

## LESLEY DILL: WILDERNESS, LIGHT SIZZLES AROUND ME

Bates College Museum of Art • Lewiston, ME • [bates.edu/museum](http://bates.edu/museum) • Through March 26, 2022

For the past five years or so, Leslie Dill has been paying homage to a diverse group of American men and women by constructing sculptural representations of them. Fifteen of these historical figures—writers, painters, seers, activists—comprise what exhibition curator Andrew Wallace calls “a portrait gallery of effigies”—not the kind we set on fire, but rather striking stand-ins for individuals who worked against the grain in their writings, art, causes, and visions.

Dill builds these figures out of a variety of fabrics and other materials—and words. Nearly all of them feature letters assembled on the clothing, the typeface large and small and ornate, sometimes resembling a ransom note. Like the natural history texts with which painter Irene Hardwicke Olivieri tattoos her creatures and bodies, the words require scrutiny to discern phrases, lines, and sentences—and to fully appreciate the portrayal.

Take Dill’s presentation of the painter Horace Pippin (1888–1946): The 100-inch-tall figure’s outfit made from hand-cut paper and a dark cotton fabric mounted on a wooden yoke is inscribed with his name (on his jacket), the word “heart” (on a sleeve), and something he once said, “Pictures come to my mind,” threaded down his pantlegs. Like many of Dill’s figures, Pippin’s feet are shoe lasts, simple wooden forms that add a humbleness to the portrayal.

The characterization “true believer” fits many of Dill’s subjects. Indeed, a number of them spent their lives answering to spiritual voices and visions. One of them, African-American evangelist Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900–1980), preached in the streets of New Orleans. “Because of her intense faith,” the artist writes in the superb exhibition catalogue, “she had an

unwavering path through the biblical wilderness of sin and sinners in New Orleans.”

Dill’s *Sister Morgan* comes in two sizes: 100 inches high in cotton, satin, and plastic sheeting and 17 inches tall—like a doll. In the latter, her habiliment resembles a wedding dress complete

with veil; she is, after all, a bride of Christ. She was also a poet, musician, and artist—a kind of role model, if you will, for the protean Dill.

Like all the figures in the show, *Sister Morgan* is accompanied by a large, three-part white cloth banner featuring life dates, name and, in this case, a single word in large letters, “Revelation,” each of its letters in a different color. Other banners are replete with words, symbols, and imagery related to the individual’s life and vision. Installed on the walls of the museum, they serve as compelling proclamations.

Dill created tributes to the freedom fighter Dred Scott (ca. 1799–1858) and Sauk warrior Black Hawk (1767–1838)

specifically for this show. Both men sought justice, for themselves and their people. Something Black Hawk wrote near the end of his life underscores their struggles: “How smooth must be the language of the whites when they can make right look like a wrong, and wrong like right.”

Dill’s creations are the polar opposite of, say, Madame Tussauds wax figures; they evoke rather than depict their subjects, be it poet Walt Whitman, the “lone wolf abolitionist” John Brown, or Shaker communicant Heavenly Mother Ann Lee, whose luminous gown is suspended from the ceiling. Some of the tall thin figures might recall

some of William King’s elongated people, but where the Pop Art sculptor often used his work to make social commentary, Dill’s mission is to bring awareness to specific historical individuals via acts of gratitude and praise.

Dill has substantial personal ties to Maine as the museum notes on its website. She spent part of her youth in Falmouth and graduated from Waynflete School in Portland. She went on to earn degrees from Trinity College, Smith College, and Maryland Institute College of Art. Since then, she has immersed herself in a wide range of creative pursuits that include elaborate installations, performance art, and opera.

“Textually clamorous, visually ravishing,” as critic Nancy Princenthal calls it in her catalogue essay, *Lesley Dill: Wilderness, Light Sizzles Around Me* is another brilliant feather in the artist’s ample cap.

[*Lesley Dill: Wilderness, Light Sizzles Around Me* originated at the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, IA. It next travels to the Canterbury Shaker Village, Canterbury, NH, May 28–September 11, 2022.]

—Carl Little



Lesley Dill, *Horace Pippin*, 2021, acrylic paint, hand-cut paper, thread on cotton fabric, wooden yoke, and shoe lasts, 100 x 25 x 11”.



Lesley Dill, *Revelation (Sister Gertrude Morgan)*, 2021, fabric, thread, and ink, 17 x 8 x 1”.