







## INSIDE/OUT

by Mark Sloan

On a drive through the small, rustic town of Seale, Alabama, those in the know may make a stop at Butch Anthony's idiosyncratic Museum of Wonder. Further down the road, one may also encounter a few shipping containers stacked on top of each other, packed with oddities and artifacts, ranging from taxidermized animals to bizarre antiques. Conceived by artist Butch Anthony, the Museum of Wonder and its attendant drive-through counterpart exemplify his fantastical and prolific body of work.

Anthony's works are an admixture of hokum and earnestness. Anthony started his career in the folk-art idiom after a painting of a turnip made by his friend John Henry Toney sold for \$50 when it was in a window of a gas station. He then tried his own hand at making things that tourists would buy. This journey led him to experiment with many different kinds of materials, and to meet people from all over the world who made their way to Seale, and later to his Museum of Wonder. He is now, most assuredly, working in the fine art tradition and creating art that easily converses with other works created by contemporary artists.



*Inside/Out* consists of new images, assemblages, and installations created specifically for this exhibition. As a multi-faceted self-taught artist, Anthony creates works that investigate and appropriate images from the American vernacular. His practice includes painting X-ray-like skeletons on top of antique portraits in elaborate, often gilded frames. He calls this practice "Intertwanglism." Though Anthony's work emanates from the lineage of so-called "outsider" artists, his works are unmistakably informed by art history. The term "folk art" is generally applied to traditional media such as wood carving, quiltmaking, functional pottery, weaving—practices that are passed down from generation to generation. Anthony's work often resonates the charming immediacy of folk art because of our familiarity of the selected materials, yet this surface appeal is often undermined by the conceptual premise.

Some works evince a biting sarcasm or ironic wit, while others poke fun at our consumerist society. There are several layers of meaning embedded in Anthony's work. For a few of the works in this exhibition, the artist hired a Chinese painter to create 6 x 4-foot enlargements of appropriated images he sends. Anthony then reworks the surface of these commissioned paintings, melding appropriation and global commerce with insouciant graffiti-like additions. Now, many of these paintings become more elaborate with the expansive addition of bones, artifacts, and shadow boxes that amplify the visual and conceptual presence of the piece.

An avid collector of unique and bizarre objects, Anthony's Museum of Wonder, is a modern-day cabinet of curiosities filled with art, artifacts, and antiques including the world's largest gallstone and an actual footprint from a Sasquatch. Anthony also hosts the Possum Trot Auction, a weekly junk and art auction (featured on television's *American Pickers*) on his 80-acre parcel of land in Seale that has been in his family for generations. In addition to making and selling art, producing bizarre roadside attractions, and collecting found objects to incorporate into his own artwork, Anthony built his own house and several outbuildings which have been featured in *The New York Times*. He has also collaborated on many projects with Rural Studio—an off-campus design-build program of the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture of Auburn University and one of the most remarkable architecture programs in the United States.



As a sculptor, Anthony's work often employs the detritus of our disposable society and, out of this, he constructs works that are original in concept and execution. He has become adept at creating imaginative combinations that subtly comment on the human condition. These assemblages then gain strength by being seen in the context of his other works, creating a kind of chain reaction that reinforces his primary message.

This exhibition brings together several of Anthony's creative explorations over the past few years. Singular portraits, assemblage sculpture, and installations combine to create a working model of the inside of Anthony's restless mind.

*Mark Sloan is the Director and Chief Curator of the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art.*

*This exhibition is dedicated to John Henry Toney (1928-2019).*



Left panel, top: *Audubon*, 2018. Mixed media. Photo by Mark Sloan. Left panel, bottom: View of the Museum of Wonder Drive-Thru in Seale, Alabama. Photo by Tim Hursley. Center panel: *Tongue Wagging*, 2019. Mixed media. Photo by Mark Sloan. Right panel, top: *No One to Blame*, 2018. Mixed media. Photo by Mark Sloan. Right panel, bottom: Installation view of various works by Butch Anthony. Photo by Mark Sloan. All images are courtesy of the artist.