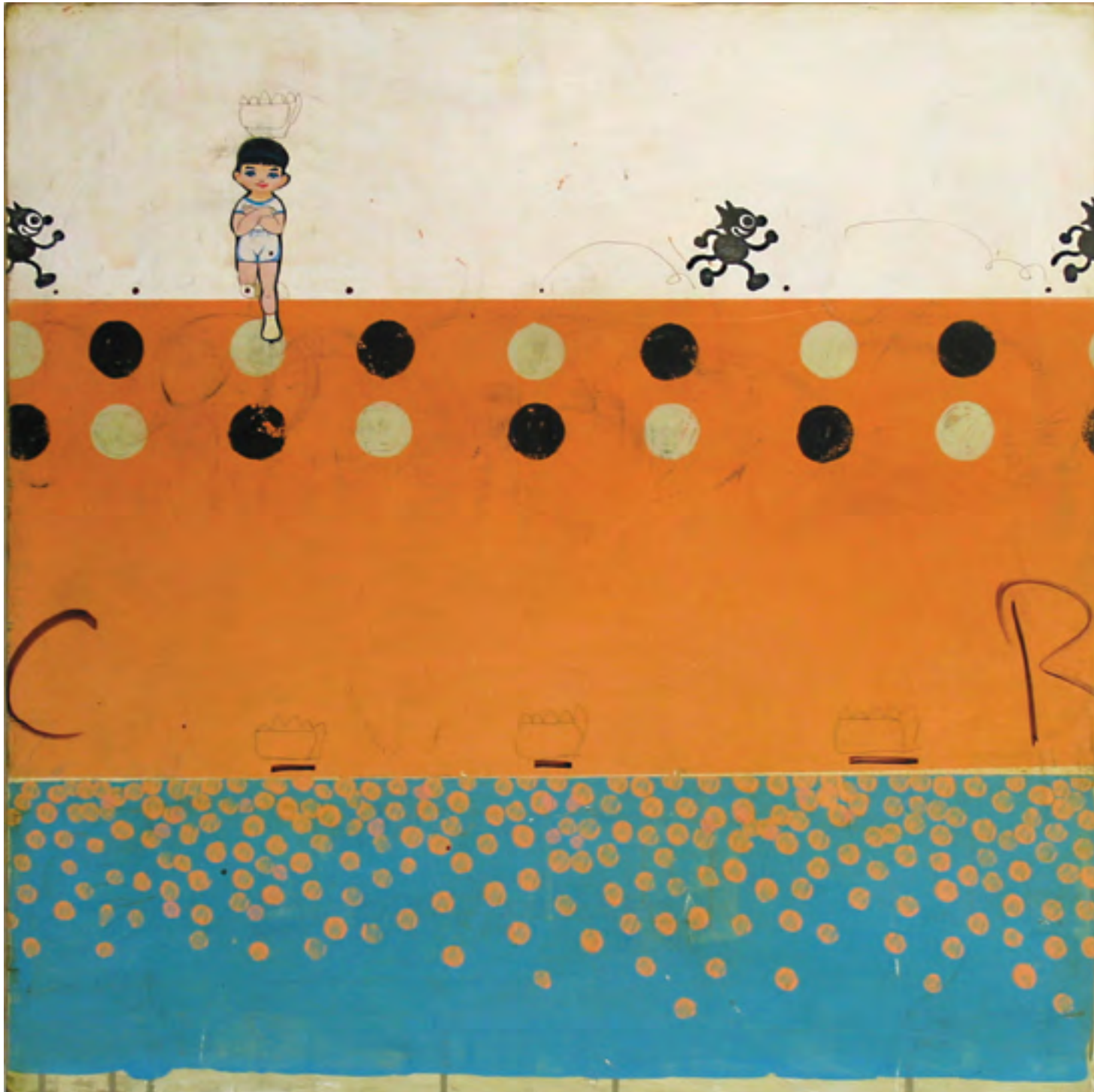


MICHAEL CUTLIP

Run for It, 2008
Mixed Media on Panel, 24 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

DOUG THORPE

Sharing the Earth Household

The Letters of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder

*Pound was an axe,
Chen was an axe, I am an axe
And my son a handle, soon
To be shaping again, model
And tool, craft of culture,
How we go on.*

—Gary Snyder, “Axe Handles”

You can see the two of them on the cover of *Distant Neighbors: The Selected Letters of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder*. Snyder is taut and lean in short sleeves and vest, a coyote trickster figure with his hands in his pockets and a slight grin, his eyes squinting as he stands in front of the Grumblefinger bookstore in Nevada City; to his left, Berry is in what look to be corduroy pants and a long-sleeved shirt, with crossed arms, facing the camera like a kindly country uncle.

Both men were born between the wars: Snyder in 1930 in Washington State, in an area now part of Seattle that was then farmland; and Berry four years later in Henry County, Kentucky, the child of five generations of farmers. Too young for the Second World War and a little old for Vietnam, Snyder graduated from Reed College in Oregon in 1951, and Berry finished at the University of Kentucky with a BA and an MA in 1957. Their peers are the slightly older poets Galway Kinnell (1927), Donald Hall (1928), James Wright (1927), and Allen Ginsberg (1926). (James Dean, 1931. Elvis, 1935.)

At Reed, Snyder discovered Waley’s and Pound’s translations from the Chinese, although (as Lee Bartlett writes in *The Sun Is But a Morning Star*):

His own interest in Chinese poetry was already primed by his experience looking at Chinese landscape paintings in the Seattle Art Museum: “My shock of recognition was very simple: ‘It looks just like the Cascades....’” [*The Sun is But a Morning Star*, p. 82.]

He was soon heading south to the Bay Area for graduate school, meeting Kenneth Rexroth in 1953. (Bartlett quotes Robert Duncan: “The person who is straight-line Rexroth is Gary Snyder. He had the same bookshelf.”) In 1955, while Berry was getting his master’s, Snyder took part in the reading at Six Gallery where Ginsberg read “Howl.” He met Kerouac, lured him up to the Cascades and the fire lookouts (a story well told in *Poets on the Peaks* and fictionalized in *The Dharma Bums*), and then left for Japan for an immersion in Zen. He returned to the States periodically, participating in the January 1967 “Human Be-In” at Golden Gate Park with Allen Ginsberg—a reminder of the very different roads Snyder and Berry travelled before meeting. Berry went west to California in 1957 after receiving