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Art DiFuria

Left-Behind Places: Alabama Vernacular Architecture through the Art of William Christenberry

The South is not an easy region of the United States to define. It is riddled with a dark, violent past, plagued by stereotypes, and “dominated by nostalgia and dullness.”¹ Of this idea of the American South’s image, Edward Ayers writes “From it’s very beginning, people have believed that the South was not only disappearing, but also declining, defined against an earlier South that was somehow more authentic, real, more unified and distinct...the South has always seemed to live on the edge of extinction, the good as well as the bad perpetually disappearing...but the South, perpetually fading, seems also perpetually with us.”² William Christenberry (1936-2016), a photographer hailing from Hale County, Alabama, the second-poorest county in one of the poorest regions of the United States, was acutely aware of the ephemeral nature of the decaying American South, documenting the decaying vernacular structures—buildings created from the materials of the land it is built on—of his birthplace of Hale County, Alabama.³ Christenberry assigns the preservation of memory to his work as its primary function, but he is also an indirect documentarian of the long-term effects of economic and cultural ruination within the American South starting after the Civil War. Due to the effects of the hijacking of Reconstruction, as well as the resulting delay of economic and technological progress in the South, the mom-and-pop stores with hand-painted signs closed and the small

¹ Edward Ayers, “What We Talk About When We Talk About the South” from *What Caused the Civil War?*

² Ayers

³ Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, “Cardboard Houses with Wings: The Architecture of Alabama’s Rural Studio” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 44, no. 3 (Fall 2010), 16

towns vanished or consolidated into larger towns. This collision of intergenerational poverty, and neglect caused the vernacular buildings that Christenberry grew up with to slowly disintegrate. This perpetual ruination continues to quietly engulf the rural American South after his death in 2016. Christenberry's photographs, paintings, and sculptures documented these multifaceted processes of ruination in the culture of his childhood.⁴

Christenberry regularly returned to the same buildings to document their slow decay into the red clay soil. *Building with False Brick Siding*, which portrays a slowly collapsing structure in Warsaw, Alabama was one of the many buildings Christenberry spent decades documenting. When initially photographed in 1974 (Fig. 1), the building was one of a few structures along a dirt road. The photograph was taken in the mid-afternoon on a sunny day. Light creates harsh, angular shadows along the building. Nothing is soft in this image. The support columns on its front deck bow out slightly, suggesting the age and wear of the structure. The building itself is a basic beige color, with fake brick siding wrapped along the walls and gable. The thatched roof is slightly off center of the house, as is the rusted door. It is clear that this building has not been used in any form for a long time. On the right side of the building, thick vines of Kudzu have begun to crawl along the column and side. The porch is overgrown with weeds and the result of uncut grass.

When Christenberry returned to Warsaw to photograph the building a decade, Kudzu had overtaken it. The grass in *Building with False Brick Siding, Warsaw Alabama, 1984* (Fig. 2) had grown to hip height by then, and we see no sign of the false brick siding that described the structure in the earlier photograph. The kudzu sits against the triangular rooftop, cascading down over the walls and choking the old, bowed support beams of what used to be the porch. Nature

⁴ William Christenberry, Elizabeth Broun, Walter Hopps, Howard N. Fox, Any Grundberg. *William Christenberry*. New York: Aperture, 2006, 16

has flooded the buildings along this dirt road in a tsunami of green leaves. New trees are on the horizon line behind the building, and rapidly encroaching on the lawn. Yet another decade later, in 1994 (Fig. 3), there is hardly anything visible through the thick growth of branches, bushes, and ferns. There is a hint of an outline of the triangular roof, but the image is overwhelmed with the pattern of leaves and shadow in the bright sunlight. A splash of blue sky in the corner and the visible grass in the foreground grounds the image in space, but it is clear the earth has swallowed the false brick building whole.

