

LOST AND FOUND

A Pilgrimage to the Desert Shrine of Noah Purifoy

AS TOLD TO LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER OCT. 26, 2016



"These massive rock formations off the Twentynine Palms Highway startled me. My visual field and understanding were challenged. It was a new way of seeing." Credit LaToya Ruby Frazier for The New York Times

A

few years ago, I saw something by the assemblage artist Noah Purifoy that startled me. One of the “Watts Uprising” pieces at P.S. 1 in Queens, made of debris found after the Watts riots, was so similar to the way my friend, the installation artist Abigail DeVille, works. She and Purifoy both collect discarded materials. In Abigail’s case, it’s to show how people are positioned in society; for Purifoy it was social commentary.

They both have this sense of responsibility and duty embedded in their work. Objects that had no meaning, this junk, all of a sudden said something about the American experience. Abigail’s installation “Dark Day,” at the New Museum, was made out of furniture collected from Dumpsters outside her grandmother’s projects in the Bronx: The furniture was suspended upside down from the ceiling. When I saw Purifoy, I immediately saw Abigail.

Purifoy was born in 1917 in Alabama. He fought in World War II, came back and soon fled to Los Angeles. It struck me deeply, his sense of displacement. After the Watts riots of the mid-1960s, he collected burned materials that ended up in his art. Purifoy had a creative solution to dealing with injustice. Instead of evaporating or being silent, he took these things — pieces of wreckage — and turned them into works of art, a meditation on one’s life, one’s work, one’s history. This is the most powerful act.

Abigail and I wanted to make a pilgrimage and pay homage to someone who is clearly an ancestor and a predecessor for each of us. We wanted to witness our history in Purifoy’s work in the Joshua Tree Outdoor Museum. I couldn’t believe how incredibly hot it was in the Mojave — I was hoping I wouldn’t faint. It felt as if I were going through this spiritual cleansing and detox. This has been a rough few years in thinking about racial equality.

Even though he died in 2004, Purifoy is still teaching us in these 10 acres of a hundred or so sculptures in Joshua Tree. He moved there when he was priced out of Los Angeles, in a way that is so similar to gentrification today. The art world didn’t really allow him to exist, though he was offered a space in the Mojave to live and to create. It really hit me when I saw “[Aurora Borealis](#),” a large-scale sculpture of wood, chairs and other found objects. I could understand Purifoy as a person and how he moved through life. I remember quietly looking at Abigail look at that piece, and she saw a part of her reflecting back. It was a moment that almost brought me to tears, to realize we did have an ally and a predecessor. *AS TOLD TO JAIME*

LOWE



Pat Brunty, caretaker of the Joshua Tree Outdoor Museum, which maintains the Noah Purifoy Foundation, behind one of Purifoy's artworks. Credit LaToya Ruby Frazier for The New York Times



"When I look at that wood and the boots and that gesture, I think about work, labor and being a caretaker." Credit LaToya Ruby Frazier for The New York Times



Abigail DeVille, photographed through a motel window, with reflections of the photographer and the landscape behind her. "I'm on the outside, Abigail's on the inside, we're facing each other with the landscape behind me. I was thinking about Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe." Credit LaToya Ruby Frazier for The New York Times



DeVille, beneath a poncho, holds a diamond-shaped sculpture she made from cardboard and mirrors. "The diamond configuration honors the ancestors whose brilliant lives continue to shine in present memory. Abigail and I first saw Purifoy's work at MoMA P.S. 1 when it was included in the 2012 group exhibition 'Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980,' curated by Dr. Kellie Jones. Purifoy has often been overlooked by critics, curators and historians. Because of this show, we were finally able to recognize Purifoy as an influential predecessor." Credit LaToya Ruby Frazier for The New York Times



"It looks like some kind of action like an offering might occur here. Tires are symbolic of the rising and setting of the sun and continual progression of change." Credit LaToya Ruby Frazier for The New York Times



“It’s election season, and you see this and you know what he’s talking about. On the other side there are red, white and blue toilet seats. I think he’s being very direct about the United States and democracy and voting.”Credit LaToya Ruby Frazier for The New York Times



"It feels like a freeing moment to be so playful." Credit LaToya Ruby Frazier for The New York Times



“Abigail is so embedded, a viewer might not even notice she’s there. She looks like something Noah originally created.”Credit LaToya Ruby Frazier for The New York Times



"This immediately makes me think about protests and activists crossing bridges. I'm thinking about Birmingham, Selma." Credit LaToya Ruby Frazier for The New York Times

LaToya Ruby Frazier is a photographer who creates work about industrialism, Rust Belt revitalization and environmental justice.