



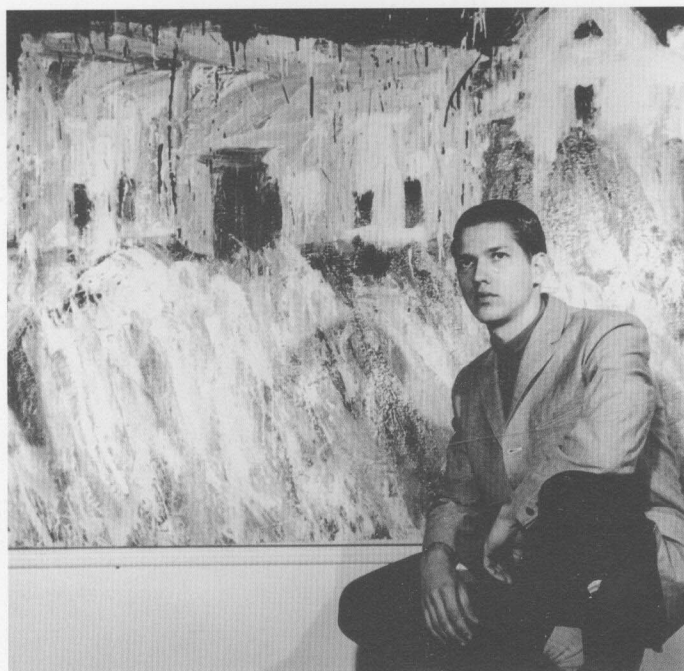
WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY
THE EARLY YEARS, 1954-1968

BY J. RICHARD GRUBER

WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY
THE EARLY YEARS, 1954-1968

J. RICHARD GRUBER

MORRIS MUSEUM OF ART
AUGUSTA, GEORGIA



WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY WITH "TENANT HOUSE I" AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA, 1960

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COVER: TENANT HOUSE II, 1960, *William Christenberry*, oil on linen, 79 1/4 x 77 1/4 in.

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In August of 1968, William Christenberry left Memphis, where he had been teaching art at Memphis State University, and moved to Washington, D.C., to join the faculty of the Corcoran Gallery School of Art. A short time later, Sandy Christenberry, his wife, arrived accompanied by a moving van. Many of the artist's early works, including a large number of the paintings and "constructions" featured in this exhibition, were taken from that van and placed in storage.

Since that time, the works Christenberry completed in his Washington studios have been exhibited and collected on a national and international level. He has achieved recognition as one of the nation's foremost color photographers. Yet, since 1968, most of the early works have remained in storage, away from view, literally hidden in the artist's spacious attic.

In the winter of 1993, I visited an exhibition of the artist's work at the Morgan Gallery in Kansas City. Even though I had worked with the artist since 1984, beginning when I was the director of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, one of the paintings in the show, "Tenant House IV" (1964), now in the Hallmark Collection, was a revelation. Another early painting, "Tenant House II" (1960), was located by Myra Morgan and entered the collection of the newly opened Morris Museum of Art later that year. By 1994, both of these paintings were featured in a traveling exhibition, "House and Home: Spirits of the South," organized by Jock Reynolds, Director of the Addison Gallery of American Art.

Earlier, in 1982 and 1983, Christenberry exhibited a selection of the paintings at the Middendorf Gallery in Washington and the Morgan Gallery in

Kansas City. Then, for another ten years, the early works remained generally overlooked. In 1994, Mark Spencer featured early works in "William Christenberry," an exhibition at The Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art. Last year, heartened by the growing interest in his early years, he decided to bring all of the works out of storage. At the artist's invitation, I went to his studio, accompanied by Keith Claussen, Director of the Morris Museum, in the spring of 1994 for a private "unveiling" of the long-hidden works. There, in great amazement, we saw his normally pristine studio completely filled with paintings, drawings and his dynamic "constructions," many of which were still covered by the dust they had accumulated after decades in the family attic. This exhibition, already under consideration, became an immediate reality for us that evening.

It has been a pleasure to work with Bill Christenberry, who has been generous with the sharing of his time and the loan of his art. Both Bill and Sandy Christenberry have endured hours of detailed interviewing, in a wide range of locations. Bill has been most open in allowing my research in his extensive archives and studio files. Sandy added to the completion of this project in many ways, and, in a very real sense, she should be thanked for her significant role in the preservation of these works. Other members of the Christenberry family, including Mr. and Mrs. William Christenberry, Sr., have also been supportive.

Two individuals from Kansas City have been vital to this project from its inception. C. Richard Belger, as a collector and as a patron of the arts, has been a quiet force behind the renewed appreciation of Christenberry's early work since 1983. In addition to major loans from his family collection, Dick has

supported this exhibition, the catalogue and the planned national tour, making it possible to extend the scope of the project in important ways.

