

Hawkins Bolden: *Seated* MARCH 2022

By Daniel Fuller



Installation view: *Hawkins Bolden: Seated*, Institute 193, Lexington, KY, 2022. Courtesy Institute 193.

On View

Institute 193

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Out in the cornfields, scarecrows provide a critical and solitary purpose. Their only job is to stand a lonely watch over the sugar from young corn, the desire of crows, doves, blackbirds, sparrows, and turkeys. Placed in fields in the spring and then burned after the autumn harvest, their ashes regenerate the topsoil with essential nutrients. The abstract assemblages are modeled on a human from the waist up, with arms outstretched horizontally. There has always been the implication of crucifixion, death, and resurrection. But what are we to make of Hawkins Bolden's assemblages of scarecrows in reverse stuffed with just their lower limbs hanging limply, lifeless on the wall?

Bolden was born September 10, 1914, in Memphis. At the age of seven, he was badly injured while playing baseball. As a result, he began to suffer from frequent seizures. One day, he collapsed to the ground, unable to stop staring at the sun. Everything went dark. He lost his sight at the age of eight. Despite this obstacle, he became a proficient handyperson, frequently repurposing discarded objects he would accumulate from the streets and alleys around the neighborhood. It reached a point where garbage men would collect and deliver useful materials to him. His assemblages took many different forms, crafting a representational figure from wooden posts as the skeletal system for a pair of legs. Those legs were covered by well-worn workwear from Bolden's own dresser; tattered Wrangler jeans, overalls, painter's pants, all stuffed bulbous with raw leaves, straw, and grass tied at the waist and feet with wire coat hangers. By 1965, a niece suggested these figures would help protect his tomatoes, greens, and peppers growing in his small backyard garden.



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There has always been a weight to living in Memphis. It is a genteel, industrial city; white residents are sure of themselves as progressive people. While southern cities like Atlanta, Birmingham, Montgomery, and Tampa were torn apart by the struggle for Civil Rights, Memphis escaped large-scale riots despite the 1968 Sanitation Strike and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Throughout the 1950s and '60s, the city was split in two, Black Memphis and white Memphis. As a result of Jim Crow laws, the vast majority of the city's Black males were low-paid laborers and service workers. Decades of exploitation and indignity made it easy for the pro-segregationist police commissioner to make sure there were few opportunities to rise up.

As you step into the exhibition in Lexington, there is a line of six scarecrow figures hanging on the gallery wall. The scene is tender and violent at the same time. There is a presence in the absence of the torso. Viewers feel compelled to find truth in the void, to complete the circle. It's bleak. Though nameless and faceless, they are not fictional men from far away imaginary places. Instead, they are the physical embodiment of emotions, traumas, loss. Here they hang from the wall like they once hung from trees. It's the ultimate desecration of the victims to leave them on display. Except for Goya's *The Disasters of War* or the National Lynching Memorial, I barely have the visual vocabulary for the sort of hate this represents. Stripped of all courtesy, Bolden captured something quintessential about America. This is not how we want to see ourselves as a nation.



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Whether Bolden's scarecrows "speak" to us or not, hanging them at eye level feels appropriately aggressive. Despite being together, there is loneliness to them all. Free will was stolen from these totems long before they had an opportunity to come alive.

These sculptures originally lived along the fence in Bolden's yard in one of the two tiny neighboring houses he shared for nearly seventy-five years with his sister, Elizabeth. Over that time, downtown Memphis encroached from all directions, ignoring previous racial divides. Bolden, and many others, had no faith in the powers of progress. I've often wondered if these guardians were less about scaring off crows and more a fine "how-do-you-do," to the unwelcome new neighbors. Despite being made in the 1980s, they are not time capsules. In the gallery, they feel somber, a persistent reminder that we haven't seen life through their eyes. We never listened to them when we had the chance.

Contributor

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