

JAMES FUENTES

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LONNIE HOLLEY

Born 1950 Birmingham, Alabama.

Lives and works in Atlanta, Georgia.

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LONNIE HOLLEY

Which Do We Drop First the Baby or the Bomb?

On view May 2 – May 28, 2017

James Fuentes, New York



Installation view of *Which Do We Drop First the Baby or the Bomb?*, James Fuentes, New York.



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Installation view of *Which Do We Drop First the Baby or the Bomb?*, James Fuentes, New York.



Lonnie Holley
LH/S 8463/U
Busted Without Arms II, 2016
60 3/4 x 11 x 20 inches (154.31 x 27.94 x 50.80 cm)



Lonnie Holley

LH/S 8183/U

The Seer, 2016

Steel

83 x 24 x 30 inches (210.82 x 60.96 x 76.20 cm)

30 x 24 inches (76.20 x 60.96 cm) (base)



Lonnie Holley

LH/S 8509/U

Permanent: Hair Was My Glory and Chain, 2016

hair dryer, found chair, ball and chain, lock and key, dress form,
permanent wave machine

Overall: 71 x 39 1/4 x 18 inches (180.34 x 99.70 x 45.72 cm)

Chair: 34 x 17 1/4 x 15 1/2 inches (86.36 x 43.82 x 39.37 cm)

Hair Dryer:

49 x 14 x 13 1/2 inches (124.46 x 35.56 x 34.29 cm)

dome adjusts in height

Dimensions variable

Mannequin :

56 1/4 x 16 x 7 inches (142.88 x 40.64 x 17.78 cm)

adjusts in height

Dimensions variable

Ball & Chain:

47 x 5 x 5 inches (119.38 x 12.70 x 12.70 cm)

adjusts in length with chain

Dimensions variable

Rack / Hair: 71 x 22 x 18 inches (180.34 x 55.88 x 45.72 cm)



Lonnie Holley

LH/ 8465/U

The Artists Spirit in Wood, 1995

Wood, metal

77 x 24 x 16 1/4 inches (195.58 x 60.96 x 41.28 cm)



Lonnie Holley

LH/ 8475/U

The Way They Saw Things, 1997

Sandstone

23 x 13 1/2 x 10 inches (58.42 x 34.29 x 25.40 cm)

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LONNIE HOLLEY

The Weight of Everything

On view September 20-October 22, 2017

James Fuentes, New York



Installation view of *The Weight of Everything*, James Fuentes, New York.



Installation view of *The Weight of Everything*, James Fuentes, New York.



Installation view of *The Weight of Everything*, James Fuentes, New York.



Installation view of *The Weight of Everything*, James Fuentes, New York.



LH/ 8708/U, **Lonnie Holley**
The Lookers, 2017
Steel and epoxy
93 x 54 x 43 inches (236.22 x 137.16 x 109.22 cm)









LH/ 8709, **Lonnie Holley**
From the Roots I Am, 2017
Steel and epoxy
95 x 41 x 36 inches (241.30 x 104.14 x 91.44 cm)







LH/ 8712/U, **Lonnie Holley**

The Branch that I Grew Up With, 2014

Oak limb, steel, cloth, artificial leaves, iron, string, human hair, corn silk, heater core, TV transformers, buttons, digital hookup material, barbed wire, treaded paper, technical wire, cotton plant root, pig iron, aluminum shaving, and coconut shaving
47 x 35 x 12 inches (119.38 x 88.90 x 30.48 cm)



LH/ 8713/U, **Lonnie Holley**
Pretty Woman's Child, 2014
Root, wire, artificial flower, fabric, net, rope
10 x 8 x 5 1/2 inches (25.40 x 20.32 x 13.97 cm)



Lonnie Holley
LH/ 8734/U
Underneath the Slave Ship, 2017
Found materials, steel wire
78 x 30 x 22 inches (198.12 x 76.20 x 55.88 cm)





Lonnie Holley

Born 1950

Lives and works in Atlanta, Georgia

Holley, Gasperi Gallery, New Orleans, LA

1986 Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham, AL

1984 Little House Galleries, Birmingham, AL

Solo Exhibitions

2017 *The Weight of Everything*, James Fuentes, New York, NY

Lonnie Holley: I Snuck Off the Slave Ship, Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, GA.

Lonnie Holley: Which Do We Drop First, the Baby or the Bomb? James Fuentes, New York, NY

2015 *Something to Take My Place-The Art of Lonnie Holley*, Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art; Charleston, SC

Supported by the Power-Lonnie Holley, John Hope Franklin Center, Duke University, Durham, NC

2014 *Lonnie Holley, It's Like Coming Home*, Cash-Rojas Projects, Atlanta, GA

2013 *Keeping You Out Of Harms Way*, James Fuentes, New York

2010 *Assemblages and Drawings*, Jeff Bailey Gallery, New York

2005 *Recent Works*, Monty Stabler Gallery, Birmingham, AL

2004 *Lonnie Holley: A Twenty-Five Year Survey*, Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL

Do We Think Too Much? I Dont Think We Can Ever Stop, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK

2003 *Lonnie Holley: Perspectives 8*, Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL

1994 *Sculpture*, Luise Ross Gallery, New York

1991 *Cultural Recycling: The Work of Lonnie*

Group Exhibitions

2017 *Thumbs Up for the Mother Ship (Lonnie Holley and Dawn DeDeaux)*, MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA

Revelations: Art from the African American South, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (de Young Museum), San Francisco, CA

Animal Farm, curated by Sadie Laska, The Brant Foundation, Greenwich, CT

2016 *Post Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980-2016*, Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago, IL

2015 *When the Curtain Never Comes Down*, The American Folk Museum, New York, NY

2014 *The Body Metonymic*, curated by Dick Goody, at Oakland University Art Gallery, Rochester, MI

When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South, Studio Museum of Harlem, New York

Prospect 2 Biennial, New Orleans, LA

2013 *Come Together: Surviving Sandy*, Industry City, Brooklyn, NY

2012 *Pitch*, Lonnie Holley, Fabienne Lasserre, Halsey Rodman, Jeff Bailey Gallery, New York, NY

2009 *Also On View: Lonnie Holley / Drawings and Sculpture*, Jeff Bailey Gallery, New York

2006 *Mary Lee Bendolph, Gees Bend Quilts and Beyond*, Austin Museum of Art, Austin, TX

- 2005 *Coming Home: Self-Taught Artists, the Bible and the American South*, American Bible Museum, New York
- The Whole World is Rotten: Free Radicals and the Gold Coast Slave Castles of Paa Joe*, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
- 2004 *Dopes, Dupes and Demagogues: Viewed by Outsiders*, Luise Ross Gallery, New York
- Gathering, The Dalton Gallery, Agnes Scott College, Atlanta, GA
- Coming Home, Self-Taught Artists, the Bible, and the American South*, Art Museum of the University of Memphis, Memphis, TN
- 2003 *Recycled/Remade: Contemporary Folk Art From the Collection of the Birmingham Museum of Art*, Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL
- 2002 *Testimony: Vernacular Art of the African-American South - Selections from the Collection of Ronald and June Shelp*, AXA Gallery, New York
- Street Savvy, Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning, Jamaica, NY
- Testimony: Vernacular Art of the African-American South*, Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, SC
- 2001 *Singular Visions*, University of Virginia Art Museum, Charlottesville, VA
- WET!*, Luise Ross Gallery, New York
- 2000 *Four Outsider Artists: Holley, Mr. Imagination, Norbert Kox, Charlie Lucas*, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA
- Ogun Meets Vulcan: Birmingham's African American Men of Metal*, Ruth Hall Hodges Art Gallery, Morris Brown University, Atlanta, GA
- 1999 *Uncommon Bonds: Expressing African-American Identity*, University of Delaware, Newark, DE
- 1998 *Winter Group*, Luise Ross Gallery, New York
- Self-Taught Artists of the 20th Century: An American Anthology*, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, TX; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA (traveling exhibition)
- 1997 *Material Dialogues - Contemporary Arts: The New Jersey Context*, New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ
- Bearing Witness: African-American Vernacular Art of the South*, Schomburg Center, New York
- Drawing on the Spirit of 9: Drawings and Paintings on Paper by Contemporary African-American Self-Taught Artists*, Atrium Gallery, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT
- Obsession With Line*, Archer Locke Gallery, Atlanta, GA
- Bill Traylor and Thornton Dial, Minnie Evans, Lonnie Holley, Louis Monza*, Luise Ross Gallery, New York
- Tragic Wake: The Legacy of Slavery and the African Diaspora in Contemporary American Art*, Spirit Square Center for the Arts, Charlotte, NC
- Let It Shine: Self-Taught Art from the T. Marshall Hahn Collection*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
- Souls Grown Deep*, Emory University, Michael C. Carlos Museum, Atlanta, GA
- 1995 *Civil Rights Now*, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA), Winston-Salem, NC
- Contemporary Folk Art: A View from the Outside*, Nathan D. Rosen Museum Gallery, Boca Raton, FL
- Dust Tracks on a Road: Four Southern Artists*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
- 1994 *Outsider Art by Southern Folks*, Hunterdon Art Center, Clinton, NJ
- 1993 *ASHE: Improvisation and Recycling in African-American Visionary Art*, Diggs Gallery at Winston Salem State University, Winston-Salem, NC