Myra Morgan and her husband, Jim Morgan, first met Bill Christenberry at the University of Alabama in the fall of 1954. Bill and Myra have remained friends for four decades. As the director of the Morgan Gallery since 1969, she has been a tireless advocate for his art. In many ways, she has become an equally enthusiastic supporter of this exhibition. In addition, Dennis Morgan and Lynn Berthold, both of the Morgan Gallery, have contributed notably to the show.

In Augusta, we thank William S. Morris III, Chairman of the Morris Museum of Art, for his continuing commitment to the creation of a museum dedicated to the full range of art and artists of the South. Keith Claussen, Director of the museum, has been enthusiastic in her support of this exhibition and has served as an able, and patient, editor of this publication. Catherine Wahl, Registrar, has handled the details of the movement of an extensive body of work with her usual diligence. Vince Bertucci, of Morris Communications Corporation, has created a catalogue design which embodies both the spirit of the art and the spirit of a very distinctive place, Hale County, Alabama.

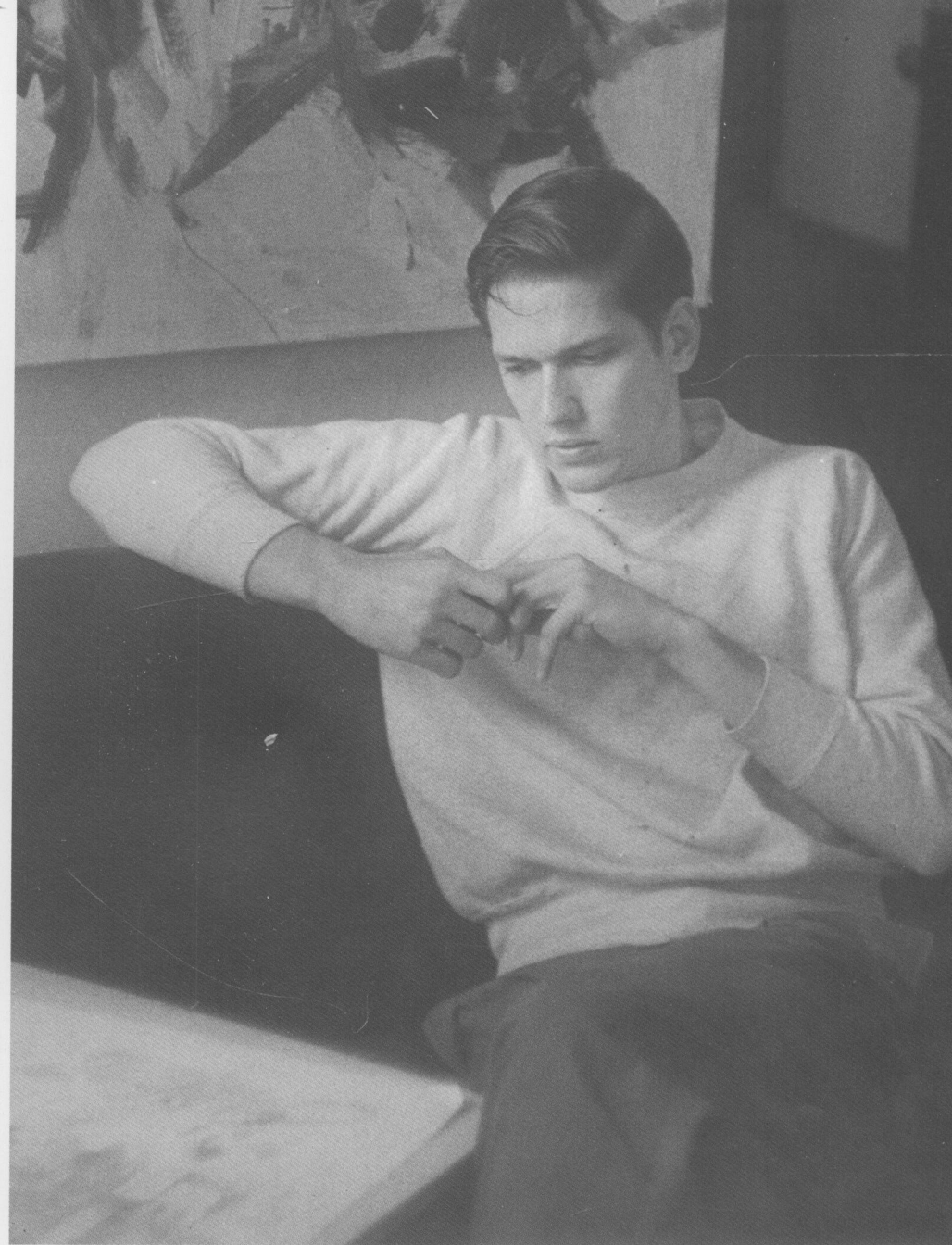
And, finally, we thank all of the lenders to the exhibition.