The construction and history of vernacular buildings like *Building with False Brick Siding* in the South is crucial to understanding Christenberry's work. Vernacular buildings are generally defined as the common architecture of the region. Veronica Aplenc defines vernacular architecture as “‘ordinary, everyday, non-elite’ structures of any historical period that are used by ‘ordinary, everyday’ individuals for ‘ordinary, everyday’ purposes related to their daily lives.”⁵ They are created with inexpensive materials, generally without the supervision of professional architects or contractors, lacking aesthetic appeal. Recently, there has been growing interest in vernacular architecture, as architects search for sustainable ways to build. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein writes on the identity of the vernacular “Wherever architects attempt to design ‘the vernacular,’ they are confronted with the paradox that the vernacular lives up to its truest definition when it appears not as designed architecture but as an unpretentious, private niche that looks just as if it has been made by locals.”⁶

Like all vernacular architecture, the buildings appearing in Christenberry's photographs are rooted in poverty and necessity. The South had the highest concentration of people living

⁵ Veronica Aplenc, “Architecture of Vernacular Subjectivities: North American and Slovenian Perspectives.” *Journal of Folklore Research*, vol. 42, no 1, 3

⁶ Botz-Bornstien, 19

below the poverty line in the United States—a moderate concentration beginning at approximately 11% and a high concentration beginning at around 15%—stretching from Texas, through Alabama, and up through the Appalachian Mountains, with Mississippi being the state with the highest population of Americans living below the poverty line.^{7,8} There are a higher percentage of Black Americans and Hispanic Americans living in the South, who statistically live in higher concentrations of poverty due to institutionalized racism.⁹

The population of Hale County rests around 15,000 people, with more than a quarter of the residents living below the poverty line.¹⁰ According to the 2019 Census Bureau, Black Americans outnumbered white Americans in Hale County by an 19% margin.¹¹ Hale County is also within Alabama's Black Belt or "Cotton Belt," known for its rich, black soil, perfect for farming, which supported a massive wave of cotton plantation construction in the 1820s and 30s.¹² The region stretches horizontally across the lower middle part of the state, encompassing several counties and a few cities that would become historic sites of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, such as Selma and Montgomery. Cotton plantations thrived on the nutrient-dense soil, and as a result, the Black Belt supported half of the population of enslaved people in Alabama.¹³ After the Civil War, the Black Belt quickly spiraled into poverty when it became evident that there was a lack of any other natural resource besides agriculture in the region.¹⁴

⁷ "Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE)," *United States Census Bureau*, 2019, "Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE)," *United States Census Bureau*, 2019

⁸ This is from 2019, according to the United States Census Bureau

⁹ Marybeth Mattingly, Catherine Turcotte-Seabury. "Understanding Very High Rates of Young Child Poverty in the South" *Carsey Institute*, no. 21 (Summer 2010), 2-4

¹⁰ Michael Ulrich Hensel, "Rural Studio: Incarnations of a Design-and-Build Program" *Architectural Design*, (March 2015) pp 42

¹¹ Census Bureau. "Hale County, Alabama" Quickfacts, last accessed February 11, 2021

¹² Herdman Cleland, "The Black Belt of Alabama." *Geographical Review* 10, no. 6, 379

¹³ University of Alabama Center for Economic Development. "Alabama's Black Belt Counties"

¹⁴ Cleland, 383

Even in the 1940s, when William Christenberry was a young man living in Hale County, agriculture was the primary use of the land in the Black Belt.¹⁵

Reconstruction in the American South was planned very differently than the takeover that occurred after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Bruce E Baker and Bryan Kelly maintain that there may have been a complete overhaul of the South's economic and political structure.¹⁶ However, Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, a Confederate sympathizer and white supremacist, "rejected calls for thoroughgoing reconstruction in favor of a more lenient approach to readmission of the former slave states that left them...as nearly as possible in their ancient condition."¹⁷ Johnson favored much more lenient laws for landowning, white, Southerners, stripping the freedmen's opportunities to own the land they farmed.¹⁸ These detrimental policy changes—the failure of the democratic, intersectional, fair redistribution of wealth across a war-ruined country—lead to sharecropping, also known as tenant farming; landlords allow tenants to work on farms in exchange for land to build homes. Funding for shelter, clothing, and food was extended through credit, which, if crop yields were low, became debt to the landowners. If a family of sharecroppers had debt, they were, by law, unable to move off the property.¹⁹ Sharecropping became, arguably, a legal form of enslavement of poor, overwhelmingly Black, Southerners. Because of this, southern families were placed at a direct disadvantage for economic growth, resulting in the contemporary southern poverty that is seen today. Sociologist Arthur Raper asked in 1931, "To whom does cotton belong? To the tenant farmers? To the