	<i>Figurines</i> , Luise Ross Gallery, New York, NY		<i>Time</i> , High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
	<i>Passionate Visions of the American South: Self-Taught Artists from 1940 to the Present</i> , New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA (traveling exhibition)	1987	<i>Voices in the Wilderness</i> , Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL
	<i>Collectors Show</i> , Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AR		<i>The Bloodline</i> , Howard University, Washington, DC
	<i>Dream Singers, Storytellers: An African-American Presence</i> , Fukui Fine Arts Museum, Fukui, Japan and Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ (traveling exhibition)	1981	<i>More Than Land and Sky: Art from Appalachia</i> , National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (traveling exhibition)
	<i>Not by Luck: Self-Taught Artists in the American South</i> , Hunterdon Art Center, Clinton, NJ		Collections
	<i>Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars: Death, Reverence and the Struggle for Equality in America</i> , Betty Rymer Gallery at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL		American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY
1992	<i>Give Me a Louder Word Up: African American Art</i> , Metropolitan State College Center for the Visual Arts, Denver, CO		Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL
	<i>Montgomery Biennial</i> , Montgomery Museum of Art, Montgomery, AL		De Young Museum, San Francisco, CA
1991	<i>The Legacy of Africa in the New World</i> , Waterloo Museum of Art, Waterloo, IA		High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
1990	<i>The Next Generation: The Southern Black Aesthetic</i> , Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA), Winston-Salem, NC		Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
	<i>Another Face of the Diamond: Pathways Through the Black Atlantic South</i> , INTAR Latin		Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta, GA
	American Gallery, New York, NY		Milwaukee Museum of Art, Milwaukee, WI
	<i>Southern Outsider Art II</i> , American Primitive, New York, NY		Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
1989	<i>The Figure Redefined</i> , Primitivo, San Francisco, CA		New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ
	<i>Art from the African Diaspora</i> , Aljira, A Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, NJ		New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA
	<i>Outside the Mainstream: Folk Art in Our</i>		Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA
			Smithsonian American Museum of Art, Washington, DC
			Projects
		2011	Art on the Beltline, featured artist
		2004	Guest Artist, Miami University, Oxford,

OH

2003 Perspectives 8, Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL

2001 Space One Eleven Residency, Birmingham, AL

1996 Commission, Olympic Games, Atlanta, GA

Awards and Fellowships

2014 Robert Rauschenberg Residency, Captiva Island, Fla.

2006 Joan Mitchell Fellowship

The New York Times Magazine

MAGAZINE

Lonnie Holley, the Insider's Outsider

By MARK BINELLI JAN. 23, 2014



Lonnie Holley in his apartment in Atlanta. Credit Gillian Laub for The New York Times

One night in October, just a couple blocks from Harvard Square, a young crowd gathered at a music space called the Sinclair to catch a performance by Bill Callahan, the meticulous indie-rock lyricist who has been playing to bookish collegiate types since the early '90s. Callahan's opening act, Lonnie Holley, had been playing to similar audiences for two years. A number of details about Holley made this fact surprising:

He was decades older than just about everyone in the club and one of the few African-Americans. He says he grew up the seventh of 27 children in Jim Crow-era Alabama, where his schooling stopped around seventh grade. In his own, possibly unreliable telling, he says the woman who informally adopted him as an infant eventually traded him to another family for a pint of whiskey when he was 4. Holley also says he dug graves, picked trash at a drive-in, drank too much gin, was run over by a car and pronounced brain-dead, picked cotton, became a father at 15 (Holley now has 15 children), worked as a short-order cook at Disney World and did time at a notoriously brutal juvenile facility, the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children in Mount Meigs.

Then he celebrated his 29th birthday. And shortly after that, for the first time in his life, Holley began making art: sandstone carvings, initially — Birmingham remained something of a steel town back then, and its foundries regularly discarded the stone linings used for industrial molds. Later, he began work on a wild, metastasizing yard-art environment sprawling over two acres of family property, with sculptures constructed nearly entirely from salvaged junkyard detritus like orphaned shoes, plastic flowers, tattered quilts, tires, animal bones, VCR remotes, wooden ladders, an old tailor’s dummy, a busted Minolta EP 510 copy machine, a pink scooter, oil drums rusted to a leafy autumnal delicateness, metal pipes, broken headstone fragments, a half-melted television set destroyed in a house fire that also took the life of one of Holley’s nieces, a syringe, a white cross.

His work was soon acquired by curators at the Birmingham Museum of Art and the Smithsonian. Bill Arnett, the foremost collector (and promoter) of self-taught African-American artists from the Deep South — the man who brought worldwide attention to Thornton Dial and the quilters of Gee’s Bend, Ala. — cites his first visit to Holley’s home in 1986 as a moment of epiphany. “He was actually the catalyst that started me on a much deeper search,” Arnett says, adding bluntly that “if Lonnie had been living in the East Village 30 years ago and been white, he’d be famous by now.”

Had Holley’s story climaxed right there, with his discovery and celebration — however unfairly limited it has been, if you accept Arnett’s view — you would still be left with an immensely satisfying dramatic arc. But in 2012, at age 62, Holley made his debut as a recording artist. He had been hoarding crude home recordings of himself since the mid-’80s, but never gave much thought to anything approaching a proper release. Then he met Lance Ledbetter, the 37-year-old founder of Dust-to-Digital, a boutique record label based in Atlanta. Ledbetter, who started Dust-to-Digital as a way of bringing rare gospel records — pressed between 1902 and 1960, most them never available before on compact disc — to a broader audience, had never attempted to record a living artist before he heard Holley. “I was hearing Krautrock, R.& B., all of these genres hitting each other and pouring out of this 60-year-old person who had never made a record before,” Ledbetter recalls. “I couldn’t digest it, it was so intense.”



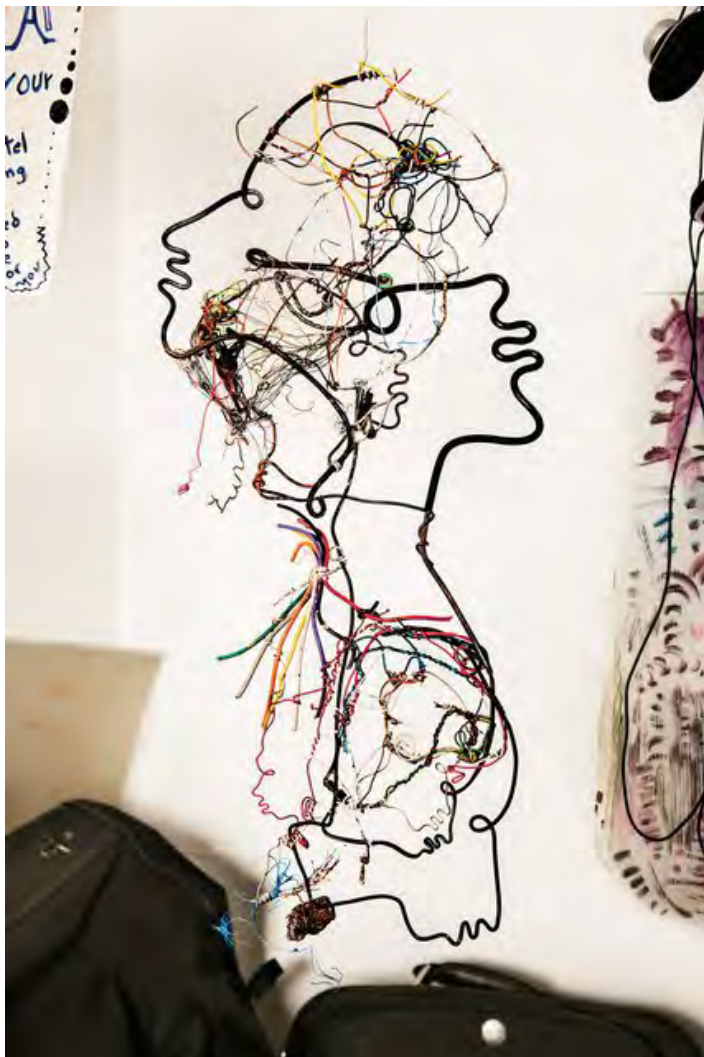
Holley rehearses at a studio in the Ormewood Park neighborhood of Atlanta. Credit Gillian Laub for The New York Times

