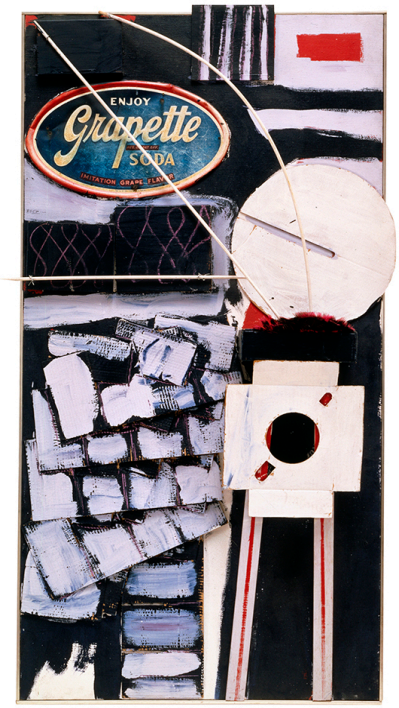
Art in America

FOR SIX DECADES, WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY CAPTURED THE RAMSHACKLE VERNACULAR OF THE SOUTH

By *Zachary Fine* February 19, 2020 1:07pm

William Christenberry: *Palmist Building, Winter View, Havana Junction, AL*, 1981, dye-transfer print, 20 by 24 inches; at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art.

William Christenberry (1936–2016) is best known for the small color photographs of Hale County, Alabama, he began taking in the 1960s: stark frontal portraits of ramshackle houses, sun-bleached billboards, and trees choked by kudzu. Born and raised in nearby Tuscaloosa, Christenberry spent most of his life out of state—in New York City, Memphis, and, finally, Washington, D.C., where he settled in 1968—but returned to Hale County frequently. He found a way to memorialize the South that showed its mixture of impoverished hurt and beauty without fetishizing ruin.



William Christenberry: *Advertisement*, 1964, mixed-media wall construction, 59 by 33 by 8 inches; at Ogden Museum of Southern Art.

While studying painting and sculpture at the University of Alabama, Christenberry casually took pictures using a Kodak Brownie camera he'd been gifted as a child. His attitude toward photography became more serious in 1960, when he came across Walker Evans's documentary photographs of Hale County in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Evans directly encouraged Christenberry when the two met in the early 1960s, calling his Brownie photographs "perfect little poems." In "Memory is a Strange Bell," the Ogden Museum of Southern Art's compact retrospective of Christenberry's six-decade-long career, ample space was given to his photographs, but much of the exhibition was dedicated to his forgotten, and often less than successful, attempts at painting, drawing, and sculpture.

Throughout Christenberry's career, and across mediums, he cleaved to certain motifs, particularly Southern vernacular architecture and signage. In early paintings like *Fruit Stand* (1963), a brightly colored composition depicting crescent-shaped watermelons and drippy boxes of peaches and pears, and *Beale Street* (1964), a field of crudely painted symbols and storefront signs topped with a collage of advertisements, Christenberry blends the Abstract Expressionist technique he learned as an art student in the 1950s and contemporary trends like Pop that he encountered in New York. While Christenberry's paintings are rather uneventful—their marriage of styles often feels garbled—his experience working in multiple mediums seems to have benefited his photography, heightening his attention to surface and detail.

In 1977, Christenberry started using a large-format 8×10 camera. The resulting placemat-size photos from the 1980s and '90s preserve his interest in Southern architecture but get closer to its surfaces. In works such as *Side of Warehouse, Newbern, Alabama* (1980), a wall entirely fills the composition with dented and ripped panels of imitation brick. Buildings in these later photographs are not carefully centered or shown in open space, as with the earlier Brownie pictures; instead, the documentary impulse gives way to one that is more artful, askew.

Christenberry's late artworks engaged with a concern that hovered only imperceptibly at the edge of his photographs: racial terror. References to the Ku Klux Klan appeared in a few of his paintings from the 1960s—including *Beale Street*, which incorporates an image of three hooded Klan members with menacing empty faces—but it returns in the 1990s as a demon to be rigorously exorcised (albeit to a somewhat tinny effect). In a 1996 series of ink drawings, "K-Houses," Klan hoods merge into stands of barren trees, while an untitled sculpture from the same year shows a limp Klan member tied by the neck to the base of a tree.

William Christenberry: *Ghost Form*, 1994, mixed-media sculpture with red soil, 16 3/4 by 34 by 20 inches; at Ogden Museum of Southern Art.

William Christenberry: *K-House*, 1996, ink on paper, 29 1/2 by 21 3/4 inches; at Ogden Museum of Southern Art.

The most compelling nonphotographic works in the show were the architectural models that Christenberry made throughout his career, which suggest votive offerings. *Palmist Building* (1975–76), for instance, is a gritty model of a clapboard house in Havana, Alabama, that Christenberry photographed repeatedly over the decades. Originally a general store run by his great-uncle, it was taken over by a palm reader, and eventually engulfed in the foliage of a chinaberry tree. The decision to rebuild this dilapidated house in miniature, plank by plank, shows how intentional Christenberry was about the subjects of his work. The buildings he chose were unloved little shrines, symbols of historical wounds and fond personal memories. They were worthy of tenderness and reverence.