J. Richard Gruber

DEPUTY DIRECTOR
MORRIS MUSEUM OF ART

WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY
MEMPHIS, 1962
(DETAIL)

Photograph by William Eggleston



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*"I guess somebody would say that I am literally obsessed with that landscape
where I am from. I don't really object to that.
It is so ingrained in me. It is who I am.
The place makes you who you are, creates who you are."*

—WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY, 1994 ¹



STEWART, ALABAMA, 1961

William Christenberry
Brownie black and white photograph

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THE CHRISTENBERRYS AND HALE COUNTY

Tuscaloosa, one of the most historic cities in the state of Alabama, is located along the Black Warrior River near the site of an Indian trail crossing. A village, first established there by Creek Indians in 1809, was destroyed by the Tennessee militia in 1813. As the Indian tribes began to move west, settlers from South Carolina began to arrive, and, by 1819, the Alabama legislature had incorporated the town called "Tuskaloosa." From 1826 to 1846, when Tuscaloosa served as the capital of Alabama, the city developed rapidly.

Sophisticated new structures, including a capitol and other buildings designed by William Nichols, an architect who came to the region by way of North Carolina and England, filled the city. The University of Alabama, founded in Tuscaloosa in 1831, also featured impressive buildings designed by Nichols. Many of those important early buildings were lost, however, when Union troops burned the campus in 1865. After the war the campus was rebuilt. The state capital may have moved to Montgomery long ago but the University of Alabama remains, still the vital heart of Tuscaloosa.²

William Christenberry was born in Tuscaloosa in 1936, at the Druid City Hospital, located just beyond the old boundary of the University of Alabama campus. That hospital site is now a part of the campus and the hospital has been incorporated into the University's medical center. His birth near that campus may have been fated, or was, at least, a telling sign about his future as well as his strong sense of loyalty to the university. He lived nearby in the city, on Seventh Avenue, within sight of the campus and its imposing football stadium.

With fondness, he remembers walking over to watch the University of Alabama football team, the Crimson Tide, during its practice sessions in the fields near his home. Even his summers were spent nearby, in Hale County, where his grandparents lived, the Christenberrys outside of Stewart and the Smiths near Akron. After graduating from Tuscaloosa City High School, Christenberry studied art at the only college or university he had ever wished to attend, the University of Alabama. After earning undergraduate and graduate art degrees there, he obtained his first professional teaching position, in the Department of Fine Arts, on the Tuscaloosa campus.

Building upon the strength of his Alabama foundations, he has gone on to become a respected professor of painting at the Corcoran School of Art as well as a nationally recognized artist. Christenberry still returns to Tuscaloosa each summer with his family, driving more than 800 miles from Washington. On these trips he works, creating the photographs that are closely related to his paintings and sculptural forms, and he visits with relatives and friends, especially his parents and members of his extended family. During these trips, from family and other local Alabama football fans, Christenberry gleans information about the prospects for the upcoming Crimson Tide season, a passion he still maintains. By almost any measure, William Christenberry can be regarded as a native son of Alabama.

Tuscaloosa, the place of his birth, served as his Alabama home for most of his early years. However, nearby Hale County and the presence of his family members there exerted an equally powerful influence from an early age. Like Tuscaloosa, Hale County pos-



WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY AND ART
DEPARTMENT BUILDINGS, UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA, 1995.



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sesses handsome antebellum architecture and significant historical sites, especially in cities like Greensboro, the county seat. Important Indian sites, especially the burial mounds near Moundville, not far from the Christenberry farm, made a great impression on him as a young man. Yet, despite its pockets of affluence and historical significance, Hale County is still best known as one of the poorest counties in the state, a distinction that came to national attention during the Depression era, during the years of his early childhood.

During the 1930s, federal field agents and county extension agents commonly appeared in rural Alabama counties, including Hale County, to gather information for research purposes and to seek solutions to the dire conditions that had overtaken the state's farming populations. The statistics were potent and startling, as a recent study by Alabama historian Wayne Flynt suggests. "By 1935, Alabama contained 176,247 tenant families, 64.5 percent of all farmers in the state. Some 68,000 of these families were sharecroppers, the poorest of the poor; and white sharecropper families outnumbered blacks, 34,717 to 33,257."³ With such a large and scattered population of tenant farmers, simple and inexpensive housing forms became commonplace. In Hale County, which reflected the somber conditions evident throughout the state, the Christenberrys grew accustomed to the poor tenant farmers and their modest, often dilapidated houses.

In 1936, the year of Christenberry's birth, Walker Evans and James Agee came to the South to discover and document the effects of the Depression on tenant farming families. After exploring many regions of the South, Evans and Agee discovered exactly what they had been seeking in Hale County, not far from the Christenberry farm. The families they encountered in Hale County, all known to members of Christenberry's family, were featured in their now classic book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, published in 1941. Because of the difficult nature of the book, and its appearance after

the Depression, when public interest in its subject matter had ended, the book soon went out of print and was generally overlooked.