In terms of genre, Holley’s music is largely unclassifiable: haunting vocals accompanied by rudimentary keyboard effects, progressing without any traditional song structure — no choruses, chord changes or consistent melody whatsoever. In many ways, Holley is the perfect embodiment of Dust-to-Digital’s overriding aesthetic: a raw voice plucked from a lost world, evoking the visceral authenticity of a crackling acetate disc. The title of his Dust-to-Digital debut, released in 2012, could double as its own category description: “Just Before Music.” That album and its follow-up, “Keeping a Record of It,” released in

September and, for my money, one of the best records of 2013, introduced Holley to a new audience, including members of hip indie-rock bands like Dirty Projectors and Animal Collective, who have all played with him.

At the Sinclair, Holley sat in front of a Nord Electro 2 keyboard. The stand was lowered close to the stage floor, along with Holley’s stool, forcing him to splay his knees. In photographs from his younger days, Holley is rangy and handsome, with an intense, faraway gaze that, in certain shots, possesses a dangerous, slightly mad edge. (“I think it’s more serious than angry,” Holley says of the look.) Age has softened his face and added streaks of white to his unkempt goatee. He was wearing a black beret, glasses and a Harvard T-shirt, his fingers and left forearm laden with jewelry (upward of six rings per finger, more than a dozen bracelets armoring his left wrist, the bracelets doubling as protection for when Holley sculpts with barbed wire and other jagged materials).

“Oh, goodness,” Holley said. “It’s wonderful to be here.” Then he began to play the keyboard — only the black keys — and spacey, ethereal music filled the room. The young crowd fell silent and watched, rapt. His voice was hoarse and occasionally tuneless, and Holley held his palms flat while he played, his long fingers extended. It looked as if he were fanning a flame or trying to calm a small dog or a child.



A sculpture, titled “Power of a Mother,” in Holley’s home.
Credit Gillian Laub for The New York Times

Backstage, only a few minutes before showtime, I learned that each of his pieces is actually a one-time performance; his words and music, whether in the studio or on a stage, are entirely improvised. “It’s like a mental flight, as Dr. King said — I’m taking a mental flight each time I’m up onstage,” Holley told me. I had to look it up, but he was referring to the speech that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered to striking sanitation workers in Memphis the day before he was assassinated, in which King fantasized about taking a “mental flight” to ancient Egypt, across the Red Sea, “through the wilderness, on toward the promised land.”

I was dubious about Holley’s ability — anyone’s, really — to pull off something like this in a satisfying manner. But then, as if to directly rebuke my unvoiced doubts, Holley began the second number by singing, “I was telling a friend of mine, a few minutes ago, we was talking about centuries and centuries,” and I realized I was the friend he was singing about. (We had actually just met.) Holley then proceeded to create, on the spot, a song that distilled everything that’s so excellent about his music: both its fragile, anachronistic beauty and its unhinged weirdness. This particular song, which, like all of Holley’s songs (and many of his conversations, for that matter) is not easy to summarize, included several riffs on the cruelty of the government shutdown (which we had been discussing backstage), a joke without a punch line about a pair of cave men named Ugg and Lee, whistling, scattin, a couple of Satchmo growls and, ultimately, a devastating and sincere profession of

patriotism, during which Holley sang bits of the Pledge of Allegiance and then offhandedly improved “America the Beautiful” with a riff on a verse from the Gospel of Matthew, “So much to be harvested, and the harvesters are so few.”

After the show, I emailed Bill Callahan, who labors in a lapidary fashion over his own lyrics, to hear what he thought about Holley’s approach. “All music is improvised,” Callahan wrote back, “just at different speeds.”

In 1997, Holley’s original art environment was destroyed after the Birmingham Airport Authority condemned his property as part of a planned expansion. There had been a protracted legal battle. By that point, Holley’s yard consisted of thousands of pieces and had taken over roads and wooded areas abandoned by neighbors forced out by the airport. He received a settlement of \$165,700 and bought new land in Harpersville, a more rural Alabama community about 35 miles away.

“I was living in hell in Harpersville,” Holley told me. He was raising his five youngest children on his own, after their mother went to prison on an armed-robbery charge. Holley was arrested after property stolen by one of his sons from a local golf course was discovered at his house. A few months earlier, Holley says, he was shot in the wrist when a neighbor opened fire on his home. He told me that the feud stemmed from the fact that his property had been seized in a drug raid; the neighbors were related to the previous owner.

In 2010, he finally moved to the south side of Atlanta, where he now lives in a walk-up one-bedroom apartment near the federal penitentiary. (The building is owned by a fan of Holley’s work who is also friends with the Arnett family.) When I visited Holley, I was initially startled by how thoroughly he seemed to have recreated his art environment within the confines of his modest new living quarters, which is to say, his place looked as if it had been taken over by squatters or maybe a home-decorating show in which the makeover artists are restricted to using materials scavenged from trash bins. Found objects (DVD cases, egg cartons, torn bedsheets, yellow police “Do Not Cross” tape) were draped from wires crisscrossing the room, along with Calderesque wire sculptures of faces made by Holley. Nestlike piles of junk he picked up on walks along the nearby train tracks were partly covered by tarps; his workbench was a rough-hewed wooden plank balanced on a window sill and a garbage can.

“What I’m doing here, I think Malcolm said it best: by any means necessary,” Holley said. “We can make art where we have to. Dr. King, if you remember, wrote a sermon on a piece of toilet paper.” He said he was in the process of securing studio space, so he could make his apartment more of a conventional home. He was wearing a long-sleeved Carhartt shirt and paint-spattered cargo pants. All of his rings and bracelets — copper, silver, black rubber, garishly beaded — were either homemade or found objects. They added to the shamanistic aura Holley projects, although the backpack he always carries, in case he comes across any potential art materials, exuded more of a hobo practicality, as a bag stuffed with more bags inevitably does. There were also multiple pieces of rope hanging from the straps of the backpack, “in case I need to tie something off,” Holley explained.

As we left his apartment, he said his friend in the soul-food restaurant downstairs warned him about crime in the neighborhood. We drove past check-cashing joints, boarded homes, 1-888-JUNK-CARS signs, a wine-distribution warehouse surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. Eventually we stopped for coffee, and Holley described how he learned to repurpose other people’s trash from his grandmother, who used to sell scrap metal to junkyards. “In the ‘50s and early ‘40s, there wasn’t no garbage trucks, especially out in the country,” he said. “Everyone took their stuff and dug holes and buried it. That’s where I got pretty much all of my material. All you had to do was go around the edge of the property lines, and you mostly found everything that they’d thrown away.”

We were sitting at an outdoor table with a partly filled ashtray. Holley stopped talking to reach over and pluck out a cigarette butt, examining it as if he had discovered a rare penny in a handful of

change. He asked me for a sheet of paper from my notebook, then tore apart the butt and affixed its cottony filter to a wooden coffee stirrer, also liberated from the ashtray. “This is called white oak,” he said. “It’s what they use to weave baskets and things, because it’s flexible.” He fashioned a miniature paintbrush and then painted a heart and the word LOVE using ashes mixed with a few drops of his iced coffee, the solution creating an appealing speckled-eggshell patina.

