

ArtSeen

Joe Minter: We Lost Our Spears

By William Corwin



Joe Minter, *Two in the Field*, 1996. Welded found metal, 50 x 32 x 16 inches. Courtesy Cary Whittier.

Eight welded metal sculptures stand resolutely on a pale blue ground in the small storefront gallery of March, all facing outwards towards the street. The number and the nature of the figures makes it hard not to think of the back row of one side of a chess set breaking ranks and standing center stage. Most of these characters seem like warriors or guards; they are armed, or, as the title of one—*We Lost Our Spears* (1989)—suggests, recently disarmed. Some bear crosses on their heads and bodies in the form of tire-irons—*Three Crosses in Paradise* (1989), *Geese in Formation* (2001)—while others seem pensive and stately. Whether this is actually a chess set is irrelevant, and a well-conceived conceit on the part of the curator, because Minter's figures are members of the resistance, and they each seem to have their responsibilities: protective, spiritual, or strategic. As we are all currently very well aware, armies of resistance have determination, but still suffer under the burden that their action is in response to an outside oppression. Minter's sculptures have always reacted against the atrocity of slavery, and most of the figures in his pantheon are, or were, slaves. Of the eight figures, only the sculptures *Geese in Formation* and *The Tools of the Young Sharecropper* (1998) are not enchained. The stately, vertical *Tools of the Young Sharecropper* stands at the center of the arrangement, possibly the king or queen, with a blank and indifferent shovel for a face. Despite the fact that the figure has no chains, its "neck" is encased in pickaxe heads, either as a form of manacle, or a weighty necklace of state—either way, this is not a free being.

Minter's work centers on a site-specific project, "African Village in America" in Birmingham, Alabama, and his medium is much more varied than the metal found-objects: the exhibition at March Gallery presents solely metal work, which casts Minter in a modernist light, creating correlations with such artists as David Smith, Louise Nevelson, Melvin Edwards, Mark di Suvero, and even Marcel Duchamp. Despite being removed from its original context, the work straddles both reading as actively political and mytho-poetical, as well as formal analysis as a juxtaposition of industrial and agricultural forms. Minter plays with the idea that no matter what arrangement one places found objects into, the mind will almost inevitably gravitate towards a reading of the human figure. He is analytical in this process. The eight pieces on display run the gamut from very figurative, such as *We Lost Our Spears and Two in the Field* (1996), to *In Control of the Mule* (1989) or *Geese in Formation*, which are concertedly non-figural in their composition but still seem to harbor a vague implication of a body, or bodies. Minter's use of threshing blades for the extremities of his "figures," no matter how rusted, also adds a simultaneously threatening and practical innovation to the Duchampian readymade discourse. We often see the readymade as a relatively benign and amusing sculptural manifestation. By predicating his works on an unflinching presentation of African enslavement, and using sharp and scary objects to highlight that, Minter offers us an alternative, non-Eurocentric readymade.

In recognizing the fearsome readymade, it's important to investigate Minter's choice of objects, as they specifically imply certain themes from slavery. There is the relating of agricultural implements to slavery: the arms and legs of *We Lost Our Spears and Two in the Field* are made from the V-shaped blades of threshers or harvesters. Proceeding from this anthropomorphization of the tool is the acknowledgment of where these found objects come from: it is removal of the tool from the machine. This indicates a fluid movement from enslaved person as vehicle to mechanical vehicle—prompting the question of what has changed and highlighting Minter's bigger question of what has become of the slaves? There is the chain, an effective symbol used again and again, and its correlative the twin—people chained together through cruelty but also mutual support and love. There are the rotating circular blades and wheels, reminiscent of the torture devices frequently affixed to the necks of enslaved people and used to imprison and isolate them. But, in the piece *In Control of the Mule*, there was a trio of small horseshoes, each supporting one of the three upright forms in the composition, surreptitiously welded at the base of the piece. Horseshoes have many meanings—most obviously to shoe horses, animals which were used by overseers to control slaves. But there is the undeniable reading of the horseshoe as good luck—a glimmer of hope tucked into the base of these three enchained figures. This is the resistant double nature of Minter's work—these enslaved figures he depicts are as resilient and strong as the sturdy rusted iron they are made from, and despite the chains and the abuse, they never stop standing.