



Smithsonian
***Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture***

Smithsonian American Art Museum

News

March 15, 2006

Media only: Susan Kenney Battle (202) 275-1592
Laura Baptiste (202) 275-1595
Media Web site: <http://americanart.si.edu/press>
Public only: (202) 633-1000

Smithsonian American Art Museum Presents William Christenberry's Art

“Passing Time: The Art of William Christenberry” will be on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum from July 1 through July 8, 2007. This exhibition, a survey of past and present work, features more than 60 of Christenberry’s photographs, drawings, paintings, sculptures and building constructions—some seen here for the first time. Christenberry selected both the works included in this exhibition and the adjoining installation of folk art from the museum’s permanent collection.

William Christenberry (b. 1936) looks for the spirit of Southern culture in the landscape and architecture of rural Alabama. Drawing from his formal training, family traditions and a lasting relationship with his boyhood home in Alabama, Christenberry has spent the past 50 years creating a remarkable body of work that explores all aspects of life and experience.

“Though his work is inspired by the American South, Christenberry’s overall themes are universal, touching on family, culture, nature and the spiritual,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. “His artworks are poetic assessments of a sense of place, landscape, aging, memory and the passing of time.”

The folk art and commercial signs that surrounded Christenberry as a child continue to influence his aesthetic sensibilities and are prominent in many of his works. “Alabama Wall I,” a metal construction, includes bits of collected tin signage patched together to echo his mother’s quilting. His strong sense of craftsmanship has roots in his father’s woodworking skills; his structures and monuments, such as “Spratt Church,” reflect the handcrafted objects and vernacular architecture of rural Alabama.

Christenberry left Alabama in 1961. Though he never returned there to live, he has always related much of his work to his experiences growing up in the South. He explained, “Not because I dislike it, but because living outside it, I can see it more objectively.”

Christenberry was strongly influenced by Walker Evans and James Agee’s seminal literary work “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.” Evans’ straight-on photography and Agee’s penetrating

poetics are wholly evident in Christenberry's visual documents. The book, which deals with the integrity of the rural poor living through the Great Depression, was written and photographed in rural Tuscaloosa, Ala. in 1936; the year of Christenberry's birth.

Christenberry received a bachelor's degree and a master's degree from the University of Alabama in 1959. Shortly thereafter, he began experimenting with a Brownie camera and in the mid-1970s, Christenberry created his first building construction inspired by his own photographs. Christenberry teaches at the Corcoran College of Art + Design in Washington, D.C. and has received numerous awards, fellowships and grants including the Lyndhurst Foundation Prize, a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship and an Art Matters grant. In 2005 he gave a lecture titled "Southern Views" as part of the Clarice Smith Distinguished Lectures in American Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Christenberry is represented by Hemphill Fine Arts in Washington, D.C. and Pace/MacGill Gallery in New York City.

Publication

"William Christenberry" is co-published by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Aperture Foundation in New York, with a foreword by Elizabeth Broun and essays by Walter Hopps, Andy Grundberg and Howard N. Fox.

Credit

"Passing Time: The Art of William Christenberry" is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The Smithsonian American Art Museum collection began with gifts of art donated to the federal government in 1829 and has evolved into one of the world's most important American art holdings, with approximately 40,000 artworks in all media, spanning more than three centuries. The museum's National Historic Landmark building, currently under renovation, is located at Eighth and F Streets N.W. in the heart of a revitalized downtown arts district, above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station (Red, Yellow and Green lines). When the building opens July 1, it will be an outstanding showcase for American art and portraiture that celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans.

Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 357-1729 (TTY). Recorded information: (202) 275-1500. Please visit the museum's Web site at www.americanart.si.edu or www.reynoldscenter.org.

###

Note to Editors: Selected high-resolution images for publicity only may be downloaded from <ftp://saam-press@ftp.si.edu>. Call (202) 275-1594 for the password. Additional information about the exhibition will be available from the museum's online press room.