Holley’s need to create borders on the compulsive. He sketches faces on napkins in restaurants, pastes together collages in notebooks while riding from one show to the next. Photography, his latest medium, allows him to arrange found objects wherever he might be and simply document this ephemeral act. “I’m getting toward a terabyte of material,” he said of the project, his voice a mixture of pride and concern. “And I’m one man, not a company!”

After the coffee, we drove to an industrial part of town where Arnett, who has long been Holley’s loudest advocate, stores his collection. The place reminded me of a cross between the American Folk Art Museum and the warehouse at the end of “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” Boxes filled with Gee’s Bend quilts were stacked five high. A central place of honor was set aside for Holley’s sculptures: a gnarled tree root laid across a pair of beat-up rocking chairs; a plaster column topped with picture frames, Coke bottles and a hairbrush; golf clubs and baseball bats protruding from a drain pipe used in a work titled “Protecting Myself the Best I Can (Weapons by the Door).”

James Fuentes, the Lower East Side gallerist (and former director at Deitch Projects) who represents Holley, says one of the things that drew him to Holley’s work was that it was “assemblage sculpture made from a nonironic standpoint.” Holley’s first attempt at working with sandstone came after two of his sister’s young children died in a house fire. “We didn’t have no money to get no memorial stones,” Holley said, “so I decided I was going to cut the sandstone and make them tombstones.” It was the late 1970s, and Holley had recently moved back to Alabama after working at Disney World and found his mother living in desperate poverty. “I got depressed, very depressed,” Holley said. “There were some burnings on my brain I can’t explain. I didn’t wanna see Mama have to go to neighbors to ask if they had anything. She had all those children, and no matter how I was working, whatever I tried to go do, really, I couldn’t make no changes in her life. The art were the thing that pulled me out from that, the baby tombstones. I didn’t know what art were.” (To clarify the 27-children count: Holley says that includes some stillbirths and early deaths.)

Holley loves nothing better than to explain the meaning behind his pieces, all of which come densely packed with outside references, and in the warehouse, he began a declamatory phase, his robust Southern accent giving his words a slightly sung quality. Holley can be very charming and funny — after the tombstone story, he recalled the time he misunderstood an early curator’s suggestion to try his hand at busts and wound up carving a bunch of miniature sandstone buses — but then he’ll speak in long, elliptical blocks of text, shifting between favorite metaphors, current events, historical allusions and detailed family history. A question about how his music and art relate to each other sparked an eight-minute lecture touching on Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, a trip to Kentucky, Mary Todd Lincoln, the types of shoes worn by civil rights marchers and a sculpture he made called “Above the Shoe.”

“My thing as an artist, I am not doing anything but still ringing that Liberty Bell, ding, ding, ding, on the shorelines of independence,” he said near the end of this particular riff, fixing me with an intense gaze. “Isn’t that beautiful? Can you hear the bell I’m ringing? And will you come running?”

Like the “mental flights” his lyrics take, Holley’s monologues can be fascinating, but also, without musical accompaniment, exhausting in a way that will make your head hurt if you try too hard to follow his line of thought. “He’s totally abstract, and he’s been that way forever,” says Holley’s 31-year-old son, Kubra. After a few days with Holley, I was reminded of a friend’s story about a visit to the Georgia folk artist (and Baptist minister) Howard Finster back in the 1990s. “If you need to go

inside and use the bathroom or anything, go ahead,” Finster told my friend after pausing in the midst of a rambling, impromptu sermon. “I’ll be doing this whether you’re out here or not.”

How to characterize artists like Holley and Finster has long been a source of controversy. Many bristle at qualifiers like “folk” or “outsider” — outside what, exactly? — and yet spending any time with Holley makes you realize there’s a genuine eccentricity that sets him apart, separate from any differences in class or geography or general background that might place him “outside” the social sphere of, say, Art Basel attendees. But the better I got to know Holley, the more I realized that the reason none of the old categories felt satisfying was that I was ignoring the one that was most apropos: The kind of artist Lonnie Holley is, first and foremost, is a performance artist.

This seems especially clear now that he’s releasing music. Holley began making home recordings after picking up a Casio keyboard in a pawnshop. Sometimes he sang, other times he just talked while making his work, explaining the significance of whatever salvaged objects he happened to be weaving into his vast tapestry. He multitracked the more musical numbers with a dual-cassette boombox and a karaoke machine. “Sometimes I’d have a video camera set up, recording my physical actions,” Holley recalled. (It’s a technique he still uses today at times.) “I’d be dancing and painting. Sometimes I’d go to a flea market and buy all these different garments, and I’d change my clothes all day. So I was almost doing a presentation.”

Holley would occasionally play the audiocassettes for Arnett’s son Matt, who works with his father and also runs an underground music space in his Atlanta home. Matt became obsessed with Holley’s recordings, and they impressed any musician friends he shared them with. But what to do with the music? “I didn’t even know what to call it,” he says.

He eventually had Holley play a set at his space and made sure Ledbetter was in the audience. He also took Holley into a recording studio, where they cut the song that would become what might be my favorite of Holley’s recorded pieces, “Six Space Shuttles and 144,000 Elephants.” In it, Holley imagines the building of a sextet of cosmic arks (“the size of the Hindenburg and the Titanic, both put together”) in honor of Queen Elizabeth’s birthday. The elephants eventually return to save the earth from environmental degradation. Summarized, this sounds silly, but the “nonironic standpoint” Fuentes appreciates in Holley’s sculptures works its magic here too. By the end, when Holley begins softly singing “Happy birthday, dear queen,” the sudden shift in tone and impossible earnestness of his delivery flattens me to the ground every time.

On the road, Matt acts as Holley’s tour manager, driving him to gigs in a rental car, working the merchandise table and writing out nightly set lists to Holley’s specifications. The “song titles” are merely phrases or ideas that have popped into Holley’s head, which he’ll improvise around during the performance. They read like fragments of poems: “I Can’t Hate the Ocean for Bringing You”; “The Field’s Too Wet — I Ain’t Got No Water for Awhile, for Awhile”; “Where Did That Leaf Come From?”

Matt Arnett has known Holley since he was a teenager, thanks to the work of his father. Bill Arnett has played a larger role in the lives of his favored artists than a typical collector. For years, Arnett has helped support artists, including Holley, with stipends, in exchange for which he receives right of first refusal on anything they produce. Critics dismiss the idea of a privileged white collector making deals with black artists from isolated and often deeply impoverished worlds and possibly exercising unfair influence over them. It’s an issue that has been explored at length elsewhere, most pointedly in a 1996 “60 Minutes” segment that featured Bill Arnett. “60 Minutes” portrayed his business relationships with his artists as blatantly exploitative, but the artist in Arnett’s stable who complained on camera, Bessie Harvey, later rescinded her comments. Holley himself has nothing bad to say about Arnett after working with him for 30 years. “I didn’t really trust him at first,” Holley says. “You have to remember, this is a white man, so I’m curious about who I’m being involved with. But the only thing Bill was doing was setting my expectations free.”

Nevertheless, the state of Holley's living space, the obsessive and all-encompassing nature of his art-making, his scattered manner of speaking, all raised uncomfortable questions for me about the line between an eccentric creative person and a more genuinely troubled one. In the world of music, especially, there's a way in which the embrace of such artists can feel condescending. Daniel Johnston, an undeniably talented rock musician who has spent time in mental institutions and whose oddball, wildly uneven home recordings were celebrated as quirky fetish objects by the alternative rock scene in the '90s, comes to mind. In Holley's case, the sheer quantity of his output guarantees artistic highs and lows, which are unavoidable when a lack of editing is such an integral part of his creative method. But I would argue that those highs, particularly when it comes to the music, make the whole package worthwhile, so accepting the messiness of Holley's multifarious performance never feels like giving him a pass.

Holley had a girlfriend in Atlanta for a while, an aspiring musician he was living with, but that didn't work out. He spends time with his children, who are all grown, and will have social dinners with the Arnetts or with Lance Ledbetter and his wife. But mostly, Holley is a loner, the performative aspect of his personality creating a distancing effect that keeps him a man apart.

