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Weathering Steel: Noah Purifoy's Outdoor Desert Art Museum

At age 72, Noah Purifoy packed up his truck and headed east on the I-10 from the urban sprawl of Los Angeles, where he'd spent the last 30 years, toward the high desert in Joshua Tree, California. He remained there from 1989 until his death in 2004, constructing over one hundred large-scale works that intersect earth art, assemblage, and architecture across a ten-acre plot of land. Purifoy's works are made from locally discarded and repurposed materials that form a site-specific dialogue with their environment.[1] His multifaceted constructions combine sheets of rusting steel, sun-washed wood, and recycled appliances, culminating in the Outdoor Desert Art Museum.

Purifoy's early assemblages have been contextualized within the Black Arts Movement and postwar Los Angeles, in dialogue with Simon Rodia's Watt's Towers, and influencing artists such as Betye Saar, David Hammons, and John Outterbridge. However, little has been written about his later works. Drawing from *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* by Christina Sharpe, this paper examines how the process of weathering steel on-site becomes analogous to the political climates Purifoy dwelled within, from his upbringing in Alabama, where he was born in 1917, his service in the Navy in the 1940s, and life as an artist, activist, and educator across Southern California where he remained from the 1950s onward. Through a critical geographic lens that navigates space, place, and lived experience, Purifoy's site re-spatializes personal and collective narratives by juxtaposing material objects to realize potential futures.

[1] In *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity,* Miwon Kwon defines site-specific art as incorporating a location's physical conditions in its production, presentation, and reception.

In what Christina Sharpe refers to as “the weather,” she posits: “The weather necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies.” Sharpe’s notion of the weather examines how environmental factors influence social, cultural, and political life, culminating in the “total climate.” Human activity affects and is affected by geography, resource distribution, and power, where systematic prejudice is as pervasive as the climate. Just as the weather compels change and improvisation, Purifoy’s artistic practice over time uses objects embedded with histories, memories, and associations to generate new meanings beyond their original context.

The high desert’s arid climate preserves memories, materials, and meanings. Joshua Tree lies over 2,000 feet above sea level at the intersection of the Mojave and Colorado Deserts. The landscape is prone to little rainfall, intense dry heat, and alkaline soil. Its endless sands are scattered with Joshua trees, ancient rock formations, and cacti, accompanied by the pungent smell of creosote. This environment slows down corrosive processes such as rust, making the high desert an ample site for preservation.

The rusting steel on-site signifies the passing of time through oxidation. Oxidation is a natural process that occurs in both metals and the human body. Exposure to wet weather, humidity, and pollutants corrodes the structure, strength, and permeability of metals, particularly iron and steel, resulting in rust. In humans, oxidative stress is an imbalance of free radicals and antioxidants in the body, which can lead to cell and tissue damage. Though the warped, dented, and rust-streaked sheets of steel in Purifoy’s work are weathered from their past lives, they are simultaneously preserved within his Joshua Tree site.

Purifoy would drive around Joshua Tree, Yucca Valley, and 29 Palms in his red pickup truck, searching for discarded items. He built relationships with the community by accepting unwanted junk. In return, people dropped off items like broken refrigerators, washing machines, televisions, car

parts, and construction materials.[2] Visitors learned from him, helping with heavy manual labor for his projects. Purifoy frequently gave tours of his site, sharing stories about his artworks and their connections to places, events, and memories. He was interested in sculpture's ability to record life experiences. Just as storytelling is a way to pass down oral histories, walking, too, imprints knowledge kinesthetically, resulting in an embodiment of people, environment, and artwork.

Purifoy's works do not abide by a singular perspective; instead, they spread out organically across the ground, transforming the viewer into an active participant in a corporeal experience. Visitors begin at the welcome sign and can meander through the dispersed site. There is no set way to navigate; visitors' trodden paths over the years form a web-like imprint on the irregular sand surface. Visitors can touch, walk through, and engage with Purifoy's works rather than remain passive spectators within a controlled environment.

Corrosion: Bessemer Steel

The corroded metals in Purifoy's *Bessemer Steel* signify extraction processes that intertwine resources, labor, and wealth within the landscape. *Bessemer Steel* is a multi-story structure resembling a dilapidated factory made of piecemeal steel, piping, and plywood. The structure features two tiers with flat roofs, standing about eight feet tall. A rusted medical instrument sterilizer sits atop the first tier alongside an old gas heater and scattered debris. Narrow, chimney-like spires extend from the top and toward the sky. Cables secure the leaning walls to the ground for stability. The dented and bowed materials resist clean geometric angles; some overlap, while others leave open gaps for the elements to permeate. Cool gray steel contrasts with coppery corrosion and flaking white plywood. On the west side, two pale yellow and aqua chairs sit beneath the structure's elongated shadow, inviting visitors to find respite from the sun.

