

Joe Minter is “The Magic City” and “The Magic City” is Joe Minter. He is one of a long line of descendants of emancipated slaves, farmers, coal miners, and steelworkers who built Birmingham into the city it is. To visit Joe’s home is to take a walk in the deepest recesses of American history. Abutting right up to his property is the Shadow Lawn Memorial Gardens, “ancestral African burial grounds” where Michelle Obama’s great-great grandfather is buried besides countless hero veterans of war who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country. Minter frequently ends his long days by sitting beside the cemetery, not talking, “just listening to the 70,000 collective years of lessons the ancestors can teach him.”

This is sincerity that Minter makes work out of. For the past 40 years he has kept a visual diary of American tragedies. Covering every empty inch of his half-acre yard is the African Village in America, monuments after monuments to our absolute worst and our often unrealized potential to be our best. There are artworks that depict a re-creation of the Birmingham jail cell that held Martin Luther King Jr., the Sandy Hook school shooting, the tsunami in Japan, Ferguson police, and on and on and on. We are surrounded by scrolled bible verses and passages and pleas for unity. Every turn is another lesson, a chance to learn.

Leaving the African Village in America fully intact this exhibition presents a parallel aspect of Minter’s remarkable artistic output; large-scale sculptures made as stand-alone artworks. These works contain materials gathered in an industrial city: rusty iron and steel, wiry wire, repurposed wood, and stout chains. An anchor held afloat transforms into a lesson on African Americans in the Armed Services; wrenches and saws – tools of manufacturing and self-sufficiency – become crosses, and scrap metal become Afrofuturistic space shuttles and planets intertwining science fiction and African history. Behind it all this work captures an optimism that if we sit for a moment, listen to the lessons in the wind, that we finally might get it right.

Joe Minter, Sr (born c. 1942) is a retired construction worker and “outsider” artist who created his “African Village in America” at his home and an adjoining vacant lot at 912 Nassau Street near Shadow Lawn Memorial Park in the Woodland Park neighborhood of Birmingham. The African Village in America was begun in 1988 after Minter received a vision from God. The result, which is being continually enlarged, is a densely-packed art environment consisting of sculptures, monuments, signs, plantings and totems. The primary themes involve African-American history, particularly in Birmingham. Specific installations memorialize the 1963 church bombing and Martin Luther King, Jr’s stay in the Birmingham City Jail. He includes references to the spirits of African warriors looking over their descendants, and the achievements of African-Americans in numerous fields. Alongside the themes of achievement and loss are constant Biblical references and words of praise and thanks to God. These messages are distinct from William Rice’s “cross garden” in

Prattville in that they favor praise and respect for God and creation rather than fiery appeals for salvation.

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