

Bert Long Jr.'s
Quest, 1983, at
Deborah Colton
Gallery

COLLECTING ONE OF TEXAS' GREATEST ON CULTURE PLACE

A RARE BODY OF WORK BY THE LATE TEXAS ARTIST AND ROME PRIZE WINNER **BERT LONG JR.** IS OFFERED EXCLUSIVELY THROUGH THE ARTIST'S ESTATE VIA HIS LONG-TIME DEALER, DEBORAH COLTON GALLERY. **CATHERINE D. ANSPON** TELLS WHY THIS TALENT NEEDS TO BE ON YOUR ACQUISITION RADAR. AVAILABLE EXCLUSIVELY ON CULTURE PLACE.

Today, the biggest excitement in both the museum world and the art marketplace swirls around contemporary and historic Black artists. Institutions and private collectors alike are laser-focused on seminal figures in the newly minted canon of Black art history, as well as current Black art makers who propel a prescient dialogue about race forward, commenting on and critiquing the African-American experience.

Bert Long Jr. (1940-2013) is overdue for broader national recognition. In

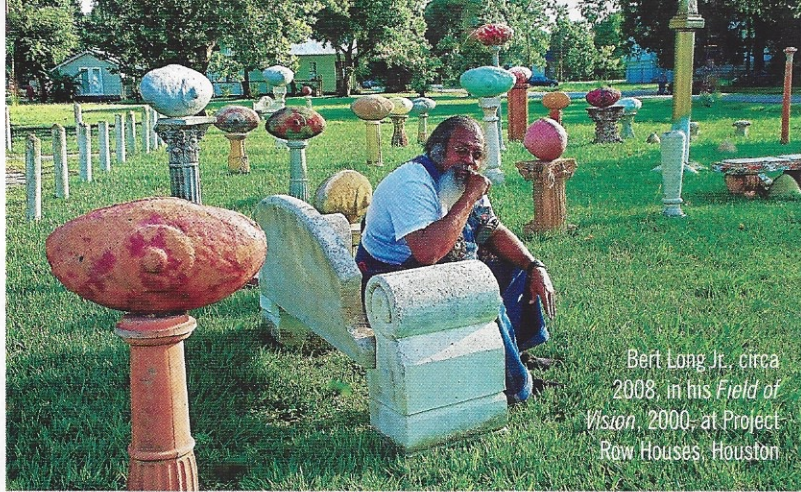
much the same way that Dorothy Hood's limpid color field-meets-surrealist canvases have been rediscovered, now is the moment to take a closer look at Long's four decades at the center of the Houston art world — as well as his trajectory that took him from the Fifth Ward to the American Academy in Rome, from a banquet-chef gig to an all-encompassing life as an artist with dual studios in Texas and Spain.

Along the way, the awards piled up, as did his contributions to our Texas cultural landscape. He co-founded Project Row Houses and published the magazine *Houston Art Scene*. He

was a catalyst during the early days of the scene spun around Lawndale Art Center and the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston; years later, his best buddies were forged from those heady times, James Surls and John Alexander. He exhibited at the MFAH in "Fresh Paint: The Houston School" and was named Texas Artist of the Year in 1990. He also received the rare accolade of a Rome Prize residency (1990-1991) and was collected by important patrons and institutions, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; NYC's Metropolitan Museum of Art; Dallas Museum of Art; the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin; and in the private collections of Orange Show founder Marilyn Oshman and Texas Patrons of the Year Anita and Gerald Smith and Poppi Massey.

A prolific painter who also often ventured into assemblage sculpture, he taught himself art history through exhaustive museum and book study but lacked a formal art degree. That did not stop Long: During his lifetime, he amassed a resume (which he often carried around to proffer to art critics or collectors) the size of a phone book, bursting with profiles, critical reviews, and invitations to gallery and museum exhibitions — more than 100 in number — that featured his outsized talent. Indeed, Long willed himself to become a patriarch of the Texas art scene and was one of its most original energies.