[2] Lipschutz, *Noah Purifoy: Through the Fire,* Ph.D. Dissertation, 24.

Bessemer Steel connects place and process. Noah Purifoy was born two hours south of Bessemer, Alabama, in 1917, in the small rural town of Snow Hill. Many of Purifoy's siblings and relatives lived or worked in Bessemer for work opportunities outside of sharecropping.[3] Purifoy's family relocated from Snow Hill to Birmingham when he was three for increased opportunities. He remained there until 1935, when he completed high school. Birmingham was regarded as "the industrial city of the South," notable for its steel production in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[4] The physical environment was crucial in shaping Birmingham's economy and labor forces; the city became a leading iron and steel manufacturer due to its unique geological coalescence of iron ore, coal, limestone, and dolomite- all raw materials required for making iron and steel.[5] Birmingham's steel production increased exponentially, from less than one ton in 1900 to 3.7 million tons by 1978.[6] The abundant natural deposits combined with the Bessemer process for mass production led to some of the lowest material assembly costs in the nation.

The Bessemer process was invented by Henry Bessemer in the 1850's during the Second Industrial Revolution to mass produce steel. Through carbon oxidization, he transformed the brittle and unable material called pig iron into a molten and malleable one. This fueled production across Europe and the United States from the nineteenth century into the mid-twentieth century,

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[3] Lipschutz, *Noah Purifoy: Through the Fire*, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2.

[4] White, *The Birmingham District: An Industrial History and Guide* on Bessemer, Alabama: DeBardeleben inherited Pratt Iron and Coal Company, shortly after in 1884 began mining on Red Mountain for iron ore, establishing DeBardeleben Coal and Iron Company 1886, manufacturing pig iron furnaces, also Bessemer Coal, Iron and Land Company, and Alice Furnace Company. By 1887, the company owned 150,000 acres of land for coal and iron mining, and it was worth $13 million.

[5] White, *The Birmingham District: An Industrial History and Guide,* 33-37; the map provides evidence for the presence of iron ore in Red Mountain, located in the heart of Birmingham, with several large volumes of coal, limestone, dolomite, and other natural resource deposits that surround the city in every direction. Iron is a naturally occurring metal element.

[6] White, *The Birmingham District: An Industrial History and Guide*, 55. See also, American Steel and Iron Insititute; The Iron and Steel Industrial of the South by H.H. Chapman, Birmingham Chamber of Commerce.

contributing toward innovations in railways, construction, and the military defense industries. By 1887, the city of Bessemer, Alabama, was established. Named after the Bessemer process, it was founded by a Confederate soldier (Henry F. DeBardeleben) who centered the city around his iron, steel, and coal business and rose to compete with the unparalleled steel production in nearby Birmingham.

While the transition to industrialism was more profitable and provided higher wages than sharecropping, it relied on low assembly costs driven by underpaid, predominantly Black labor. Although Birmingham benefited from specific geographic advantages, it faced pervasive racialized labor practices and resource exploitation, common throughout the South. According to critical geographer Bobby Wilson, plantation owners and tenant farmers concentrated Birmingham's wealth through industrial mining, manufacturing, and management, effectively controlling laborers and the workforce and inextricably linking race, place, and capital. Consequently, from 1910 to 1970, these conditions triggered the Great Migration, an exodus of six million African Americans migrating from the Southern United States to the Northeast, Midwest, and West. Purifoy's *Bessemer Steel* illustrates the effects of industrialization and urbanization on power distribution through layered sheets of oxidized metal.

Erosion: Earth Piece

Purifoy's *Earth Piece* references his background in military industrial fabrication and establishes a discourse with post-war sculpture and earth art along the West Coast. *Earth Piece* features a geometric horseshoe-shaped passage that descends 20 feet into the ground—the corridor's walls, lined with steel sheets, open to a larger courtyard, where slender rebar spires emerge from the sand. A wood bridge arches overtop but is intentionally broken in the center, marked with a black and red "keep out" sign. Beyond the excavation, fragmented ruins rise from the sand. For years, visitors interacted with the work, exploring the underground passageway, but erosion has rendered it

unsafe. A chain-link fence now surrounds it. As time and forces of nature inevitably erode the work, *Earth Piece* slowly slips into a state of increasing disorder until becoming one with the landscape again.