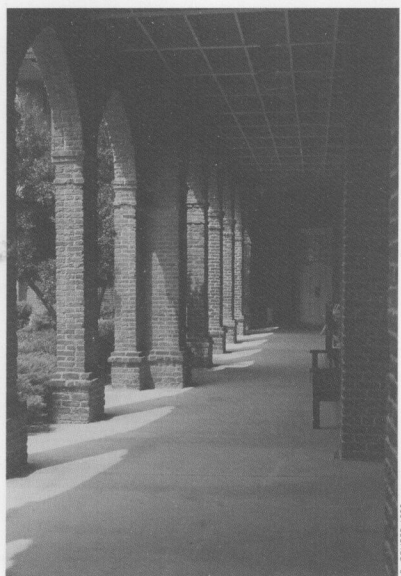
Christenberry first came upon the book when it was reissued, in a new edition, in 1960. Its discovery offered a clear and personal focus to his art at a crucial stage in his early career. Much has been written about Christenberry's relationship to that book, its influence upon his art and about his friendship with Walker Evans, which began in New York in 1961.⁴ However, Christenberry was well versed in the history of Hale County long before he came upon that book, certainly more so than either Evans or Agee had been when they came to Alabama in 1936.

For more than thirty-five years, Hale County and adjoining Perry County have served as inspiring environments for the artist. In August of 1995, on a driving trip there with Christenberry and his father, William Christenberry, Sr., one could quickly see, as had been evident on previous trips with him, that the artist was returning to the creative wellspring, to a deep and rich vein of inspiration, one he needed to revisit on a regular basis. In Hale County, where tract housing developments now creep beyond Tuscaloosa's borders, the realities of the scorching summer of 1995 were ever present. Yet, inside the air-conditioned van with the Christenberrys, it seemed we had entered a different time zone, not fully present and not quite past.

For the Christenberrys, each weathered house, each white church and its accompanying graveyard, each crossroad community and each bend along the two-lane highway seemed to bring up another story. Through these tales the history of the Christenberry and Smith families is continually maintained, updated and shared. And, through these summer visits to the sites that populate his photographs, paintings and painted sculptural forms, the artist nurtures his roots. He also leaves behind the pressures of the national art world with its ever changing trends and agendas to gather a harvest of raw materials, including real Alabama soil, which he transports back to



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WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY AT COURTYARD
OF ART DEPARTMENT, UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA, 1995

Washington. There, in his quiet studio, surrounded by his collection of worn signs from the Alabama countryside, and looking out over his flower gardens, he creates works inspired by these journeys home.

FAMILY. ART. ALABAMA.

For William Christenberry these are three constant elements that contribute to the balance, the consistency and the focus that have marked his life as well as his career. There has been a clearly evolving pattern to Christenberry's life over the past several decades and a related rhythm in each year. A central part of that pattern, and that ongoing rhythm, is the annual drive South to Alabama, the place where these elements converge.

The artist has clearly stated the importance of these trips: "By the time I get to Alabama on a trip, I just cannot wait to get out in the country and absorb it — photographically, finding objects, drawing, and coming back here [Washington] to spend the rest of the year dealing with what I feel."⁵ Each year he returns with his wife, Sandy, and his children, back to where he was born. Back to where his art began. Back to where the history of the Christenberry and Smith families is most real. Returning to Alabama now, Christenberry brings a sense of objectivity that would be difficult for him to maintain if he had not left. As he has said, "living this far away, 806 miles from Tuscaloosa, gives me a perspective on home that I don't think I would have if I still lived there. I don't think I could see it as clearly."⁶

Death and the passing of dearly loved family members, most recently, the artist's sister, Danyle, also forms a sad, and occasionally tragic, part of the Christenberry family history. Traveling through Hale and Perry counties, the Christenberrys regularly stop to visit the graves of their relatives, some of whom were part of the early history of the region.

The first Christenberrys in Alabama moved to Perry County from Tennessee and North Carolina before the Civil War. By 1916, the Christenberrys had moved into Hale County. The spirits of these relatives are kept alive through these visits and through the family's storytelling.

"I have very, very fond memories of my childhood," the artist has stated, and the stories he was told about his relatives were a special part of that childhood.⁷ He seeks to maintain those traditions when he passes stories on to his own children. In his art, Christenberry often draws upon personal and historical resources as he explores the changes evident in a familiar yet ever evolving Southern environment. Through the microcosm of Hale County he studies larger truths. Those truths are then injected into the richly layered art forms he continues to create.

The Havana Methodist Church and its graveyard are regular stops on these annual visits. Both of his Christenberry grandparents, Daniel Keener (D.K.) and Eula Duncan, are buried near the handsome white church, a structure dating from the middle of the 19th century. His grandfather, D.K. Christenberry, has always been proudly remembered as the patriarch of the Christenberry family, as one who maintained a firm hand on matters relating to both the family and the local Methodist church. He was a respected figure in Hale County. Stories about D. K. Christenberry are numerous and are often told to illustrate his proud stature with the citizens of the county. Long after his death, his descendants are still recognized and welcomed in the small towns and the country stores of Hale County, recognized by the noted "Christenberry nose."