Both *Dwell* and *PaperCity* featured Long's reimagined shotgun house in the heart of the Fifth Ward, designed by Brett Zamore. Above all, Long was a vivid presence in my own life. We connected from the day in 1998 when I sighted him, a charismatic presence wearing denim overalls and a bolo-style amulet in the Project Row Houses' installation devoted to his late wife, Connie. We became fast friends. I would often be invited to break bread with the artist at his Fifth Ward home and discuss future ideas and schemes, which were always on the grand scale: a performance artwork spun around an epic dinner party entitled *Feast*, creating an ad campaign for a luxury retailer where Long's ice sculptures in a vitrine provided an artful backdrop



Bert Long Jr., circa 2008, in his *Field of Vision*, 2000, at Project Row Houses, Houston

for high jewelry, and an endgame for a massive Vegas-style ice spectacle combining performance and a multi-ton ephemeral sculpture that would be wildly embraced by the public and enchant a broad audience.

Long passed away in 2013, and our art world still feels diminished. As a tribute in his honor, two weeks after his death, The Menil Collection screened John Guess Jr.'s biographic film *Bert*, narrated by John Alexander. That same year, a definitive book came out: *Bert Long: The Artist's Journey*, written by a former Rice University professor, the late Thomas McEvelley.

Since Long's death, Deborah Colton Gallery has represented the estate and kept the artist front and center with inclusion in two art fairs (most recently, the 2014 edition of the Dallas Art Fair) and seven gallery exhibitions, including the now-on-view "20 in 20: Part 2." The gallery also collaborated with the Houston Museum of African American Culture on a museum retrospective for Long in 2019, "Riding the Tiger: The Art of Bert Long, Jr., which saw the exhibition's title piece — arguably his magnum opus — the painting *Riding the Tiger*, 2000, acquired by Houston art patrons Craig and Tatiana Massey. Emblematic of his tenacious approach to life as an artist, Long said of his self-portrait, "Every day we wake up, and we get on this tiger. It's on fire. There is no ground below it. The ocean is above it ... The tiger has ferocious claws and a mouth full of teeth that will hurt you. Life is not easy. Life will chew you up, claw you up, set you on fire, toss you off a ravine, and pound your ass. And what you have to do every day is wake up and say okay, I'm ready to get on

that tiger!"

Colton tells *PaperCity*: "Bert Long believed that as an artist, he had an obligation to enhance people's lives through his art. Having been included in prominent exhibitions and recognized throughout Texas, nationally, and internationally, Bert Long did accomplish much of his objectives during his lifetime. The power of his art has yet to reach its full potential though, and I am confident that his impact will reach far beyond what [even] he had dreamed."

THE CULTURE PLACE COLLECTION

For Culture Place, Colton, in tandem with the artist's estate, selected a ten-piece portfolio encompassing the artist's major themes about growing up Black in America and carving out a life as a creator. Key works from Long's most significant decades are represented mirroring the topics that the artist held to be the most urgent — concerns that still powerfully speak to our time.

The earliest piece in the collection curated for Culture Place is *The Force or Bottom Bound*. Dating from 1977 and displaying the image of a storm-tossed clipper ship — which we read as bearing a cargo of slaves — the canvas is painted in a tight realist style with an exquisite, almost ghostly surface that harkens to 19th-century techniques and aesthetics. Colton says of the canvas: "It's known as one of Bert's very first works ever exhibited and is a very important painting.

The sculpture *Quest*, 1983,

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highlights Long's gift for assemblage. "*Quest* has been in many institutional and museum exhibitions [as well as published in *Texas Artists Today*] and is a trademark work of Bert's," Colton says. Look closely at *Quest*, and the viewer will discover Long's high/low universe, with offerings attached to a suitcase traveling on a pair of feet; the valise has burst open to reveal an array of worldly contents, from a Diner's Club credit card, steering wheel, and keys to liquor bottles, orange peel, a frying pan, a bone fragment, harmonica, and Long's own publication, *Houston Art Scene*. From three decades later comes *Happiness*, 2010, an unsettling portrait that can be read as a likeness of the artist, delicately delineated with thin washes of color, contrasted with its robust, handmade Hydrostone frame bearing text. The face in *Happiness* is anything but, with eyes crookedly placed upon the head and an expression of unease.

Discover the complete Bert Long Jr. estate portfolio at Deborah Colton Gallery exclusively through Culture Place. Concurrently, see — and acquire — a curated exhibition of important Black contemporary artists offered by Culture Place galleries, live January 20 through February 3.

Bert Long Jr.'s *Happiness*, 2010, at Deborah Colton Gallery



Artworks Exclusively Available on CulturePlace.com

