



Willie Cole (b. Newark, New Jersey, 1955)

Jonny Mae, Willie Cole, 2013
The Beauties Suite
Intaglio and Relief

Willie Cole is a noted contemporary African-American sculptor and conceptual and visual artist

Cole is best known for assembling and transforming ordinary domestic and used objects such as irons, ironing boards, high-heeled shoes, hair dryers, bicycle parts, wooden matches, lawn jockeys, and other discarded appliances and hardware, into imaginative and powerful works of art and installations.

Through the repetitive use of single objects in multiples, Cole's assembled sculptures acquire a transcending and renewed metaphorical meaning, or become a critique of our consumer culture. Cole's work is generally discussed in the context of postmodern eclecticism, combining references and appropriation ranging from African and African-American imagery, to Dada's readymades and Surrealism's transformed objects, and icons of American pop culture or African and Asian masks, into highly original and witty assemblages. Some of Cole's interactive installations also draw on simple game board structures that include the element of chance while physically engaging the viewer.^[2]

Cole's widely recurring symbolic and artistic object that was initially brought to the attention of the art world in the mid-1980s has been the steam iron. While Cole's unique approach of imprinting the steam iron's marks on a variety of media result in a wide-ranging decorative potential of his scorplings, these scorches are also to be viewed as a reference to Cole's African-American heritage

Cole is known for his use of found objects. As metaphors for slavery's branding and African American domestic labor, he's dismantled electric irons and turned them into sculptures reminiscent of African masks, and heated them to make scorched paper diagrams of slave ships. More recently, he's been assembling thrift shop high heels (presumably discarded after lifetimes of painful traveling).

In Cole's deft hands and multileveled sensibility, his art connects the personal and the spiritual, everyday consumer objects and multi-layered metaphor, and African-American and US history and reality within a global perspective.

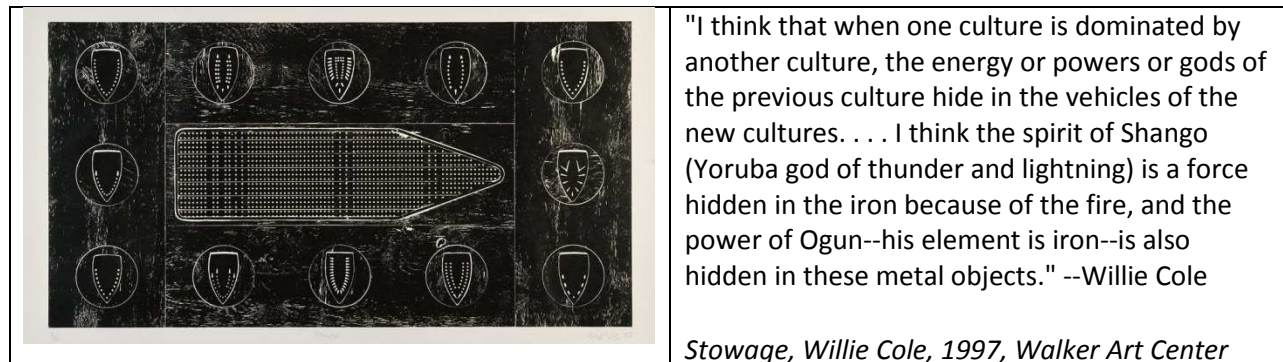
Cole sees himself as an "urban archaeologist." His work derives from his fusion of reductive and Pop Art sources, and its draws from traditional African art to create provocative works in many media. Best known for his found-object sculptures, he also makes drawings, paintings, and prints. Cole's art

transforms everyday mass-produced objects into personal icons or symbolic representations that explore ideas of diversity, identity, and a consumer-based society.

Willie Cole (b. 1955, Newark, NJ) attended the Boston University School of Fine Arts, and received his BFA degree from the School of the Visual Arts in New York in 1976. He continued his studies at the Art Students League of New York Art from 1976-79. Recent solo exhibitions include James Gallery of the City University of New York; Memphis Brooks Museum of Art; and Rowan University Art Gallery. A retrospective exhibition, *Anxious Objects: Willie Cole's Favorite Brands*, was organized by the Montclair Art Museum in 2006 and traveled nationally. Cole is the recipient of many awards, including the David C. Driskell Prize in 2006, the first national award to honor and celebrate contributions to the field of \

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Willie Cole is the recipient of many awards, including the 2006 Winner of the David C. Driskell Prize, the first national award to honor and celebrate contributions to the field of African-American art and art history, established by the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia.^[4] Cole is represented by Alexander and Bonin Gallery in New York; and by Guido Maus, beta pictoris gallery / Maus Contemporary in Birmingham, AL.



