

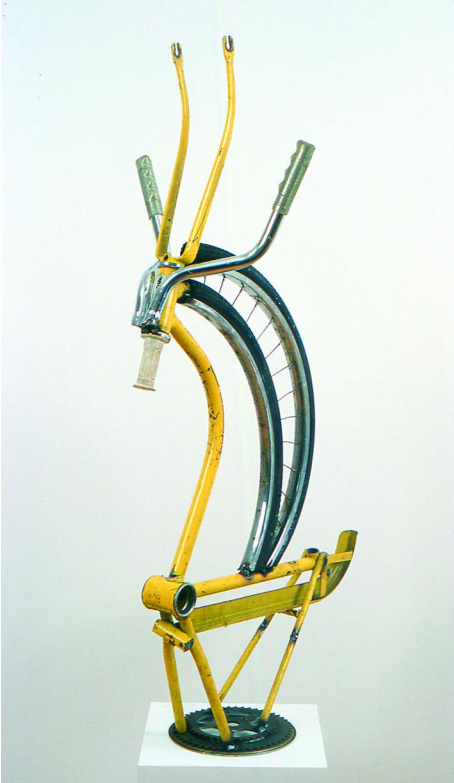
AFTERBURN

Willie Cole: Selected Works 1997 – 2004

November 13, 2005 - January 6, 2006



WORCESTER ART MUSEUM



Speedster tji wara, 2002, bicycle parts, 188 x 38 x 56/5 cm. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, Sarah Norton Goodyear Fund. Photo: Bill Orcutt, courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York



Antelope Headdresses (tji wara), Mali, Bamana people, 20th c., wood, metal. Male, H. 92.7 cm; Museum of African Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Anonymous gift. Photo: Eric Gould

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Multi-tasking with Willie Cole

Willie Cole's work suggests a post-modern eclecticism—combining references, both intended and serendipitous, to the appropriation of African forms by modern artists, to Dada's ready-mades and Surrealism's transformed objects as well as to icons of American pop culture. He invests his forms with meaning and history both personal and communal—although he might say, he rediscovers meaning that is already present.¹ Like other African-American artists, Cole personally has mined a vein of imagery and significance that draws upon Africa and the experience of Africans in

the Americas. Irons and ironing boards evoke the role of many African-American women as domestic workers in other peoples' homes. Scorch marks suggest branding, and the intertwined histories of slavery and plantation culture that marked early economic development in Latin America, the Caribbean and the southern United States. The shape of the iron itself suggests boats, and thus the iniquitous Middle Passage where so many died in their forced move from Africa. Visual puns and verbal play characterize his work, creating the layered meanings that demand our intellectual multi-tasking.

Or Through African(ist) Eyes²

Cole's *TjiWara* series alludes to headdresses worn by Bamana men from Mali. *TjiWara* is the *beast that works*—a mythological character and culture hero who taught humans to cultivate, enabling them to survive.³ The bicycle, linked to youth and exercise, parallels the Bamana celebration of strength and energy channeled into community farming activity. Emphasis on physicality in turn suggests athletic prowess and the dominant role, real if also a stereotype, of African-Americans in sports today. Bicycle parts suggest the ready-mades of the Dadaists and Surrealists, but they are transformed not as commentary on the roles of artist, academy and gullible public, but from a delight in formal correspondences, design possibilities, and unusual materials. I am reminded of plastic dolls and market paraphernalia woven into Nigerian dance masks. New materials mobilize old compositions, broadcasting the positive messages of modernity and creativity.⁴

Though Cole's dramatized irons involve us in a consideration of African-American historical experience, that of domestic servitude, they expand the reference to particular African ethnic groups through the sculptural enhance-

ment of shapes and the treatment of surface. Thus Worcester's *Kanaga Iron* evokes the cruciform shape and simplified facial forms of the Dogon Kanaga mask in its handle. Every Dogon (Mali) man historically owned and wore his Kanaga mask in association with the celebration of ancestral forces just as every American household contained an iron, wielded by its owner or an employee. In both cases, changes in culture and technology have drastically reduced the numbers of people within their respective communities that actually use these items. In the iron called *Chewa*, the fiber surfaces and shape recall the woven masks worn by male initiates in coming-of-age ceremonies in Malawi. If the oversize irons evoke the work of Claes Oldenburg, they equally reference African principles of representation. The African traditional artist has long used symbolic proportion to tell his audience that something is important, that it is not what it seems to be.