¹⁵ J Sullivan Gibson, "The Alabama Black Belt: Its Geographic Status" *Economic Geography* vol. 17, no. 1, 13

¹⁶ Bruce E Baker, Brian Kelly, Eric Foner. *After Slavery: Race, Labor, and Citizenship in the Reconstruction South*. University Press of Florida, 2013, 1-2

¹⁷ Baker, 2

¹⁸ Baker, 2

¹⁹ Stanton, Mary. *Red, Black, White: The Alabama Communist Party, 1930-1950*. Alabama, University of Alabama Press, 2019, 17

landlord who furnished the tenant? Or, to the banker who financed the landlord?”²⁰ Naturally, the one with the power, which the tenant farmers did not possess. President Roosevelt established the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act and the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937, after The Commission on Farm Tenacity revealed that the economic situation in the South was more dire than had previously been anticipated.^{21,22} Photographers such as Dorothea Lange (1895-1965), Marion Post Wolcott (1910-1990), and Walker Evans (1903-1975) documented these tenant farmers lives, including the vernacular buildings they constructed on the land (Fig. 4, 5, 6).

Evans—who would later become Christenberry’s mentor (Fig. 7)—had partnered with James Agee (1909-1955) in 1936, the same year that Christenberry was born, to live with, photograph, and write about three families of sharecroppers for the book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, (Fig. 8).²³ One of the families that the two men documented in the book, who went by the pseudonym “The Ricketts”—the family’s real name were the Tingles—worked on the farm just next door to Christenberry’s grandmother.²⁴ Her family, the Smiths, owned the land that they farmed on, and she was able to eventually leave, moving to Stewart, Alabama with Daniel Keener “D.K.” Christenberry, who build the home and farm that William Christenberry himself would grow up in. Christenberry would continue to return to the home in Stewart to photograph the screen door on the side of the house (Fig. 9). When Christenberry was a young man, he was given a small Kodak Brownie as a Christmas gift. Micheal Adno writes on

²⁰ Stanton, 18

²¹ Stanton, 135

²² The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act would allow the federal government to buy up unused land, rehabilitate it into viable farmland, and move tenant farmers onto the land (Stanton, 135).

²³ James Agee, Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001: Figure 4 is an image of Walker Evans and William Christenberry talking to a photography class at the University of Alabama in 1975

²⁴ Adno

Christenberry's emergence into photography "He'd shoot tenant houses and graveyards, then send his film to a drugstore for prints. In 2008, reflecting on those early works, he wrote ' I was trying to come to grips with my feelings about the landscape and what was in it.'"²⁵

These buildings that appear in William Christenberry's work are echoes of the people that survived on the land, as it was the people who built them to live and work in; created for need, rather than aesthetics. Despite the outward plain appearance, these Southern vernacular buildings have captivated artists alongside Christenberry. Agee, who's writing was an inspiration for Christenberry, wrote passionately about the beauty of the houses the three tenant farming families in Hale County lived in:

Here I must say, a little anyhow: what I can hardly hope to bear out in the record: that a house of simple people which stands empty and silent in the vast Southern country morning sunlight... shines quietly forth such grandeur, such sorrowful loneliness of its exactitudes in existence, as no human consciousness shell ever rightly perceive, far less impart to another: that there can be more beauty and more deep wonder in the standings and spacings of mute furnishings on a bare floor between the between the squaring bourns of walls than in any music ever made: that this square home, as it stands in unshadowed earth between the winding years of heaven, is, not to be but of itself, one among the serene and final, uncapturable beauties of existence..."²⁶

Agee's words about Hale County, Christenberry's home, deeply moved him. Adno writes "At first, it was Agee's words, not Evans' photographs, that cast a spell over Christenberry, but in time that would change" and that Christenberry would later write "What Agee was doing with the written word was that I wanted to do visually."²⁷ Like Agee, Christenberry was far more captivated by the decaying vernacular architecture than the antebellum mansions many considered ready-made for photography.²⁸ Documenting the run-down, the bullet-hole-ridden, the barely standing, was his mission. In an interview for an exhibition of his work at the

