

## Thornton Dial



Born: 1928, Emelle, AL

Died: January 25, 2016, McCalla, AL

Thornton Dial was born in 1928 in Emelle, Alabama. One of 12 children, he grew up impoverished during segregation without his father present. From a young age, he and his siblings created toys from discarded objects. At the age of 10, he moved to Bessemer, Alabama with his half-brother to live with a relative. He in 1951 married, and he and his wife have five children.

Dial worked at the Pullman Company for 30 years, which manufactured railroad cars until the company closed in the 1980s. He operated the punch and shear machines, learning to bend and shape iron—a skill he later applied to making art. During this time, he worked odd jobs and made art out of scrap metal and other discarded materials. He created so many pieces that he often buried them to make room, thinking others would laugh at his work. After his retirement in 1984, he and some of his sons began working in wrought iron to create furniture. Neighboring self-taught artist Lonnie Holley introduced him to William Arnett, a collector of African-American art, who urged Dial to become a full time artist and provided him with art world connections and financial support.

Dial worked in a variety of media including large-scale sculptures, painting, and assemblage, yet his pieces are easily recognizable. His catalogue includes small works on paper as well as large welded sculptures. Portraiture, animal figuration, and abstraction offer recurring themes. A tiger motif frequently appears in his work, a symbol of black struggle. Dial's work reflects his life experiences, often within historical context, ranging from the implications of race relations in America to romance. Despite lacking a basic education and formal training, Dial has risen to prominence and museums across the country hold his works in their collections



Thornton Dial, *Struggling Tiger in Hard Times*,