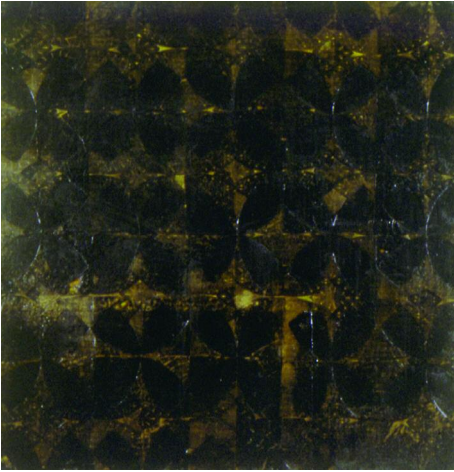
Ahead of its Time corresponds visually to Bamana mask forms, but suggests the influence of African art on modern artists, for it is both a "head" of its time (in Africa, masks were subtle variations on themes rather than radical



Chewa 600, 1997, bamboo, wood, jute, rope, and straw, 101.5 x 154.9 x 76 cm, collections of Eileen Harris-Norton and Peter Norton, Santa Monica. Photo courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York



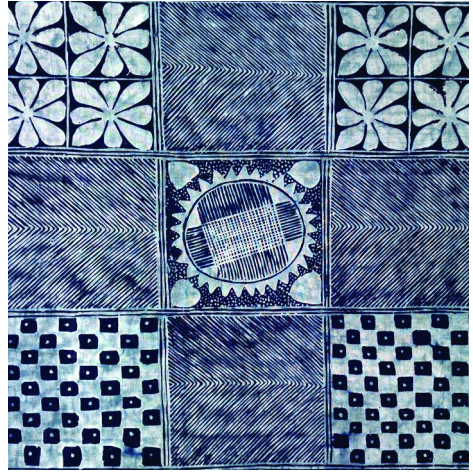
Antelope mask, Malawi, Chewa people, Cornhusks, cane armature, H. 243 cm. British Museum. © Copyright The Trustees of The British Museum



Commemorative Scorch, scorches and poly-urethane varnish on canvas, 188 x 183 x 10.1 cm, collections Eileen Harris-Norton and Peter Norton, Santa Monica. Photo courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York

departures from existing forms) and ahead of its time in its role as a wedge in the hands of artists who sought to change the rules of form laid down by the French Academy. *Naturally Smooth* relies upon wood, the primary medium of African sculpture, and comments wryly on EurAmerican primitivizing stereotypes of “natural” that have plagued us since the 18th century.

Like African textiles and African-American quilts, *Commemorative Scorch* and *Branded Irons* are seriate, repetitive in design, and cryptic in narrative. In *Commemorative Scorch*, Willie Cole burns iron silhouettes into quatrefoils that overlay densely packed but more lightly burned sole plate patterns, aligned so they combine and recombine into foliate and cross forms like those associated with Olokun, god of the sea, found on Yoruba indigo-dyed textiles and 17th century Benin brass plaques. Memory of Benin’s greatness, its imperial expansion linked to the overseas trade and its dark aftermath, for this part of Africa was renamed the “slave coast,” enriches and renders more subtle the obvious references to African American history made by the iron and its marks. Quatrefoils recall too numerous patchwork patterns like Flying Geese, Drunkard’s Path, and Evening



Textile (detail), “Olukun” design. Nigeria, Yoruba people, Indigo dyed, starch-resist patterned cotton, c. 1970, 184 x 167 cm. Private collection. Photo: Stephen Briggs

Star associated with safe passage along the Underground Railroad. In *Branded Irons* Cole plays with a range of ideas, layering ideas of slavery, scarification, individual identity and marketing—each iron similar but separate, each brand identified by its sole plate as African ethnicities might have been identified in the past by scarification marks, or each individual by his own features. *Branded Irons* stands as a reminder for me of the enormous cultural variation in Africa, negated by a widespread and ignorant view that Africa is homogenous with a single culture. In the third scorched work, Cole more randomly disperses the forms, so they resemble a scattering of leaves, calling to mind traditional medicine; feathers and thus birds, metaphors of arcane knowledge in Yoruba thought linked to medical practitioners, diviners, priests and kings; or even to the lozenge shaped bone implements of the Lega (Congo) used by elder members of the community organization (Bwami) to invoke the elephant metaphors expressive of their responsibility.⁹ The title *Infestation* transforms the image into something altogether more hostile. The swarming forms, beetle-like, suggest inner-city cockroaches and microbial infection, or boat-like, the maritime trade, slavery and colonialism.