Kubra, the middle of Holley's five youngest children (or the "13th of the 15," as Kubra says), acknowledges that his upbringing was unorthodox. For years, the Holleys were the last family remaining as their neighborhood was swallowed up by the airport authority. (Holley was married to the mother of his five youngest children; she served her prison term in Ohio, where she still lives today. His other 10 children come from four different mothers and did not live with Holley and the younger children in Alabama.) Kubra and his four full siblings ended up sticking close together, turning abandoned homes into their own clubhouses. But, Kubra says: "I have nothing bad to say about my dad. He always found ways to provide for us. Sometimes as an adult, you do have some regrets about missing out on the more typical stuff growing up. That structure. But a lot of our life lessons were more down to earth. I could teach you about making something out of nothing to put food on the table. If every computer in the world shut down, I could show you how to live."

On my last day in Atlanta, it was unseasonably warm for early November, and Holley decided to take me and Ledbetter for a walk along the BeltLine, an in-progress conversion of miles of unused Atlanta train tracks into bicycle and walking trails. Holley was in high spirits when we picked him up. Some of his children had just come to visit him from Alabama, and in a few weeks, he would be touring Europe. "I'm loving Atlanta," Holley told me. His long-term plans involve a re-creation of his outdoor studio. "What I want to do is get a few acres here and start over," he said.

The particular stretch of the BeltLine we were exploring remained trash-strewn and overgrown. Holley's eyes immediately dropped to the ground, in search of new art materials, and soon he had collected the cracked mouth of a whiskey bottle, shards of white pottery, the wire portion of a spent bottle rocket. A young woman, out walking her dog, stopped to take Holley's picture with her smartphone. I assumed it was because his voice had been steadily rising, taking on a preacher's cadence, and also because he was waving around several feet of thick cable he had just extracted from a patch of pokeweed, but when Holley began to tell her about his art, the woman smiled shyly and said, "I know who you are." She had seen his work at an exhibit and recently listened to one of his songs at her office. It made her cry.

Holley invited her to join us and continued to expound on topics of interest (slave ships, Moses and the burning bush, Boris Karloff's version of "The Mummy"). She seemed to soak it all in, saying yes to his best one-liners and occasionally clutching her hands to her chest, genuinely moved. I looked for hints of flirtation coming from Holley, but he mostly seemed pleased to have a fresh audience. Holley often had the air of someone not fully present, but only because he was picking up signals from elsewhere.

“This performative mode that you’ve spotted, that’s just the way Lonnie is,” Bill Arnett later told me, dismissing my performance-artist theory. “Performance art, that word is from the mainstream. I’ve known Lonnie for 25 years, and he is emphatically not from the mainstream. So unless you want to call him, what — an outsider performance artist? — I don’t think it works.”

Maybe not. But there is something about watching him sing or make a sculpture or tell a story or do all of the above at once that’s markedly different from looking at one of his pieces in a gallery or listening to his record at home. Sometimes it’s the simplest gesture. Back on the tracks, Holley’s eyes alit on a signal post. The metal box had mostly been stripped, and Holley quickly wove three thick wires through the latch. After bending one down himself, he had me and Ledbetter do the same. Then he took a step back and explained that what we had just done was called a collaboration, and that anytime we came back, we would remember what we did together. “Can’t nobody really shut this door without tampering with it,” he said, testing it himself. “What we did, we prevented something from ever being locked again.”

As he reached inside the box and began plucking at its springs, I wondered, again, how much this was part of the performance: playing the box like a musical instrument, dropping casual-sounding bits of folk wisdom about locks and doors. But he appeared fixated on the task at hand. “Lance,” he murmured to Ledbetter, “you got your recorder?”

George King, an Atlanta filmmaker who has spent the past 18 years shooting Holley for a planned documentary project, earlier described seeing “boxes and boxes of cassettes” of recorded music, back when Holley was still living in Alabama. “I don’t think there was any purpose, necessarily,” King told me. “It wasn’t like he hoped it would be released or even that he’d listen to it a week later. He just wanted to document that it happened. A lot of the time, his interest appears to be in making an object rather than even displaying it. Lonnie is kind of like a shark that way: to survive he has to keep moving forward, to keep making things. It’s almost an existential thing. That’s how he experiences the world.”

Ledbetter fired up the voice-memo application on his smartphone and set it inside the switch box. Holley flicked the springs, which created a throbbing echo. Then he started to sing along, softly, stretching out the words. “Do you remember me? Down by the rail rail rail rail road?” Nodding his head, pleased, he whispered to Ledbetter: “O.K. You got that? Good.” And then we kept on walking.

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Art in America

DECEMBER 2013

LONNIE HOLLEY

James fuentes

Sculptor, painter, musician and educator Lonnie Holley was born in Alabama in 1950. He is one of a group of contemporary artists, among them Purvis Young, Ronald Lockett and Holley's close friend Thornton Dial, whose work has its roots in Southern-American vernacular art and architecture.

Holley's own art is particularly indebted to the tradition of the yard show—the embellished yards decorated with wood, concrete, plants, roots, paint and cast-off objects seen throughout the American South. For 18 years, Holley's one-acre property outside of Birmingham served as yard-show-like multimedial environment incorporating his paintings, sculptures carved from industrial sandstone (a by-product of Birmingham's steel industry) and found-object assemblages. It was bulldozed in 1997 to make way for a proposed addition to the Birmingham airport; Holley now works out of a studio in Atlanta.

With the exception of one 2011 sandstone carving, this crowded exhibition of a dozen pieces was limited to assemblage sculptures made in the last 10 years. Into these essentially abstract constructions, Holley introduces political, autobiographical and poetic narratives that address our relationships to nature, technology, and one another, among other subjects.

As in the work of Dial, the materials in Holley's assemblages may have formal, pictorial or metaphorical value—or all three at once, as in *The Cause of the Accident* (2011), the centerpiece of which is blown-out truck tire. As a shape, the tire interacts with the circular forms of a hubcap and a loop of thin wire in a serene arrangement that pairs flow and stillness. As an object, it is evidence of an incident, perhaps a fatal one. As a symbol, it serves as a cautionary reminder of the laws of cause and effect.

Recurring elements are emblems of motion (in addition to tires, there are steering wheels and truck gears), power (electrical cords and plugs), communications (telephones and telephone wires), danger (barricade tape, red paint), labor (workman's tools and ladders) and frequently art. In *High Class Chair* (2011), for example, an arrangement of a gilded picture frame, a classroom chair, a piece of electrical cable and a crude wooden cross is dedicated to the late art critic and scholar Thomas McEvelly, a champion and explicator of Holley's work.

Two especially strong sculptures emphasize human interconnectedness. *The Catholic Lady's Pictures* (2004), a bouquet of empty picture frames sprouting from a piece of firewood set on its end, is—according to a statement by the artist—a portrait, of sorts, of the neighbor who once owned them, while the fugitive face in profile in *Mother P* (2011), two interlocking pieces of scrap metal threaded through with a squiggle of wire, stands in for unnamed forebears and their histories.



Gabriel's Horn (2011) features a square grid of wire fencing hung with an assortment of objects, including a battered metal horn. The work encompasses a more global vision of community—one in which we ignore our common humanity and the consequences of our actions at our peril. About this piece Holley has written that the horn symbolizes the act of alerting others to danger. The implication here is that this is the job of artist, but, as Holley adds, “Gabriel was a messenger in biblical times, and I wanted to show that maybe that kind of spirit exists in all of us.”

- Anne Doran

Lonnie Holley: *Gabriel's Horn* 2011, mixed mediums, 67 by 51 by 18 inches, at James Fuentes.

ARTFORUM

APRIL 1992 PP80-84

Lonnie Holley's Moves

JUDITH MCWILLIE

As both insiders and outsiders, [diviner] consultants have greater freedom and viability in giving advice on problems in the community, but they also must walk a fine and difficult line in maintaining two conflicting identities. As both alienist and annunciator, the consultant stands at once at the center and the periphery of the society- the out- sider who is the ultimate insider.

-Rudolph Blier, 1991

The culture of particular form is approaching its end. The culture of determined relations has begun.

-Piet Mondrian, 1937

The late 1980s was a period of unprecedented growth for institutions that functioned as buffers between the urban polyglot and what the sociologist Arthur Paris calls "the global countryside," that selectively invisible domain that Western historians once del- egated, to the economic periphery.¹ Significantly, the representa- tives of these institutions- New York's Museum of American Folk Art, for example- tended to bypass what they called "the fine arts establishment" for direct contact with artists themselves. Not only were they able to create a parallel economy, purchasing vanloads of works by newly "discovered" artists at a fraction of gallery prices, but some of them also encountered the visionary impera- tive in its rawest states.