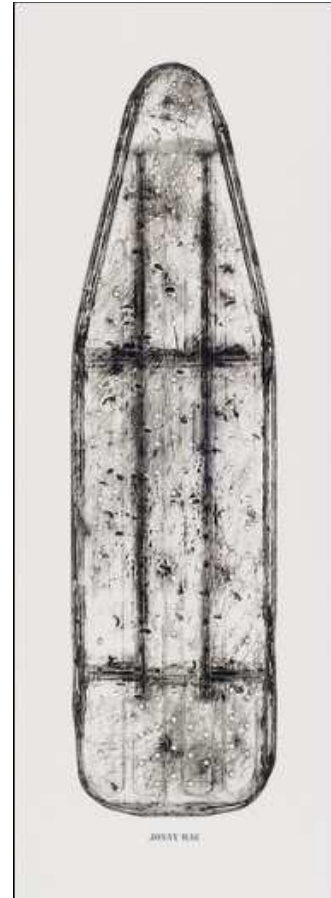
While Willie Cole was growing up in New Jersey, his grandmother and great-grandmother worked as housekeepers and they often asked him to fix their irons. When he moved into his first artist studio, he brought 15 broken irons with him. For Cole, this common household appliance has a number of connotations: domestic servitude, African rituals of scarification, and an African heritage of "branding"--identifying particular tribes by way of shields or masks. To make the print *Stowage*, he grouped several different makes of irons (Silex, General Electric, Sunbeam) around an ironing board that is meant to represent a slave ship. The marks of the various irons evoke members of different African tribes who may have been brought to America aboard such a vessel.

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Willie Cole's poignant series *Five Beauties Rising* finds visual resonance in female nudes and in diagrams of slaving ships. Synthesizing parallel narratives of servitude and domestic labor, each print is labeled with a woman's name. Their scratched and pitted surfaces reminiscent of long wear and abuse, but also resilience and fortitude.



Five Beauties Rising, Willie Cole



Willie Cole's art is universal yet profoundly personal. He transforms conventional objects into works of art that conjure collective memories while referencing the artist's personal identity. Each of the five intaglio impressions of ironing boards in his recent series *Five Beauties Rising* is a poetic document, recording both the singular existence of a specific object and the larger historical narrative it represents.

To make these works—and the other 22 prints in the *Beauties* series—Cole and the printers at Highpoint Editions began with ironing boards that Cole acquired from the Salvation Army and Craigslist. Using vehicles, cinder blocks and brute force, they flattened—ironed out, one might say—the boards, then further reduced them by repeatedly running them through an etching press until they were a mere eighth-to-sixteenth of an inch in depth. Finally, the boards were inked intaglio and printed on white paper. Each reveals its own character, its blemishes and scars, and each has been given a name, printed in relief at the bottom of each sheet—*Savannah, Dot, Anna May, Queen and Fannie Mae*.

As in his other works, Cole identifies and explores the mutability of these objects. His sculptures, accumulations of everyday items such as shoes or irons, recall Dada readymades, but are infused with the spirituality of African tribal masks, the transformational aesthetic of Surrealism, and the Pop Art-driven critique of consumer culture. In *Five Beauties Rising*, he transformed the ironing board's workaday surface into a template through compression. The metal thus creased and distorted and marked by dents and scratches from daily use, produces an ethereal, x-ray-like image. The names printed below each ironing board evoke a narrative, suggesting life behind the ghostly representation, and Cole's choice of names evokes a very specific kind of life—those of the generations of African-

American women working in other people's homes. Some belonged to his own ancestors who worked as slaves or domestic servants; others he culled through onomastic research.

Irons and ironing boards appear frequently in Cole's work. In his well-known "scorch" pieces, irons acts as both templates and press, marking the paper with heat rather than ink. With *Five Beauties Rising*, he guides the ironing board to its own type of imprint. The ink picks up the manufactured grooves and grids of the board and the alterations generated by the flattening process. The print is a record of the object's passage through the world—its life of quotidian utility and its final incorporation into art.