Iron Figures bring to mind a panoply of African sculpture and cultures through form, stance, gesture and decoration. The iron parts reassembled create bodies rendered as discrete geometric elements. Thumb through any good book on African art, and you will recognize *Perm Press's* shoulder blades conflated with breasts and her classic female gesture of generosity made by supporting them.

Malcolm's Chickens III and *To get to the other side* make more complex and cross-cutting references. According to Cole, *Malcolm's Chickens* are modern Trojan horses, firebombs disguised as "art," and a sad comment on America's having to face the consequences of "exporting terrorism (in various forms) around the world and, on September 11th, that terrorism returning home to attack the USA."¹⁰

Cole explains the title of his giant game *To get to the other side*, not as winning, but as answering the riddle, "Why did the chicken cross the

road?"¹¹ The logic is convoluted if irrefutable—for Cole's chicken (and Malcolm's too) is the sacrificial cock in African Yoruba and Diaspora Santeria and Candomble ritual. In this context, it is the sacrifice to Eshu-Elegba, gatekeeper of the Gods, to allow prayer to proceed from the world of the living to the spiritual world. *To get to the other side* is also a coded reference to the escape from slavery, crossing the rivers that separated slave and free states, and then the border, into Canada, once the free states no longer offered safe haven. Subversive spirituals spoke of getting to the other side as well, masking the true meaning with acceptable Christian content. Cole populates his giant chess game with players in the form of Lawn Jockeys, perennial "boys" and faithful servants, but for Cole, manifestations of Eshu-Elegba, an African trickster who is not what he seems to be. Cole uses the figure in a signifyin' way, a term referring to a black vernacular verbal practice that is full of wit, double meaning, and social criticism.¹² Eshu himself is the ultimate



To get to the other side, 2001, 32 cast concrete lawn jockeys, mixed media, galvanized steel, and wood frame, 488 x 488 cm. Collection of Peter Norton, Santa Monica. Photo: Orem Slor, courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York



Elegba figure (detail), Epu mask (aguru epa), Nigeria, Yoruba people, Ekiti region, Wood, black, brown, and white paint, H. 121 cm. Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA. Gift of the Wellcome Trust



To get to the other side (detail), 2001, 32 cast concrete lawn jockeys, mixed media, galvanized steel, and wood frame, 488 x 488 cm. Collection of Peter Norton, Santa Monica. Photo: Orem Slor, courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York

signifier, less important at home among the Yoruba of Nigeria, perhaps, than in the Diaspora where physical survival often depended upon conforming and psychological survival depended upon being other than what one seemed. The Lawn Jockey suits Elegba for red and black are his colors and the active asymmetry of his stance indicates the erratic nature of chance. As the principle of chance in Yoruba philosophical thought, he is present in places of choice and potential conflict—doorways, junctions, the marketplace, sexual relationships. He plays all the roles in this massive game. He is pawn, king and queen layered in power cloth, i.e. men's neckties, and swathed with beads, knight armed with invoked medicine in the form of nails, bishop laden with spirit-catcher bottles, and rook protected by medicine bundles and the raffia that marks shrines and other sacred spaces. Lawn Jockey/Elegba layers references to multiple African and Diaspora cultures. The intentional redundancy of the image gives it emphasis; the combination of African cultural references strengthens its conceptual impact.

That Willie Cole is never hesitant to push his audience towards understanding prompted this African(ist) reading of his work. He has studied African and Diaspora cultures so that they provide an important part of his visual and intellectual resource base, just as the industrial sectors of urban America supply his working materials. He draws on the forms/ideas of the Dogon and Bamana, Luba and Kongo, but he shows a particular affinity for the philosophy and culture of the Yoruba, using the materials of Ogun, patron of those who work with metal, the heat of Shango, the thundergod, and the rapier wit of the Trickster. Though he has not traveled there, he is as close to Africa and its many cultures as he is to modernism and its many exponents, and, like all of us, he is an individual and of his own time. Thus, understanding his work requires intellectual exercise, to cross cultural and historical boundaries, to recognize the swiftly changing focus of 20th century art movements, to multi-task, in other words, in order to move beyond sheer visual enjoyment of the physical object.

