
Free Labor

Joe Minter

February 19–March 29, 2025

Parker Gallery is proud to present *Free Labor*, Joe Minter's first solo exhibition on the West Coast and one of two solo exhibitions inaugurating Parker Gallery's 6700 Melrose location. For over thirty years, the Alabama-based artist has held a light to the struggles and contributions of African Americans, closely examining the reverberations of slavery in Black contemporary society, while also probing racial, social and political injustices and major world events in his work. The exhibition at Parker Gallery will feature a selection of large-scale sculptures from 1989 to 2018, together with recent paintings made between 2022 to 2024.

In 1989, Minter experienced a vision to unite his community through his universal art, "make the art and put a message with it that could heal the wounds everywhere." When the city of Birmingham announced plans for a civil rights museum, Minter began making sculptures in earnest, tributes to historically under acknowledged peoples and events, particularly those of his African ancestors. These early sculptures—welded-steel and assemblage works using castaway objects—draw from his prior jobs in construction and welding to celebrate the "foot soldiers" of the civil rights movement.

With works like *Free Labor* (1996), *Birmingham 1963* (1998), *The Slave Ship* (2018) and *Inheriting the Struggle* (2000), Minter directly confronts the inherited trauma of his ancestors spanning hundreds of years. These discrete sculptures relate to the artist's best known work, a sprawling, site-specific environment which he calls *The African Village in America*, built on the grounds of the artist's home and studio in Birmingham as an active site of tribute to African American history. Notably, the landscape

directly behind *The African Village* is dotted with the tombstones and graves of Shadow Lawn Memorial Gardens, the city's largest historically black cemetery, the proximity and emotional weight of which provides an anchor and enveloping context to Minter's work.

The historic and contemporary commingle in *The African Village* and across all of his work. For the past several years, Minter has turned his attention to painting, using the medium as another means to process life's many turns, while transmitting genuine hope for the future. Ranging from the personal to the universal, Minter's practice draws from his deep engagement with the world, revealing his many interests and concerns, and above all, reflect a person wholly engaged with his community and the evolving state of humanity.

Joe Minter (b. 1943, Birmingham, AL) was featured in the 2019 Whitney Biennial, curated by Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta. Recent group exhibitions include *Shifting Landscapes*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2024); *Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers: Black Artists from the American South*, Royal Academy of Art, London, England (2023); and *Called to Create: Black Artists of the American South*, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC (2022). His work is in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; the Ackland Art Museum at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, CA; the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; the New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA; the Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL; and the Minneapolis Museum of Art, Minneapolis, MN, among others.