As Purifoy grew up encompassed by the processes of industrialization in Birmingham; his predilection for manufactured materials can be attributed to his early occupations and service in the military. After graduating high school, Purifoy attained his Bachelor of Education from Alabama State Teachers College and taught high school shop classes. [7] By 1945, he enrolled in the Navy, building infrastructures across the globe for U.S. military bases. He was stationed nationally and abroad during his service, including Ventura County, California, offering his first glimpse of the West Coast way of life.[8] After his service in the Navy, Purifoy attained his master's degree in social work from Atlanta University in Georgia. By 1950, after a brief career in social work, he pivoted and headed west to California to attend Chouinard (now Cal Arts) to study art, first majoring in industrial design, then switching to interior design, and making a final switch to fine art.[9]

While attending Chouinard, Purifoy worked nights at the Douglas Aircraft Company plant in Long Beach, operating a shearing machine that cut sheets of metal into templates for aircraft.[10]

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[7] See Lipschutz, 67; Birmingham Industrial School, founded in 1899, was the region's first Black high school. Initially a one-room school with eighteen students, it was led by Arthur Harold Parker until his retirement in 1939, later becoming A.H. Parker High School. Enrollment peaked at 3,600 with 100 faculty. Currently, around 700 students are enrolled, and it is one of seven high schools in Birmingham. Its notable music department was led by jazz musician Fess Whatley, who influenced future musicians like Sun Ra, a graduate just three years before Purifoy.

[8] Lipschutz, *Noah Purifoy: Through the Fire*, Ph.D. Dissertation, 8,9. At this point, the military was still segregated. Black service members were required to lodge in separate arrangements while, as in Purifoy's case, having to construct their white counterparts' housing. It was not until 1948, all military sectors were desegregated through Executive Order 9981, signed by President Harry S. Truman.

[9] "Noah Purifoy: African American Artists of Los Angeles," Interview by Karen Anne Mason through University of California Los Angeles Oral History Program; manuscript, 1992. 9, 14.

[10] See Allison Glenn's chronology in Sirmans, Lipschutz, et al. *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada.* Los Angeles, California: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2015, 78-83.

During WWII and the postwar period, California contributed 17% of the nation's defense production, leading in aircraft and aerospace manufacturing and employing one-third of the workforce by 1957. By the war's end, it was home to 140 military bases. Federal defense spending and industrial production significantly fueled the state's economic growth into automobile, petroleum, and electronics. Through these encounters, Purifoy became adept with industrial materials.

Postwar sculpture expanded to include manufactured materials such as concrete and steel to investigate the relations between form, commercialism, and labor. Purifoy's *Earth Piece* conducts a spatial intervention, employing a subtractive method to physically alter the landscape. He creates a dialogue with Michael Heizer's Double Negative (1969), Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty (1970), and Richard Serra's site-specific steel sculptures. While these artists relied upon paid labor and institutional support to formally execute their concepts, Purifoy self-funded and excavated *Earth Piece*. His work maintains a sense of intimacy through handwork and labor with familiar materials. By retaining a sense of authorship, Purifoy embeds his lived experience into the landscape.

The high desert has the capacity to embalm matter, becoming a place for storage and surplus. While artists have been drawn to its otherworldly landscape and seemingly endless space, the residual effects of wartime efforts linger. Purifoy's Desert Art Museum sits near the perimeter of the Marine Corps Air and Ground Combat Center, which functions as a simulacrum of the Middle East. The Mojave Desert houses numerous outdoor commercial and military aircraft storage sites such as the Southern California Logistics Airport (SCLA) in Victorville, the Mojave Air and Space Port, and the Davis Monthan Airforce Boneyard in Tucson, Arizona. Aerial maps evidence the great expanses of land where planes line up in geometric tessellations by the hundreds. In nearby Tucson, the Davis Monthan Airforce Boneyard is the largest in the world, serving as both a boneyard and for parts reclamation. The site houses roughly 4400 aircraft, including retired World War II fighter jets from

1946, including the Enola Gay. [11] Similarly, the Mojave Air and Space Port, located about 95 miles north of Los Angeles, was expanded into a Marine Corps training facility for the Second World War; Navy and Marine pilots trained by the thousands for combat.[12] These airport boneyards and storage sites attest to California's wartime efforts that link place and space with the desert's distinct climate.

Corrugation: Ode to Frank Gehry

In *Ode to Frank Gehry*, Purifoy references visual design language in modernist architecture. Made from plywood and discarded shipping containers, it is a Mondrian-esque arrangement of square, rectangular, and cylindrical structures intersecting four tiers and painted a bright, sun-bleached white. The work is roughly sixteen feet tall and wide and twelve feet in depth; it's poised several feet above the ground, supported by meager rusty beams, which are themselves supported by individual concrete slabs that are partially buried underground.

The corrugated steel framework is reminiscent of Frank Gehry's early works. Purifoy thought of himself as a "frustrated architect."[13] While Purifoy and Gehry both worked in Los Angeles around the same time in the mid to latter half of the twentieth century, they had similar but ultimately divergent paths. While Gehry had established a presence in modern architecture and design, Purifoy's emergence into the field was stifled.