²⁵ Adno

²⁶ Agee, 117

²⁷ Adno

²⁸ *Working from Memory*, 15

University of Cincinnati in the early 1960s Christenberry described the need he felt to document and preserve the landscape he was raised in, “What is so sad is to go through that landscape and see how little of the vernacular architecture is left. Every time I go home, I’m fearful of what I’ll find.”²⁹ Desperate to keep the memory of his home alive, Christenberry not only preserved the structures through photography, but also paintings and sculptures. He made both large and small-scale conceptual sculptures entitled “Southern Monuments” and “Dream Buildings.” These buildings were abstracted versions of the buildings of Hale County; simple, box buildings painted in muted colors, usually with a door and a ladder reaching to the top or inside the shelter. The Southern Monuments were adorned with symbols of the South, such as gourd trees.³⁰ The Dream Buildings, such as *Dream Building II* (Fig. 10) were darkly painted in blues or greys, covered in signs reminiscent of the old, hand-painted signs on the buildings of Hale County. The Dream Buildings have no doors or windows, and have a tall shape, with pointed rooftops, creating an angular, almost sinister silhouette, had it not been for the bright signs adorning their walls. Christenberry preserves the physical landscape of Hale County by resting his sculptures on a bed of red clay soil from Alabama.³¹

Many buildings left to ruin in Hale County were abandoned due to financial issues, including buildings tied to Christenberry’s family. The building Christenberry dubbed the Palmist Building was initially owned by Christenberry’s uncle, who ran it as a general store. When the shop shut down, the building was later rented to a family of palm readers who later skipped town, leaving the rent unpaid, the interior in ruins, and the large, hand-painted “Palmist” sign upside-down in the broken windows.³² Christenberry was fascinated by the building as it

²⁹ Anne Timpano, *William Christenberry: Architecture/Archetype*. Ohio: University of Cincinnati, 2001, 11,12

³⁰ Trudy Wilner Stack, *Christenberry Reconstruction*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1996, 143-147.

³¹ Stack, 37

³² *Working from Memory*, 51

slowly fell apart, photographing it from the beginning of the 1950s and ending with the final photograph of the site in 1988, after the Palmist Building had finally collapsed.³³ Christenberry desperately wanted the sign of the Palmist Building. He wrote “I didn’t have access to it because of the burglar bars on the window, which were pretty substantial, and the lock on the door. I have done some pretty drastic things to get a good sign, but I won’t break into a building to get one.”³⁴ After fighting for years with the landowners of the property, he finally was able to take the sign back to his studio in Washington, D.C, where it stayed even after his death in 2016.³⁵

The well-known images of the Palmist Building were taken in Winter and Summer in the early 1980s. *Palmist Building (Winter), Havana Junction, Alabama, 1981* (Fig. 11) depicts the Palmist Building’s clapboard façade and shattered windows lightly tangled in the branches of the Chinaberry Tree. The sky is a soft, melancholy grey, one of two hints of the previous winter rainstorms so common in Alabama, the second being the small puddle of water on the bottom left of the print. The golden winter grass and remnants of leaves, as well as the blood red streak of Alabama clay warm the grey boards of the building slowly returning to the earth. This is a stark contrast to *Palmist Building (Summer), Havana Junction, Alabama, 1980*, (Fig. 12). The Palmist Building is barely visible, draped in the rich green shroud of the Chinaberry tree. The formerly grey sky is a pale, cloudless blue. Rather than the ironically warm tones of the southern winter, Summer at the Palmist Building is glowing with the cool colors of life.