Cole has imbued these ironing boards with a new aesthetic and spiritual value, but their transformation is not yet complete: the artist plans to repurpose most of the 27 boards from the full series as sculpture, continuing their metamorphosis.

http://artinprint.org/index.php/edition-reviews/article/willie_cole

Willie Cole: Magician of the mundane, by Mary Abbe, Star Tribune September 29, 2012

Willie Cole used flattened metal ironing boards as printing plates, each bearing scars from the process.

Before the drip-dry era, the steam iron was a ubiquitous household tool. Now that wrinkles are fashionable, irons are not so common or essential.

Maybe that's why New Jersey artist Willie Cole has been able to see more than function in their humble shapes. To him irons and ironing boards are metaphors ripe with historical, religious and personal associations that beam out, with startling poignancy, from four new print-suites at Highpoint Center for Printmaking in south [Minneapolis](#).

A suite of nine screen prints called "Complementary Soles" shows the artist in a playful mood. Executed in bold colors, each of the images features the "face" of a steam iron standing with point up. Bright complementary hues -- red on green, blue on orange -- make the faces seem to pop off the paper and accentuate the steam holes, which bristle with energy and emotion as if they are scowling, grinning or even waving little arms. Let the imagination roam and the "faces" may even look like plump bodies, bishop's miters, lanterns, church windows, shields or footprints.

One of the most impressive, and surprising, things about Cole's work is how deftly it triggers such associations without masking the original source material. Thanks to his skillful manipulation of scale and color, the "Soles" are always clearly irons even when they seem to be something else. That illusion continues in "The Virgins," larger iron-inspired prints in which subtle color shifts -- pink on rose, tangerine on amber -- lend the images an almost spiritual glow. The radiant patterns of the steam holes even subliminally recall the rays surrounding the Virgin Mary in traditional religious iconography.

Transformative history

Trained in media arts and graphic design, Cole, 57, has designed album covers and produced theater and opera sets as well as prints and sculpture. He is perhaps best known for assemblage sculptures composed of women's shoes, irons, plumbing fixtures and even hair dryers, which he imaginatively transforms into objects resembling masks, chairs, thrones and figurative African carvings.

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts showcases one of Cole's shoe-sculptures in its African galleries, where it fits right in among nail-studded fetish figures. Such visual puns have a long tradition in Western art, especially in the sculpture of Picasso, who famously turned a toy car into a baboon head, a bicycle seat into a cow skull and a wicker basket into a goat's body.

Cole recognized the visual potency of steam irons more than 30 years ago, when he first used them to make scorch marks on paper and canvas. Nodding to his African-American heritage, he employed the marks to echo the designs on traditional African shields and to suggest facial scarification patterns. In a well-known 1997 woodblock print, he transformed the silhouette of an ironing board into a diagram of a slave ship laden with human cargo and surrounded by iron patterns representing the shields of different African peoples sold into slavery.

Highpoint beauties

Working at Highpoint over the past 17 months, Cole again used ironing-board imagery in two series, "Five Beauties Rising" and "The Beauties." Both are based on metal ironing boards which he used as printing plates. Purchased at thrift stores and off the Web, the ironing boards were dismantled and then flattened so that they could be inked and run through Highpoint's printing presses. To flatten them, Highpoint's staff ran over the metal panels with cars and trucks, skateboarded on them, and beat them with hammers. The resulting nicks, gouges, stains, strap marks and bruises suggest the personal history of each "Beauty," battered but dignified figures that stand upright with old fashioned names printed below them: Bessie, Ida Mae, Matti Lee.

Twenty-two of these unlikely personages line the walls in a chapel-like Highpoint gallery, their familiar forms suggesting veiled women, swaddled infants, bodies trussed up for burial, tombstones, ancient stele and, of course, ceaseless domestic drudgery.

Having grown up in a largely female household, Cole here pays homage to the women he loves. He told the Highpoint staff that some of the names -- all female -- reference his ancestors and family, while others are traditionally associated with slaves or domestic help, including Mammy from "Gone With the Wind" and Calpurnia from "To Kill a Mockingbird."

They are remarkably compelling in their individuality: Clara Esther, one of those thin, ghostly figures who floats through life unscathed; sturdy Bertha Mae, so upright and unbowed, and plump Lucy with her broad bands and battered edges.

Cole's genius is in conveying the spiritual potential of the most ordinary domestic objects, finding beauty in the mundane, and honoring these otherwise forgotten individuals and their histories.

Mary Abbe

<http://www.startribune.com/entertainment/stageandarts/171626931.html>