Lonnie Holley, a 42-year-old artist based in Birmingham, Ala- bama, is a definitive figure in this phenomenon. Black, Southern, and almost half the age of most of the artists appropriated under the folk/outsider rubric, Holley personifies the political and ethical complexities converging and "the once disparaged vernacular."² But in its scale, its syncretic 'tlexibility, and its dialogic origins, his vision defies classification in Western terms, emerging instead as a bridge between worlds, rooted in the dynamics of social reciproc- ity that are the bedrock of AfricanAmerican philosophy and eth- ics. Holley exponentially enhances these perspectives, challeng- ing fundamental critical assumptions about the social autonomy of artists, the relationship between creation and interpretation, and the psychic survival of self in community. In the context of multiculturalism, he introduces "a doubling of histories within an overarching transformation" of cultural priorities.³

Holley spent most of his youth in foster homes until he was ¹⁴, when his grandmother adopted him and taught him to pick through dumps and landfills for items to sell at flea markets. Although he cites this intervention as a turning point in his life, he nevertheless remained vulnerable to the racial and economic pressures commonly identified with the Deep South. In 1979, while recovering from a suicide attempt, he made his first artwork. "It was a baby tombstone," he says, "I didn't know it was art. My sister had lost two of her children in a house fire and it seemed that you couldn't calm her down or keep her from thinking....It was the moment that I saw a vision of myself working." Two years earlier Holley had moved to a house on the grounds of an African- American cemetery. Later he developed a one-acre site literally on the periphery of Birmingham, where he lives today with his wife and five children.

The Holley family's house is barely visible among the mounds and bunkers of

objects and other cast-off materials that are stacked, wrapped, and moored to trees and sheds through- out the site. Holley's paintings and cutouts are juxtaposed with thrift-store tapestries and fragments of fabric signed with gestural markings and ideographic seals.

Elsewhere, blocks of industrial sandstone (waste from a nearby steel mill) are tumbled about, waiting for him to transform them into carvings that animate the cycles of time. These carvings are stylistically related to Meso-American and Egyptian sculp- ture, influences Holley accepts from popular texts and television- "because," he explains, "these were the civilizations that built the pyramids," which signify durational time in his mythology. The imagery of the carvings is replicated in Holley's paintings and wire sculpture and in the organization of the site itself. Recurring themes include the dreaming mother as the origin of life, the orga- nization of knowledge in ancestral continuity, and the reciprocal exchange of matter and spirit. "The earth is made up of the dust of the ancestors," says Holley. "We are living off their bodies." Classic Afro-Atlantic idioms abound: writing in the spirit, a visual equivalent of speaking in tongues, in which a spontaneously impro- vised script is used as a praise form and as a focusing device in the divinatory consultations, Holley extends to those who need them; 'mojo hands- ritually configured objects and substances that initiate a spiritual change in their bearers; traditional objects too potent to squander; anthropomorphism in both natural and manufactured readymades and shrines to ancestors, including Martin Luther King, Egyptian and Ethiopian patriarchs, and media heroes such as Michael Jackson, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee. The cumulative effect is of an endogenous universe in which nature and technology perforate and tunnel into each other almost seamlessly.

Holley's art is a locus of "moving equilibrium" where physical coordinates constantly shift from the effects of nature and, more recently, from the intervention of collectors who home in on paintings, carvings, and object constellations. "I constantly ask the collectors that come around, Do they understand what they are getting?" he says. The answers to that question are multifarious. Though Holley's work readily syncretizes with aspects of contem- porary Western art, these consonances are only partially explained by the shuttling of museum and gallery traditions into the grab bag of popular culture. Holley himself prefers to experience them as the natural product of visionary imperatives. "I know none of the names of the workers that participated in art before, but I pay trib- ute to them," he says. "The way I see it. I am standing un for them." The

The Surrealists had their Marche aux Puces, the rambling Paris flea market where cultural “curiosities” were scrambled, rearranged, and “stripped of their functional context.” Holley’s attack on the domesticated entropy of urban landfills is no less about “contested realities.”

He is obsessed with the inexhaustible latency of it all, with the imprint of the past, the “experienced” quality that allows an object’s effects to oscillate between history, legacy, myth, and prayer. “I dig through what other people have thrown away ... to get the gold of it-to know that grandmother had that skillet and stood over that heat preparing that meal, so when I go home with that skillet, I’ve got grandmother. ‘Grand’: someone who has authority and is capable.”

Whereas Robert Rauschenberg’s combines seem dependent on gestures magnetized to a cryptic grid, Holley’s moves tend to break loose from the ground that would support them. The state free status of his art, its liminality, identifies it as divinatory rather than mannerist. Closure is in the eye of the beholder-scattered, elusive, barely familiar, like listening to Gullah for the first time, or perhaps like hearing Hugo Ball in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich during World War I. A Westerner standing in this visionary landscape may recall Abstract Expressionism, one of the last Modern movements deliberately to invoke the ecstatic. The inscrutable slabs of color familiar from Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Robert Motherwell are incarnated in the shredded curtains and banners that differentiate the zones of Holley’s site, and the sublimated brush strokes of Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock are returned to the earth as variegated sandstone, twisted fabric, crushed wood, and rusted metal.

The Modernist object lesson is occasionally useful, then, but one obvious correlation, Marcel Duchamp, is nowhere in this. In Duchamp’s readymades, an object’s utilitarian function was imported into the elite setting of the gallery. In contrast, Holley’s work is an obsessive extension of the African-American tradition of ideographic found-object votives on graves and as agents of protection in dressed yards and gardens. This legacy may have had its own effect on contemporary art: I would speculate that AfroAtlantic graves and yard shows may have been conscious influences for artists such as Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, who surely encountered them during their youths in Texas and South Carolina.

The cultural synthesis that Western artists have been exploring for much of the 20th century had already been a grass-roots reality for over 300 years in creolized societies. As North American slave owners tried to eradicate the material culture of their captives, Africans were silently sheltering the old gods and medicines in ordinary objects. The duration of this strategy alone testifies brilliantly to its efficacy. In the process, an imposed culture was turned back on itself and transformed. Lying at the heart of this dynamic is a translation of spirit into matter that culturally inverts European transcendentalism’s romantic attachment to the sublime. Whereas an Abstract Expressionist might cite transcendence as the goal of esthetic life, Holley identifies it as the origin, exposing art’s deepest liberationist impulses. “Visions come in many forms. The forces of the Spirit itself change our ways and our actions. I’m not speaking for myself as an individual; I’m speaking for the whole of life. I like the justice scale because it allows you to balance something and ...allows you to appreciate yourself and others around you. But if we fear to the point where death takes over and life do not then we somehow lose the balance.... Life and death is a twin; they have to be.” This attitude registers even in the gallery. Cultural purists who shudder at the “recontextualization” of Holley’s art should be wary of aligning themselves with conditions that would bind African-Americans to the social determinism of political and economic repression. In the migrations of Holley’s works from Alabama to Manhattan, a crucial synapse is opened between the conceptual veneer attached to popular ideography by Western art history and criticism and the physical evidence of an entirely different causality. “Everything is medicine!” says Holley.

The Inner Suffering of the Holy Cost, 1988, constellates shoes, barbed wire, a headlight, a chain, rags, a bottle, and other industrial bits, rendering them transcendently instrumental rather than marooning them in estheticism. Like a Kongo nkisi, it is a focal point or container of force, only not from “the invisible land of the dead,” as in Africa, but from the compounded effects of cultural fluency and spiritual emancipation. In the syntax of Kongo religion, the probable religion of Holley’s ancestors, this sculpture is a node of power that metonymically situates an all seeing eye at the apex of a cyclical cosmogram, invoking time, initiation, vision, and the experience of knowledge as both terror and compassion.¹⁰

And the work is also “out there” with Koonses, Warhols, and Basquiat, as well as with the vendors on Canal Street, the makeshift dwellings under the West Side Highway, yard shows in Brooklyn and Harlem, and the bricolaged facades of the Lower East Side.