The buildings Christenberry photographed were not just documented out of care and respect for the land, but rather a reminder that this culture of the rural south had once existed. Christenberry describes this goal of his art as making “an outsider look back on something he has

³³ Timpano, 37

³⁴ *Working from Memory*, 54

³⁵ Michael Adno, “Once It Comes Time” *The Bitter Southerner*, February 12, 2019

never been part of and make him feel like he has always been a part of it.”³⁶ This was also true for the dark side of the South. Christenberry looked unflinchingly at the most violent part of the history of his home and pulled his viewers inside it, so as to reckon with the ruination of the mind that humanity was capable of. Michael Adno noted that Christenberry “kept a portion of the South from returning into the earth, from devolving into myth, lore, and superstition...In a presentation at George Washington University in 2011, Christenberry stood before an audience showing slides of his work...and then his hands gripped the lectern, and he explained, ‘I cannot talk about my work or make an attempt at it without referencing the dark side again.’”³⁷ He did this by creating a small room dedicated to this dark side. There was a padlock on the door, with only one way in or out of the space. Within this locked room, Christenberry created a tableau of the darkness of the South, where hatred reigned, and the capacity for violence was immeasurable. This was a reminder of the violence of the place he loved so dearly. This was *The Klan Room*.

Described by curator Walter Hopps as an “exorcism of racism,” *The Klan Room* consisted of photographs, paintings, and sculptures focusing on the violent nature of the Ku Klux Klan.³⁸ A rare photograph of the installation view of *The Klan Room* (Fig. 13) shows a windowless room illuminated by a glowing white neon cross. Allen Tullos’s essay “Alabama Bound, Unbound,” describes the claustrophobic feeling of entering *The Klan Room* in 1996, the “kitschy” Klan dolls were piled on top of each other, and the “ruby brightness you’d expect of a supermarket meat-case” washing over the art.³⁹ Dozens of small sculptures of plain buildings, called “K-houses” are displayed in the room—these buildings have only one window and no

³⁶ Christenberry, William. *William Christenberry’s Black Belt*. Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2007.

³⁷ Adno

³⁸ *Working from Memory*, 74

³⁹ Stack, 23

door, or one door and no windows—with tiny Klansman dolls placed inside. These K-houses are not unlike the designs of Christenberry’s “Dream Buildings” but provide no source of shelter or comfort of home. Rather, the K-houses are vessels of evil.⁴⁰ Klan dolls are trapped together in a circular fence, slumped over the bars as if impaled. Others are tied to the floor, or missing limbs. One large doll in red Klan robes stands menacingly in front of a Confederate flag in the top center of the room, like an overseer. Drawings, paintings, and photographs of Klansmen are matted and framed on the walls. The pointed robes envelop featureless bodies, with only slits in the hoods for eyes and small dark shoes poking out from the hem of the cloth to remind a viewer that this is, in fact, modeled by a real human capable of such monstrosity.

It was the dedication to reminding viewers of the dark history of the South that fueled Christenberry to create this disturbing collection. Christenberry symbolized the violence of the Ku Klux Klan by creating the small dolls, photographing them in different scenes. One photograph depicts a Klan doll in a dark grey K-house with no doors, but one window (Fig. 14). The doll residing in the K-house glares at viewers through slits in the hood for eyes. It is shadowed in the darkness of the K-house, the silky texture of the doll’s robes reflecting the limited light on the subject. A neon chord appears to wrap around the Klan doll’s neck, stretching into the darkness of the building.

Christenberry’s art created in abhorrence to the Klan began with an encounter he had with a hooded Klansmen in October of 1960.⁴¹ In 1963, Christenberry exhibited two works of art depicting the Klan, called *Hate I* and *Hate II* at a faculty exhibition at the University of Memphis in Tennessee.⁴² The response to the paintings caused Christenberry to destroy them later.

⁴⁰ William Christenberry’s *Black Belt*, 7

⁴¹ Adno

⁴² William Christenberry’s *Black Belt*, 4

Howard Fox argues that this was not in response of criticism of the work, but rather the realization that using art to discuss the violence of the Ku Klux Klan was not accepted within the artistic community.⁴³ Christenberry did not intend to create the accidental installation work of *The Klan Room*. Fox writes:

The many dolls, objects, and relics that constituted this decidedly off-putting collection were intended to be seen together. But the artist, somewhat uncomfortable with its very existence, and recalling the flap his Klan paintings has caused more than two decades earlier, had no intention of publicly exhibiting it. Indeed, he did not want visitors to his studio to inadvertently learn about it, so he built a separate room, looking like an innocuous storage area but padlocked, as if it were a secret chamber in a tale by Edgar Allen Poe.⁴⁴

Christenberry worked on *The Klan Room* for approximately fifteen years, rarely showing it to viewers. In January 1979, Christenberry unlocked the padlock of the studio space to see that *The Klan Room* was gone. With the exception of the neon white cross and a red window, every sculpture, photograph, and drawing Christenberry had created of the Klan had been stolen.⁴⁵ It was suspected that the door had been taken off its hinges and removed for the theft, then screwed back into place. The room itself was not vandalized; the art was carefully removed with no calling card by the thief.⁴⁶ The room itself was likely valued at around \$50,000 in 1979, about \$195,000 today.⁴⁷ Walter Hopps, who was at the time organizing a retrospective of Christenberry's work at the Museum of Fine Arts in Montgomery, Alabama, was interviewed by the reporter, Paul Richard, and said "This was not a conventional art theft, the thieves stole it on purpose. They went after a sequestered, unique, highly idiosyncratic work of art."⁴⁸

⁴³ William Christenberry, 190

⁴⁴ William Christenberry, 194

⁴⁵ Paul Richard, "The Missing Klan Room" *The Washington Post*, March 17, 1979

⁴⁶ *Working from Memory*, 80

⁴⁷ Richard

⁴⁸ Richard

It was suspected that the Klan was not involved first-handedly, but the theft remains to this day unsolved, with no suspects.⁴⁹ Christenberry and his wife Sandy, who had two small children at the time of the theft, were afraid for their lives, and waited two months for a ransom note or sign from the perpetrator. When none came, they went public with the art theft the following March.⁵⁰ Despite the fear from the theft of *The Klan Room*, Christenberry did rebuild *The Klan Room*, the new installation containing several hundred objects.⁵¹ In her 1996 book, Trudy Wilner Stack writes on the privilege Christenberry had as a white Southerner creating *The Klan Room*, “Christenberry understands that he is part of a despicable evil, not by direct involvement, but by the color of his skin. This single criterion has gotten countless African Americans lynched, shot, tortured, and raped at the hands of organized race hatred. Christenberry is lucky in that he can survive his color; as an artist he interrogates the painful complexities of that privilege.”⁵²

William Christenberry died from complications of Alzheimer’s Disease in 2016, however, Hale County’s artistic marriage to its vernacular structures did not die with him. In 1993, Samuel Mockbee and Dennis “D.K.” Ruth, both Southerners themselves, founded the Rural Studio, a studio affiliated with Auburn University in Alabama.⁵³ The Rural Studio works with undergraduate students at Auburn and members of Newbern, Alabama—a well-traveled site of Christenberry—to design buildings using reclaimed materials such as car windshields, street

⁴⁹ Adno

⁵⁰ Richard

⁵¹ *Working from Memory*, 81

⁵² Stack, 40

⁵³ Hensel, 43: I thought it would also be interesting to say, in an odd sense of parallelism, that “D.K.”, Dennis Ruth’s nickname is the same nickname as Christenberry’s grandfather, Daniel Keener “D.K.” Christenberry, the same grandfather that built the home the photographer would grow up in in Stewart, Alabama. Not particularly pertinent, but it is a nice poetic parallel.

signs, wood, and donated carpet samples.^{54,55} Newbern was one of the many towns that thrived in the antebellum era, but contemporary Newbern has a population of less than 300 people, with a general store, a post office, and the Rural Studio. Author Andrea Oppenheimer Dean lists farming, catfish and cattle, as the only sources of employment in the town.⁵⁶

These include free homes for the citizens of Hale County, a farm, and the town hall in Newbern. These new structures are designed with the history and culture of Hale County in mind. In an article on the Rural Studio, Botz-Bornstein discusses the marriage of aesthetics and junk culture in the South and the Rural Studio as “Despite the provocative forms and the use of industrial materials, these houses seem to have become part of the landscape, something they have in common with the Alabama houses photographed by Christenberry or Walker Evans...(The Rural Studio is) a kind of vernacular experimental art, dependent on an unusual economic situation seems to have been practiced here for decades.”⁵⁷