However, as time goes on, members of the family also remember and discuss other aspects of D.K. Christenberry's life. The patriarch of the Christenberry family was, it appears, a man as often feared as respected. As a result, his life may have been considerably more isolated, and more tragic, than earlier versions of the patriarch's story have suggested. Now



CHRISTENBERRY AT WORK, IN STEWART, ALABAMA, IN THE SUMMER OF 1995.

only the artist and his father regularly visit the abandoned house where D.K. Christenberry once reigned. Years ago it was sold, along with the farm lands, by the remaining members of his family. In the summer of 1994, the front entrance and porch were obscured by hedges that reached almost to the level of the roof, creating an image that resembles one of the Surrealist paintings by Magritte that are so admired by the artist.

As his father walked the grounds, visiting meaningful sites on the property, remembering the planting of specific trees or how family members were associated with special places, Christenberry photographed the family home one more time. He prefers to concentrate on the worn and unpainted additions at the rear of the original house, the least perfect parts of the structure, especially a favorite doorway, the main entrance into the kitchen, which was the center of his grandmother's world.

Walking through that doorway, the smell of smoke and woodstove cooking still clinging to the walls and the worn wooden trim, both Christenberrys remembered the meals cooked here for the large family that filled the house. Down the hallway, the artist walked into an adjoining room, paused, remembering where his grandfather always sat and described his own participation in the required biblical readings held each evening by his grandfather. He thinks often of the man who ruled the family from this house.

In 1973, more than twenty years after his grandfather's death, the artist completed a haunting piece dedicated to D.K. Christenberry, titled "Calendar Wall." (*f. 1*) Moving to his grandfather's empty bedroom, pointing to where his bed and the original wall calendar were positioned, he told the story behind the piece. It was made from his grandfather's inscribed Cardui Calendar for the year 1947, now framed as a grouping of twelve separate serial images, shown with his grandfather's walking stick leaning against the calendar. In 1947, his grandfather's health failed, and from his bed in this front room,



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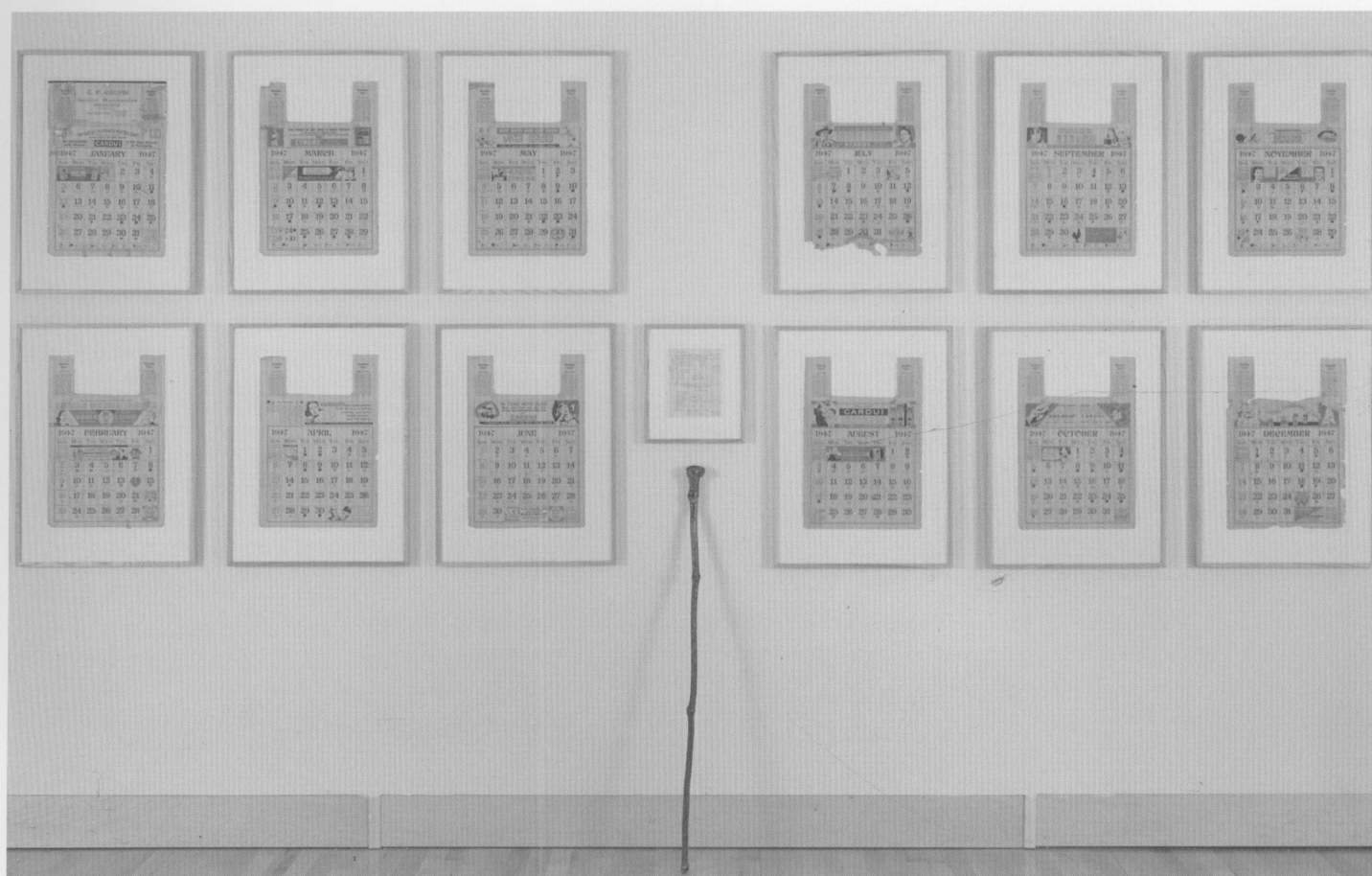
THE CHRISTENBERRY FAMILY HOUSE NEAR STEWART, ALABAMA, 1994.