Interacting with the so-called “mainstream,” Holley’s work is pushing its capacities for nurture beyond the local boundaries of either professional or vernacular culture. Regardless of the contexts it visits, it has a way of maintaining its liminality, a quality essential to the divinatory function, which, according to anthropologist Philip Peek, “never results in a simple restatement of tradition to be followed blindly. It is a dynamic reassessment of customs and values in the face of an ever-changing world.”

Almost as soon as Holley began to make art, he was cast

I pay tribute with my mind and with my labor to the Spirit something which is grander than time. I think about the seriousness of art. I also want to speak about the spiritual part of art. I have to look at it this way: that I’m serving time. All those bodies that has passed through time (leaving them nameless, there are there!), I must keep their respect or else fear that I will lose all that I have gained.

I think respect of the elders makes community. Once that respect is lost, there is no longer a community, because if we lose respect from that which we came, we are somehow or another on the journey to losing our grip with reality. And art allows us to keep that grip. If I had not started looking back to appreciate I would have went on disappreciating and destroyed not only myself but the whole world around me. We don’t need artists destroying themselves. The Spirit that inhabited the great ones of the past, do you think that it would not inhabit you)

The mind is like the body: it have to put on clothes. When we find the master force of life—love being the nurturer, the pacifier—I can see the mind that lays a law, and have to think a law, and walk a law through life. Everybody is fearful that the world will come to the point of being destroyed. It’s not. It’s that the mind will come to a point of stopping to think in the order it is in and think in a new order. That’s the whole point of the spirituality of it. I’m looking at that baby who was five thousand years in the wombs of time and saying, “It’s alright your space is secure—we made sure.” Hurt comes to an artist, it stays with his thoughts, because if you’re the kind of artist that is able to think and never cut off your thoughts and you is the type of artist that reduces things to their lowest terms, you just don’t take things and say, “It’s OK: it’s OK that the grass is growing; it’s OK to step on it and it doesn’t matter.” If you have the type of knowledge that you know when you step on that grass you are putting pressure on the root and the soil around it and also mashing the moisture from it-knowing that you are causing something to happen—that’s what makes a difference. We’re talking about a divineness here; we’re talking about a divine level. I hope that this will allow others to see all that need to be done and how much we have to do it with. Once upon a time, to come into life cost man nothing. How have we allowed the values that we have proclaimed to be in the way of continuation of life? These words are said for time and times to come.

ing art: “The diviner starts with what I call jumbled speech ... some reversals, and an apparent lack of path control, i.e., straying from one concept to another and back divination stands between worlds,” says Peek, “so it centers itself in other symbolic ways.”¹⁶ The techniques of “imagining beyond difference” JJ employed by diviners, and by artists like Holley, engage what the literary critic Veve A. Clark calls marasa consciousness, named after the Haitian Vodoo sign for the Divine Twins: “Marasa states the oppositions and invites participation in the formulation of another principle entirely. Those of us accustomed to Hegelian dialectic would seek in comparable environments resolution of seemingly irreconcilable differences... the marasa sign, like others produced in agrarian societies, has another more ‘spiralist’ agenda in mind ... Marasa consciousness invites us to imagine beyond the binary.”¹⁸

Like the diviner consultants of Togo and other nations of the Afro-Atlantic complex, Holley believes that he must bring his ways of knowing “revealingly to bear upon troubled social situations...”¹⁹ “To deal with me as an artist,” he says, and see all of my art as art and not just garbage or junk, is to see that I went to the depths of where no one else even would go ... to speak for life.... I have to educate them to know I can’t make them hear me. [Yet] they all come running and they ask on their own individual terms. God said, “I made enough in your yard that I could show my people how to change.” And I have to work it all right back out of me so I can come back and handle another one. And that’s what keeps me from going insane. And I think that’s the way it is with every artist.

The extacies and anxieties of visionary experience are thus understood not as ends in themselves but as only the first stirrings of a more extended identity in which the roles of creator and interpreter and are consolidated at the level of community. Knowledge is reciprocal, aimed at rectifying social oppositions and exclusions. As Rudolph Blier writes, “It is in part by virtue of their distinct position as outsiders or alienists that these persons are able both to observe the community and to serve as its annunciators. It is through the balancing of these two dimensions that their roles as consultants are made possible. Furthermore, it is frequently said that once one has become a consultant one must continually consult (i.e. serve as an annunciator) or else... (the alienist identity) will become too dominant...”²⁰

In the Western tradition, the initiation into “double sight” has parallels in 20th-century artists’ fascination with the “fourth dimension.” Early in the century, Duchamp, Kasimir Malevich, and others turned to Gaston de Pawlowski’s *Voyage to the Land of the Fourth Dimension*, 1912, and other works, for a glimpse into what it was like to rise “above the world of the usual sensations.” “The vision of the fourth dimension opens up horizons absolutely new,” said Pawlowski. “It completes our understanding of the world; it enables us to carry out the definitive synthesis of everything we know; it justifies that knowledge, even when it seems contradictory, and we then realize that synthesis is a total idea which partial expressions cannot contain.”²¹ Although the impulses behind this statement were in accord with the aspirations of some of the most influential artists of the century, one recognizes embedded in it the familiar parochializing tenets of Western transcendentalism: cultural universalism, renunciation of social reciprocity in the name of privileged knowledge, a view of time as linear and unidirectional, and a binary opposition between the spiritual and the material worlds. As the critic Max Kozloff has written, this century’s obsession with the notion of “high art,” an art that must “levitate above its time” in order to be “admitted into the peerage of revelation,” is a corollary of these beliefs. In such a scenario, time is “the enemy of beauty,” and would “cast us off from ‘everything we loved and by which we lived.’”²² In comparison, Holley’s devotion to an unnamed grandmother’s skillet is of another order indeed. On the other hand, puzzling over the estrangement of Western artists from society at large, Kozloff

proposes that art’s gradual ascension into the realms of unknowing, shuffling off the mortal coil of the vernacular and of the past, “accords very well with our doubts and guilts in belonging to a repressive world order.”²³ This was a bold idea in its time (1974), though Kozloff has a tendency to blame artists, rather than the economic system that appropriates them, for what is now virtually a maxim in art criticism. Yet throughout this embattled century there have been signs of poignant longing among artists in the West, a longing so deep that nothing less than a radical redefinition of community would treat it. The promise of a new community was stirring in Tristan Tzara when he delivered Aranda, Kinga, Loritja, and Ba-Kongo chants (“negro poems,” he called them) at Dada soirees in Berlin in 1917. An intuitive affinity with divinatory healing in community surfaced in the 1970s among Western artists experimenting with aleatory techniques of construction, and later among post-Modernists scrambling the Old World’s hierarchies and signifiers to introduce their brooding postcolonial swan songs. The revisioning of community has been the urgent priority of multiculturalism. And the same impulse is evident in today’s probing confrontations between artists and dominant cultural institutions as they struggle to free the divining chain²⁴ from the airless stasis of estheticism.

Artists such as Holley tell us that these forces are omnidirectional, and that the longings of Western artists too may one day be seen in a more generous light. When shown a photograph of Rauschenberg’s *Charlene*, 1954, a work that syncretizes with aspects of his own art, Holley commented, “He began to feel another level of himself. He is saying, ‘I want to give you the best of being—the wind that turns and turns in life.’ There is a door that we can go out and come back in, that we can renew ourselves. It’s better that an artist take something from a dying something and replant it, that it may come into the world and still be seen. I’m cultivating the roots of a new seed from an old source.”

C U L T U R A L
 THE WORK OF LONNIE HOLLEY
 R E C Y C L I N G

Scholar Robert Farris Thompson has described Holley's work in part as an intact Yoruba mythology of moral medicine, or nkisi; in Holley's consistently didactic work it is a kind of visual sermon.

Jay Murphy

Lonnie Holley's materials are picked up on scavenging hunts around Birmingham, Alabama—steel-toed boots fallen into disuse, abandoned scarves, handcuffs, old fuse cables, checkerboard table cloths, broken TV sets, scraps from Stockton, Yale & Fitting foundries and U.S. Pipe, quilts, shards of glass. Holley's home near the Birmingham airport is the site of a sprawling, vast reclamation project of sculptures and assemblages, at last count some 17,000 mixed media objects that take as their subjects celebrated figures in the African-American community, generational conflicts, crack addiction, welfare mothers, Martin Luther King, Michael

Jackson, environmental degradation, labor, the jailing of black teenagers, and the Persian Gulf war, all infused with his own brand of intense and homegrown spiritual wisdom.