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Clark University



Vetta Pinnacle tji wara (mother and child), 2002, bicycle parts, 126 x 58.5 x 23 cm, on loan from Alexander and Bonin, New York, New York. Photo: Orem Slor, courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York



Antelope Headdresses (tji wara), Mali, Bamana people, 20th c., wood, metal. Female with young, H. 86.36 cm. Museum of African Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Anonymous gift. Photo: Eric Gould

Notes

- 1 Interview with Jacqueline Brody, www.artnet.com/_magazine/2000/features/brody/brody97-2-14.asp accessed 7/31/2005.
- 2 I would like to thank the Worcester Art Museum, and particularly Curator of Contemporary Art Susan Stoops, for giving me this opportunity to bring my Africanist eyes to Willie Cole's work.
- 3 See Jean-Paul Colleyn, "The Ci-wara" in Jean-Paul Colleyn (ed.), *Bamana: the Art of Existence in Mali*, New York, Museum for African Art, 2001, 201-236.
- 4 See Jean Borgatti, "The Otsa Festival in Ekperi: Igbo Age Grades on the West Bank of the Niger" in *African Arts* XXXVI, 4, 2003, illustrations 17a & 17b (54), 21 (57).
- 5 See Laurel Birch Faulkner, "Basketry Masks of the Chewa" in *African Arts* XXI, 3 (May 1988), 28-31.
- 6 Compare with a Yoruba artist's depiction of Queen Victoria circa 1900. He dramatizes head and hand to indicate their importance—the head being the source of one's luck and destiny; the hand holding the flywhisk indicating royal rank. (See Robert F. Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings: Yoruba Sculpture at UCLA*, Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1971, Chapter 17.
- 7 Paula Ben Amos, *The Art of Benin*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1980, 28. The quatrefoil represents leaves used

in curing rituals sanctioned by Olokun, deity associated with the sea; the circled cross represents the crossroads with all that implies. In Benin, four-part images carry the additional cosmological significance of space and time, the four cardinal directions, the four days of the week, and the unfolding of the day through morning, afternoon, evening, and night.

- 8 Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, New York: Doubleday, 1999.
- 9 Elizabeth Cameron, *Art of the Lega*, Los Angeles, Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2001.
- 10 Willie Cole, personal communication, August 10, 2005. This comment was made in response to an interpretation of the chickens alluding to an anecdote about the rift between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammed that turns on the phrase "Chickens coming home to roost" used by Malcolm in relation to the assassination of John F. Kennedy (<http://www.cmgwww.com/historic/malcolm/about/bio.htm>, accessed August 5, 2005).
- 11 Nancy Princenthal, "Willie Cole: Irons in the Fire" in *Afterburn: Willie Cole - selected works 1997-2004*, Laramie: University of Wyoming Press, 2004, 11.
- 12 Michael Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race & Visual Representation*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 249.

About the Artist

Willie Cole was born in Somerville, New Jersey, in 1955. He attended Boston University's School of Fine Arts, received his B.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts in New York, and continued his studies at the Art Students League in New York. His most recent solo exhibitions include Tampa Museum of Art; University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; Bronx Museum of the Arts; and Miami Art Museum. He has participated in numerous group exhibitions including the Carpenter Center, Harvard University, Cambridge; Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle; Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec; the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; and the 5th Biennale de Lyon. His work may be found in public collections including Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Baltimore Museum of Art; Dallas Museum of Art; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; and Worcester Art Museum. Upcoming exhibitions in 2006 will include Alexander and Bonin, New York, and Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, New Jersey. Cole lives and works in Mine Hill, New Jersey, and is represented by Alexander and Bonin, New York.

On cover: *Perm-Press (hybrid)*, 1999, metal, wood, and wax, 96.5 x 20.5 x 38 cm, private collection. Photo: Orcutt & Van Der Putten, courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York



Kanaga Field Iron, 1995, wood, 11.50 x 198.10 x 96.50cm, gift of Don and Mary Melville.

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