DETAIL: CALENDAR WALL.

where he still dominated the family, he entered inscriptions on the calendar that documented the entire history of the Christenberry family, some of limited consequence, others of greater significance.

Like many families in the South, as elsewhere, the Christenberrys have endured painful and tragic deaths that leave deep and lingering scars. One of their greatest losses was the death of the artist's Uncle Robert. As a young man Robert had been a football player at Akron High School and had his skull fractured during a game. Even with this serious head injury, Robert was accepted for military service in 1945 and served during the final months of World War II. He was sent overseas, to Germany, where he



"Calendar Wall," and detail on previous page,
1947 Cardui calendar with walking cane.

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
NOT INCLUDED IN EXHIBITION

received another severe head injury on the battlefields. In 1946, he returned to the family farm in Stewart. Although he tried to maintain a normal life after his return, the second head injury caused him to suffer from sudden seizures. Because of these seizures, he would suddenly pass out, without warning, falling where he was standing. D.K. Christenberry could not, or would not, understand why his handsome, athletic-looking son, was no longer able to complete his farm chores and could not maintain a normal life.

Standing in the central hallway of the rambling Christenberry house, a hallway located between his father's bedroom and the boys' room in the back, William Christenberry, Sr., continues the story initiated by his son, speaking in a quiet voice. "Robert died in the boy's room. He killed himself. He used a shotgun, the family shotgun. A twelve-gauge shotgun, single barrel, a Sears and Roebuck gun." When Robert killed himself D.K. Christenberry was in the house, resting in his bed, not more than twenty-five feet away.

At the time of Robert's suicide, the artist and his father were preparing for a fishing trip near Clanton, Alabama, where they had recently moved. One of his father's co-workers found them, and told them to return to Stewart because of a death in the family. The artist remembers:

He didn't say who or how. So we had to drive seventy-five miles not knowing who was dead or anything else. We assumed it was grandpa. His Daddy. And we got there and many of my father's brothers and sisters were there. My father, being the oldest male child, was given, by one of his sisters, a handwritten note, written in pencil, that Robert had left. And one line said "I hope this makes Daddy happier." And Daddy took that note and tried to erase that. My grandfather called him into his bedroom. "I know there was a note," he said, "and I want to see it." And Daddy produced the note. My grandfather said, "I know that you

have tried to take something out of this." And he had. And he [D.K.] had to live several years, about six years, knowing that he was largely responsible for his own son's death. And in a very Christian family suicide was the ultimate sin. So we never talked about it.

Ever stoic, the elder Christenberry simply noted the following on his calendar for May 28: "1949 Robert kills himself with gun in boy's room."⁸ For the artist, his grandfather's calendar merges both the tragic and the poetic. It is a cryptic document that records, in one person's handwriting, the passage of an extended period in the life of one family, his family. In essence, it has now become a collaborative piece with his grandfather. The calendar is also an installation piece that, in the artist's view, will never be completed unless the Christenberry lineage ends.

"Calendar Wall" suggests elements found in classic Southern fiction, yet it survives as an historical accounting, still in process, of actual family events. In a 1994 interview with Mark Spencer, Christenberry described the historical framework for "Calendar Wall":

My grandfather, D.K. Christenberry, wrote in important dates going back to the nineteenth century on all twelve sheets of that calendar. The earliest date one can find on there is 1866. Another touching moment, 1951—my father, who is William Andrew Christenberry, Sr. and I am Junior and my son, Andrew, is the third—my father wrote in the death of his father. And if I outlive the death of my father, I will do the same. And I will hand on this calendar to our son, William Andrew III. That is the last thing that has been written on that calendar. It is fascinating reading and sometimes very touching—when he recorded somebody passing away or very poetic when he would record on a given spring



SITE OF THE SMITH FAMILY FARM NEAR
AKRON, ALABAMA.