Michael Ulrich Hensel describes the effect on these new vernacular buildings “In their steady accumulation these projects have begun to reshape the communities in which they are located...In addition, Rural Studio remains outward- and forward-looking in its approach, re-envisioning its own facilities into a self-efficient productive farm charged with producing 75 per cent of its own food.”⁵⁸ Even after the death of founder Sam Mockbee due to cancer in 2001, the Rural Studio continues its humanitarian efforts while remaining environmentally sustainable, as well as in-keeping with the culture of the South, working to blend the new construction with the

⁵⁴ Botz-Bornstein, 16

⁵⁵ Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, “Rural Studio” *Encyclopedia of Alabama*. Accessed February 12, 2021.

⁵⁶ Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, *Rural Studio: Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency*. New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2002, 65

⁵⁷ Botz-Bornstein, 18

⁵⁸ Hensel, 43

aesthetics of the vernacular buildings of Hale County, many photographed by William Christenberry.

The Rural Studio is further elevating the views on the vernacular started with Agee, and Evans, that continued with Christenberry. They are doing this by creating structures that do not exist solely to fill a basic survival need, shelter, but also to be works of art. The first house built by the studio in 1994, Hay Bale House, was created for Shepherd and Alberta Bryant, an elderly couple originally living with their grandchildren in an unheated shelter with no plumbing.⁵⁹ Hay Bale House (Fig. 15) was an innovation in cheap, effective insulation; the students used polyurethaned bales of hay within the stucco walls to insulate the house. The exterior of the house has a large, shaded porch, with high ceilings and a sharp, angular roof. This was one of the requests of the Bryants, as well as enough rooms for each of the grandchildren, large enough to have a bed and a desk, satisfied by Hay Bale House's three "barrel-shaped niches" in the back of the main living quarters.⁶⁰ After the passing of Mockabee in 2001, the leadership of the Rural Studio passed to his protégé, Andrew Freear (Fig. 16), who steered the Rural Studio towards longer-term projects that benefit the larger community, such as the Newbern Firehouse and the Newbern Little League Baseball Field, while also focusing on a "elegant, twenty-first century" design of the structures, rather than Mockabee's "quirkiness", according to Dean.⁶¹ The photographic work of Christenberry documenting the ruination of the buildings of Hale County has given way to the construction of the Rural Studio, where new, eclectic works of art are being constructed for the citizens of the Black Belt region.

⁵⁹ "Rural Studio"

⁶⁰ "Rural Studio"

⁶¹ "Rural Studio": Figure 11 depicts the Lions Park Playscape in Greensboro Alabama. This was a relatively new project that was completed in 2010. The playground is made from old oil drums used originally to store mint oil.

Andrea Oppenheimer Dean describes Hale County, Alabama as a “left behind place,” but out of the ruination of buildings in the impoverished Black Belt, William Christenberry’s work exists in a place of compassion and respect for the land.⁶² Elizabeth Broun writes on Christenberry’s work:

For me, Christenberry’s art straddles the paradox of past and present. Rural Alabama still exists, like rural life throughout the South and Midwest and elsewhere, and his art is evidence of its sturdy and stubborn persistence. True, it has mostly vanished from the national consciousness and media, though it’s occasionally trotted out to market the founder’s values or a new week cracker, or, and Verlin Kilkenborg’s essays in the *New York Times*, to celebrate the simple life. But a short trip through rural Alabama’s farm towns quickly displaces gentrified notions of quaintness with the realities of economic hard times and a resigned “making do.” It can feel a lot like a journey into the past, but this is an illusion.⁶³

Christenberry’s focused dedication to Hale County stems from a love of his home. What sets him apart from the more famous photographers and writers that came through the South—Walker Evans and the FSA photographers—was his status as a child of the South.⁶⁴ He knew and loved the landscape because he came from it. This was his home, and he documented the effects of the cultural ruination that were the echoes of the end of the Civil War, as well as the neglect of the region.

