Welded steel rods, tin, rope, carpet, rope fiber wood, burlap, enamel, spray paint, industrial sealing compound. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund and partial gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2018.58

The aesthetic and cultural origins of these artworks can be traced back to the era of enslavement of Africans in America through the Jim Crow period. Given the restrictions on both physical freedom and artistic expression, these works of art serve to celebrate not only the persistence, but also the resilience of these African American artists. This exhibition encourages visitors to consider the historical roots of these important works and their contributions not only to African American art history, but also to the larger canon of art in the wake of cultural and social marginalization that their makers endured.

Two works from the acquisition, Jennie Pettway's *Housetop* quilt and Thornton Dial's *Birds Don't Care Whose Head They Crap On*, will be on view in VMFA's Lewis Mid to Late 20th-Century Galleries and the 21st-Century Gallery respectively, to further demonstrate the museum's dedication to reframing these artists as significant contributors to the canon of American Modernism and Contemporary art.

"Represented within this exhibition are twenty-one of the most extraordinary African American artists of our time," says Cassel Oliver. "Their collective body of work, as reflected in the 34 objects featured in the exhibition, underscores their significant contributions to the art-historical cannon. Designated as 'folk,' 'outsider,' 'visionary' and 'self-taught' artists, they are now being absorbed within a more central narrative of art history."

On June 6, Cassel Oliver will share highlights from *Cosmologies from the Tree of Life* in a public lecture in VMFA's Leslie Cheek Theater. Her meditations on the works in the exhibition, particularly the quilts of Gee's Bend, can also be found in the 108-page accompanying catalogue, which can be ordered online (vmfa.museum/shop/) or by contacting the VMFA shop at 804.340.1525. Additional information on upcoming programming can be found at vmfa.museum/exhibitions/cosmologies/.

Sponsorship Information

Organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, *Cosmologies from the Tree of Life* is a Legacy Project of American Evolution. The 2019 Commemoration, American Evolution highlights events that occurred in Virginia in 1619 that continue to influence America today. Featured programs, events and legacy projects will position Virginia as a leader in education, tourism and economic development. American Evolution commemorates the ongoing journey toward the ideals of democracy, diversity and opportunity. Dominion Energy is an American Evolution Founding Partner and Altria Group and TowneBank are Virginia Colony Partners. Additional support for the exhibition is provided by the Council Exhibition Fund and the Fabergé Ball Endowment.

About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass nearly 40,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris, and one of the nation's finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting, and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan, and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened its doors to the public after a transformative expansion, the largest in its history.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804.340.1400 or visit www.VMFA.museum.

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