*the first dove coo or whippoorwill call, when he bought his first pick-up truck, when the big oak tree fell in the front yard, and on and on. It is a beautiful thing.*⁹

In contrast, Christenberry's grandfather Smith, John Rufus Smith, is recalled in different ways, in very different types of stories. He was a gentle and openly loving man, his daughter Ruby Willard, the artist's mother, remembers. She describes an almost idyllic childhood on the Smith family farm, which was outside of Akron, about six miles from Stewart. Grandfather Smith was also a very religious man, a Fundamental Baptist, but one who chose to express his Christian beliefs in a gentler fashion.

During a recent drive back from the Smith farm lands, the artist slowed to point out Five Mile Creek, located only a short distance from the Smith house, where his grandfather was baptized shortly before he died of a heart attack. In the past, the artist has tried to photograph the area, hoping to find a way to express the emotions he feels there. Yet, as he explains:

Some things you are just too close to. You can't create enough distance to function. This is true of my Grandfather Smith. He was totally immersed, in a total immersion baptism, when he was sixty-four years old in Five Mile Creek. And I was there as a boy. It was 1945. I was nine years old. And for years, I went back to look at that creek with my camera. Even set up the big camera. Put it on its tripod. But not yet have I been able to make a picture or attempted to make a picture to capture it. I don't think I can recapture the feelings of that time.

Ruby Willard Smith Christenberry, the artist's mother, considers her upbringing to have been somewhat different from that of her husband, who grew

up in a larger family outside the neighboring community of Stewart. The two met in the ninth grade when he transferred from the Martin-Stewart school, located one mile down the road from his house, to the school in Akron. Later, when he began to court Willard, he often rode one of the Christenberry family mules on the six-mile trip to Akron. His cousin, George Christenberry, who later became the president of Augusta College, recently recalled visiting the farm in Stewart and joining young William as he embarked on one of his evening mule rides to the Smith's house. D.K. Christenberry cautioned the two young men about staying out late. He was less worried, George Christenberry recalls, about them than he was about the mule. The mule was needed on the farm the next day and he wanted it to be well rested for a full day of work.¹⁰

There were four daughters and three sons in the Smith family. Like the Christenberrys, they also learned how to endure family losses. One son, Alvin, died as a child. Another son, John Elliott, was a casualty of World War II, as the artist explained: "My uncle, John Elliott, was drafted at the beginning of the war, around the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor. He was immediately captured on Corregidor, when the Philippines fell. And he died a sad death, in a prisoner of war camp on Bataan." That loss and the manner of his death haunted the family for years. Later, her younger brother, Eugene, died prematurely. The women of the Smith family have outlived the men, just as his grandmother, Carolyn Ingram Smith, known as Carrie, outlived her husband by more than three decades (he died in 1945, she died in 1976).

After the death of her husband in 1945, Carolyn Smith decided to sell the farm and to move into the city of Tuscaloosa. In 1946, she purchased a large older house on a tree-lined street, Eighth Avenue, close to the University and only a few blocks from where her grandson had grown. Known as a creative and careful manager of the family's assets, she pur-



TUSCALOOSA HOUSE OWNED BY MRS. CAROLYN SMITH, THE ARTIST'S GRANDMOTHER, WHERE HE LIVED FROM 1953-1961.

chased the large, four-bedroom house with the intent of offering boarding rooms to university students, using the income to help in her own living expenses. Always close to his grandmother, Christenberry became even closer after her move into town. In fact, from the middle of his senior year in high school, when his parents moved to Mobile, through his years at the University, until he left for New York in 1961, Christenberry lived in one of the four bedrooms in his grandmother's boarding house.

This living situation was beneficial for both of them. His grandmother enjoyed his company as well as his help in maintaining her large house. For the young Christenberry, who had always been part of a very close family environment, it seemed perfectly natural to stay with a relative. It also saved him a great deal of money. Staying with her saved the significant costs of college room and board fees, enabling him to pay his own college expenses despite his very limited budget. The expense of attending Auburn had created a serious dilemma for his father during the Depression, one that undoubtedly served as additional motivation when the young Christenberry enrolled at the University. He would become the first member of his immediate family to graduate from college.

In 1932, after he had graduated from high school, William Christenberry, Sr., worked on a road paving crew. He saved his money, accumulating about sixty dollars, and was determined to go to Auburn University. Because he needed additional funding for college expenses, he asked his father for the money. D.K. Christenberry agreed to a loan of one hundred dollars for his schooling. He still remembers his departure from the house: "As I got ready to leave, he said, 'William, when do you plan to pay this money back?' I had in mind to pay it back after I finished college. I didn't know how I could pay it back earlier. It worried me. But I went off to college though."

After arriving in Auburn, he passed the required entrance examinations and was accepted into the school. For two weeks, scrimping and living frugally,

he used his own money to pay the required fees and avoided using his father's money. He even found a living space in a basement near the campus. However, as expenses mounted, he was forced to consider spending his father's money. Fearing the debt and what it implied, he dropped out of Auburn after only two weeks of classes.