⁶² Dean, 1

⁶³ *William Christenberry*, 15

⁶⁴ James Agee, writer of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is from Knoxville, Tennessee:

Figures



Fig 1: Christenberry, William. *Building with False Brick Siding, Warsaw, Alabama*, 1974, archival pigment print, 16in x 22in, shared edition of 25, Jackson Fine Art Gallery, Atlanta, GA, <https://www.jacksonfineart.com/artists/william-christenberry/works/26339/>



Fig 2: Christenberry, William. *Building with False Brick Siding, Warsaw, Alabama*, 1984, digital pigment print on Hahnemuhle paper, 8in x 10in, edition of 25, Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Beverly Hills, CA. <https://www.marcselwynfineart.com/exhibitions/william-christenberry2#tab:slideshow>



Fig 3: Christenberry, William. *Building with False Brick Siding, Warsaw, Alabama*, 1994, archival pigment print, Jackson Fine Art Gallery, Atlanta, GA, <https://www.jacksonfineart.com/artists/william-christenberry/works/26339/>



Fig. 4: Lange, Dorothea, *Hoe Culture in the South: negro farm hand, near Birmingham, Alabama, July 1936*, Birmingham, Alabama, 1936, ferrotyped silver gelatin print, 8 x 10 in., Jackson Fine Art Gallery, Atlanta, Georgia



Fig. 5: Wolcott, Marion Post, *Children of tenant farmers, one with rickets, near Wadesboro, North Carolina*, Wadesboro, North Carolina, 1939, printed ca. 1977, silver gelatin print, 13 7/8 x 10 7/8 in., International Center of Photography, New York City, NY, accession no. 751.1984



Fig 6: Evans, Walker, *The Cotton Room at Frank Tenge's Farm, Hale County, Alabama*, Hale County, Alabama, 1936, silver gelatin print, 8 ½ x 6 9/16 in., International Center of Photography, New York City, NY, accession no. P.G.2012.1



Fig. 7: Evans, Walker, *Sharecropper Bud Fields and his family at home. Hale County, Alabama, Hale County, Alabama, 1935 or 1936, photographic print, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., call number LOT 991, v. 1.*



Fig. 8: Walker Evans (seated) speaking to students in Professor Gay Burke's photography class in 1975 (William Christenberry is standing in the top right corner). Wayne Sides, "Gay Burke and Art Photography in Alabama" The University of North Alabama Department of Art and Art History, April 16th 2013, accessed March 2 2021



Fig. 9: Christenberry, William. *Christenberry Family Home, near Stewart, Alabama*, Hale County, Alabama, 1994, printed 2004, dye coupler print, 18 ¼ x 23 in., High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, accession number 2014.172 <https://high.org/collections/christenberry-family-home-near-stewart-alabama/>



Fig 10: Christenberry, William. *Dream Building II*, 1981, mixed media, 27 3/4in x 13in x 13in, The Kreeger Museum, Washington, D.C. https://www.kreegermuseum.org/about-us/collection/sculpture/William-Christenberry_Dream-Building-II



Fig 11: Christenberry, William. *Palmist Building (Winter)*, Havana Junction, Alabama, 1981, pigment print mounted to dilbond, 39 ¼ in x 49 ½ in, edition of 9 + 4APs, Jackson Fine Art Gallery, Atlanta, GA, <https://www.jacksonfineart.com/artists/william-christenberry/works/29386/>



Fig 12: Christenberry, William. *Palmist Building (Summer)*, Havana Junction, Alabama, 1980, chromogenic print mntd, 33 9/10 in x 39 1/3 in, Artnet, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/william-christenberry/palmist-building-summer-havanna-junction-alabam-aa-VyNodBedLlotbWWn7Cyg2w2>



Fig 13: Installation view of "The Klan Room," 1979.

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Fig 14: Christenberry, William. *From The Klan Room*, 1982, chromogenic print, 14 1/8 in x 9 1/4 in, Telfair Museums, Savannah, GA. <https://www.telfair.org/artwork/7861/>



Fig 15: Hay Bale House, interior/exterior, Newbern, Alabama
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Fig. 16: Lions Park Playscape, Greensboro, Alabama, 2010
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