After graduating from Chouinard in the 1950s, Purifoy briefly worked at Chaffin Interior Designs as a window trimmer. He sought advancement but was fired for interacting with customers. Later, he joined Angelus Furniture Warehouse to design furniture, but was moved to machine

[11]"Davis Monthan AFB Amarg Boneyard." AirplaneBoneyards.com.

[12] "Discover: Mojave Air and Space Port." Mojave Air & Space Port. Accessed May 7, 2022. https://www.mojaveairport.com/discover.html.

[13] Sirmans, Lipschutz, et al. *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada.* 53.

operation without his consent. From 1956 to 1964, he set up window displays at Broadway Department Store but faced another stagnation in his career. Frustrated from blatant employment discrimination, he began his art practice at home and soon became the director for the Watts Towers Arts Center, from which his most well-known assemblage series, *66 Signs of Neon,* would emerge from the Watts Uprising in 1965 to reframe the impact of systematic resource depletion in the predominantly Black neighborhood.

Purifoy's modernist structure navigates through the often-inaccessible architectural spaces within Southern California. It contrasts other works on site that allow the viewer to become an active participant by entering into the structures, stepping up onto wooden steps and floors and surfaces, touching the walls, and peering through windows and openings. This work, however, denies tactile sensation. Its lifted presence off the ground, combined with the lack of doorways or windows to the inside, renders it opaque. One cannot enter the space nor look into it. The work distances itself from its audience and ground.

Flat and clean-cut surfaces and shapes, rectilinear lines and volumes, large windows, and open staircases with metal railings define modernist architecture in Southern California. As the art historian Lisa Uddin states, "This particular design vocabulary has nourished specific racial identities and opportunities, functioning not only as an aesthetic violence against minoritized people who disidentified with the conventions of white bourgeoise heteropatriarchy but also as an exercise of biopower."[14] The irony, of course, is that in Gehry's architecture and across Southern California Case Study Houses, industrial overstock was used in their construction to imagine a design aesthetic that utilized common, everyday materials to make relatable economic buildings, yet this very aesthetic has come to symbolize an elite unattainability in the most sought after real estate. Here, Purifoy

[14] Uddin, "And Thus Not Glowing Brightly: Noah Purifoy's Junk Modernism," 312.

subverts modernist art and design to create a total environment that relies upon imprecision, improvision, and vulnerability.

Conclusion: Realizing Potential Futures

In the wake of increasing polarization and cultural forms of erasure and violence, Purifoy's Outdoor Desert Art Museum preserves matter, thus keeping memories alive. Although Noah is no longer here to walk the site and pass his oral histories down to visitors, the Purifoy Foundation continues his legacy through site conservation efforts, keeping the site free and open to the public year-round and providing educational opportunities to students through the Urban Arts Initiative program. Purifoy's Outdoor Desert Art Museum re-presents material culture and histories to make space for pluralized existences. His works acknowledge contradictions and tensions, while creating new associations.

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Images

Figure 1. Noah Purifoy, Outdoor Desert Art Museum in Joshua Tree, California, aerial view.

Figure 2. Noah Purifoy, *Bessemer Steel*, 1998, found steel, wood, instrument sterilizer, dimensions approximately 192 by 144 by 80 inches, Outdoor Desert Art Museum in Joshua Tree, California.

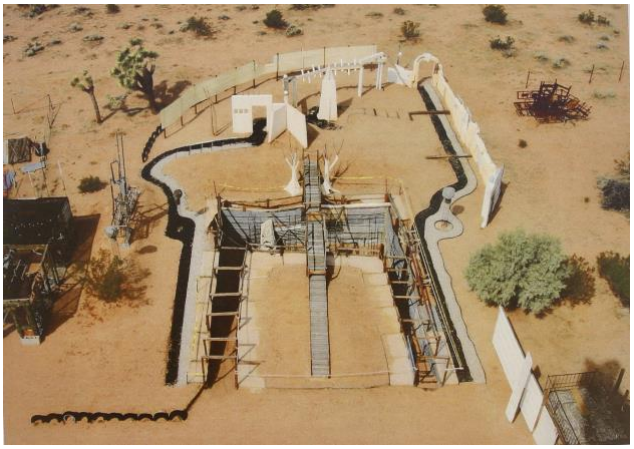

Figure 3. Noah Purifoy, *Earth. Piece*, 1999, corrugated steel, wood, plaster, scaffolding, other materials; dimensions variable, Outdoor Desert Art Museum in Joshua Tree, California.

Images Continued

Figure 4. *Ode to Frank Gehry,* 1999, found corrugated steel, plywood, concrete; 190 by 192 by 144 inches, Outdoor Desert Art Museum in Joshua Tree, California.

Figure 5. Cauleen Smith, *Sojourner,* 2018, digital video, color, sound; 22:41 minutes, Smithsonian American Art Museum (featuring *Adrian's Little Theater,* within Purifoy's Outdoor Desert Art Museum; pictured above).