He took a bus home to Stewart. On the way back, he thought about the possibility of returning to Auburn after earning more money to pay for his tuition and expenses. But, in fact, he never did, losing his only chance at a college education. In August of 1995, on the drive from Havana Junction to Stewart, as we drove on the road that led toward his father's house and to Stewart, he recalled the feelings he experienced as he returned from Auburn. After getting off the bus at Havana Junction, near the store his son would later immortalize as the "Palmist Building," he walked down the unpaved road to his house, deep in thought and emotionally torn. "As I walked up the hill toward the house, I heard someone drawing water at the well. I heard the wheel screeching. I didn't know who it was. But I was glad to get home. As I walked up my father asked 'What are you doing here? I thought you had gone off to make something of yourself.' It made me feel bad. But my mother was glad to see me." The loaned college money, never spent, was quickly returned to his father.

After this brief experience of college life at Auburn, he remained on the farm, helping his father until he found a job in Tuscaloosa. In 1933, while looking at an A model Ford in a car lot, he was attracted to a nearby bakery by the inviting smell of baking bread. Unemployed, he decided to apply for a job. Because the family did not have a telephone, he left the number of the store in Stewart. He still remembers going to that busy Stewart store, now a crumbling ruin, to receive the call, and can point to the spot where he stood when he was hired by Hardin's Bakery.

He was hired to wrap packages for \$10.80 a week, a good salary for a young man during the



J.R. GRUBER 1995



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VIEWS OF MILLS HILL AREA, HALE COUNTY, WHERE WALKER EVANS PHOTOGRAPHED IN 1936. SUMMER, 1995.



HOUSE, STEWART, ALABAMA, 1962

William Christenberry
Brownie black and white photograph

Depression but one that required working on evenings and on Sundays, often demanding from seventy to ninety hours of labor per week. Ever concerned with church and the strict observation of religious strictures, D.K. Christenberry was unhappy that his son worked on Sunday. However, because of his dedication to the company, he continued to move into better positions as the business expanded, remaining with Hardin's Bakery for seventeen years.

On May 25, 1935, he and Willard Smith were married. Because of the demands of his job they had to plan an evening wedding, after work, on a Saturday. He describes the day: "I got paid off on Saturday, the money placed in a little envelope. I went to a furniture store and bought a bedroom suite, paying a dollar and a quarter a week on it. Then I caught the train down to Akron. When I got there, I met my brother-in-law, who was going to lend us his car, a new V-8 Ford, for our honeymoon. I went to the barber shop, run by a friend of mine, got a hair cut and a shave from the barber. Went on to the Smith house and then drove to Tuscaloosa to get married. We got up to Moundville and the car stopped. I didn't think about the gas. We pushed it to a service station, got a little gas and went on and got married, at seven o'clock on Saturday night. We got off at the bakery on Saturday night. The bakery was closed." He returned to work the next day, at four o'clock in the afternoon. It was a brief honeymoon.¹¹

The next year, in 1936, while Willard was pregnant with their first child, William Sr. needed to ask for his father's support to obtain a loan to pay for the birth of their child. After his previous experience he did not look forward to making the request. The event was recounted by his son:

Daddy tells the story and I've heard this all my life. When they were expecting me, in 1936, he went to his father and asked for a small loan to pay for me to be born. And my grandfather refused him, saying "You should be

able to handle that on your own." Then my father went directly to my grandfather Smith, six miles away. And he said, "William, I'll be happy to cosign any loan form. So my father then took the form to the banker, a family friend, who asked if D.K. Christenberry had signed it. He said "No but my father-in-law, John Smith, had signed it." And the banker approved, saying "John Smith's name is as good as D.K. Christenberry's name anyway."

William Andrew Christenberry, Jr., was born at the Druid City Hospital on November 5, 1936, his birth paid for with borrowed money. Times were hard but he was born into a strong and loving family, one deeply rooted in the red soils of Alabama. Because he was born during the Depression, to struggling young parents, both of them the children of Hale County farmers, a certain realist cast to his life and art would have seemed inevitable. Yet, with his father employed at Hardin's Bakery and his parents determined to establish a middle-class life in Tuscaloosa, the young Christenberry grew up in unique circumstances. He was supported and encouraged by his family in all of his endeavors. Yet, like a true child of the Depression, he grew up with a sense of self reliance, learning to live economically, even frugally, when it was necessary. He also learned to avoid waste whenever possible, an attribute which may have contributed to his interest in the use of found objects and the collage aesthetic.

Always interested in drawing, he grew up wanting to become an artist. Art was a new direction for the Christenberrys but it was not totally out of context. While his family home was not filled with art, in the traditional sense, it was always a center of creative activity. His mother loved to create with her hands. She especially liked to sew, to quilt, to crochet, to smock and to work with needlepoint. Perhaps it was not totally surprising when, years later, her son began to design his Ku Klux Klan dolls, fabricating beauti-