Scholar Robert Farris Thompson has described Holley's work in part as an intact Yoruba mythology of moral medicine, or nkisi; in Holley's consistently didactic work it is a kind of visual sermon. In "Chairman of the Board", typewriter keys are hooked with a checkerboard and symbols for computer discs. "The old board", Holley explains, "like the old board members still in control of the locks on the doors that controls the keys that make up the moves one may play in life not having to be there themselves but sending a disc in

Jay Murphy is a writer, editor and critic in New York City; he curated an exhibit of Holley's work for Gaspari Gallery in New Orleans, which ran from October 5-26, 1991.



right
 Lonnie Holley with Ezekias Wheel
 'This piece shows how the statement of Ezekias relates to the world today: child sitting in a chair neckties ties to the wheel itself - the wheel continues to turn from the beginning of life to the column of blood that is spilled by man.'



left
You Can't replace Real Life
wood, plastic, paper,
various found objects
68" x 22 1/2" x 9"
1992
Collection William Arnett,
Atlanta, Ga.



right
Eyes of the Labor Man
wood, tin, wire, paint,
various found materials
78" x 22 1/2" x 9"
1991
Collection William Arnett,
Atlanta, Ga.

below
Can an Eye See the Spirit in
Me?
latex house paint on wood
1988
Collection William Arnett,
Atlanta, Ga.



their place, looking, sounding like their face from the many wires that's hooked within that controls life each move time and time again'. The connectors are bright orange, an indicator of the danger if the game of life is not played right.

Holley's site-specific, ongoing work is a heartfelt homage to the African-American community of Birmingham, reclaiming not just their bric-a-brac but their contributions and culture. In the construction 'This Mask Is Did in Honor of a Friend' Holley pays tribute to a Mr Sams, who told Holley 'Where there is a wheel there is a way', the black at once identifies him and represents the coal mine he labored in. Holley's fall exhibition in New Orleans helped inspire 'High Staff of Woman,' prompted in part by Mardi Gras stands, which hangs high from the trees on Holley's estate. 'A little higher than the cross, a little higher than anything here', Holley pointed out. Holley's staff is raised in respect to all women on earth and their authority in respect to man. Past the sign 'The Sandman's Originals' the right side of Holley's estate is dominated by the vibrantly colored eye on 'Grandmother's Quilt', which depicts 'her Eye being the strangest part of the quilt, weeping because of her hard labor,' similar to the protective Horus eye Holley wears around his neck.

Curator and painter Judith McWillie once remarked that it would require the skills of a Richard Wright to do justice to Lonnie Holley's journey. His knowledge of African myths and culture are all the more phenomenal for someone whose formal education stopped at the seventh grade. The fate of the runaway and prison has been Holley's as well as so many black Americans who live in a nation which incarcerates them at four times the rate of South African apartheid. Of his spiritual development, Holley claims that 'what you deposit in the bank is there' and explorations

have taken him alternately through a tour of the spiritualist His Holiness churches, Islam, and through Puerto Rican friends, a New World, Spanish Catholicism which is mixed with what remains for use from his Baptist childhood. From the Black Muslims Holley learned much of 'the African way' and the notion of being a caretaker of both himself and others; from the His Holiness churches he learned how to process spiritual realities and gifts. The large sculpture 'Big Bird Landing' shows a Native American-like figure delivering a spirit for Holley; after his visit to James Hampton's famous jail covered 'Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly' at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C., Holley claimed Hampton's 'spirit came home with me'. All of these experiences are 'totalled up in a song of Now' in his constructions where 'the materials back my words and my words back the materials.'

Holley's elaborate transformations of found materials, his poetic bricolage, often crackle with meaning. Works like 'Spirit on Wheels' or 'Docking From a Weary Ship' palpitate with a deeply felt, and at times unbearably painful, sense of life with its materiality and traumas. Holley's oeuvre shatters convenient and comfortable stereotypes about this kind of art. 'When people think of 'folk art', Holley commented while driving around Birmingham one weekend last September, 'they think of something that tells a story, when it is about the entire environment, the conditions of peoples lives.' The range of Holley's work and its concern for social ecology in Birmingham and the larger global arena, in some respects makes some of the more famous European modernist avant-garde experiments in recycling, for all their considerable importance – from Picasso's assemblages to Duchamp's 'readymades' to Kurt Schwitters' 'Mersbau' dada house-appear like art jokes, spirals of incestuous artmaking.

'Holley's site-specific, ongoing work is a heartfelt homage to the African-American community of Birmingham, reclaiming not just their bric-a-brac but their contributions and culture.'



right
The Mask Is Did in Honor of a Friend.
'That has passed away in my neighbourhood depicting an old man leaving behind a son to weep on his behalf also saying to me as an artist where there is wheel there is a way and his name was Mr. Sams. The black represents the coal mine he had worked in so long'.

about itself. Looking at Holley's prolific array of sculptures and paintings, I think of Antonin Artaud's notion that 'If there is a culture it is always alive and it burns things up.' That kind of contagion or prophetic fire is captured in an even more pristine form in Holley's rarely exhibited paintings. Paintings of Holley's, done with whatever is available, acrylics or house paints, like 'Spilling Out the Test Tube,' reach for the origins of life, what Roland Barthes called the space of the preconscious, where 'the first coition of words and things' takes place. Others show the sun blocked by floods of oil; poetic evocations of the decayed ozone layer, or relaying the damage of the Kuwaiti oil field flames.

Holley's growing reputation, at 42, as one of the youngest 'Afro-Atlantic' or visionary folk artists may also reveal how much he has in common with other environmental artists like Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison, Dominique Mazeaud, Agnes Denes, Alan Sonfist, Ian Hunter, Nancy Holt, Mary Miss, Bene Fonteles, or the Japanese artist Tadashi Tonoshiki, whose 1987 piece 'Gathering Trash' was precisely that with 100 other residents of Niinohoma. Holley's work, the recycling and reclaiming of objects designated by the dominant culture as 'trash', such as the lives, loves, and labor of African-Americans, has at least as much in common with the 'post avant-garde' of works like Krzysztof Wodiczko's 'Homeless Vehicle' and Joseph Beuys' 'social sculpture', once enacted by planting 7,000 oaks at Kassel, Germany, that it does with the usual ideas of 'folk art'. Many of his constructions, for example those travelling in the SECA exhibit 'Next Generation: Southern Black Aesthetic,' have the haunting, jagged quality of the environments of Edward and Nancy Kienholz. Perhaps with the wider dissemination of his art, it will be begin to be seen and appreciated in the larger field and social/aesthetic context of which it is a part.

'Holley's elaborate transformations of found materials, his poetic bricolage, often crackle with meaning..'



above
The King and Queen After Being Beaten Down
Industrial 'sandstone' 1986
Collection William Arnett,
Atlanta, Ga.



left
Grandmother's Quilt
'Depicting her eye being the strongest part of quilt, weeping because of her hard labour'.



[Culture Desk](#)

The Met Embraces Neglected Southern Artists

By Paige Williams
December 4, 2014

One afternoon last week, as pre-Thanksgiving snow whitened Central Park, Sheena Wagstaff was in her office at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she chairs the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, reflecting on a major gift that the Met had just accepted: fifty-seven paintings, drawings, mixed-media pieces, and quilts by thirty African-American artists from the South.

Some of the artists, such as Thornton Dial and Mose Tolliver, are well known; others, less so. The museum had its pick—a rare opportunity—of the fifteen hundred or so works warehoused at Souls Grown Deep, the private nonprofit foundation, in Atlanta, that was making the gift. Souls Grown Deep maintains the world's most comprehensive



The Metropolitan Museum of Art has received a major gift of work by black Southern artists, many of whom are usually overlooked by galleries and museums.

collection of art by untrained black Southern artists. Its founder, Bill Arnett, a white collector and curator in his seventies, had long argued, in the face of a range of institutional defenses and biases in New York and elsewhere, that the African-American artists he and others had found working in obscurity deserved serious consideration. (Arnett once told me that the foundation's collection documents "the most important cultural phenomenon that ever took place in the United States of America.") The Met's acceptance of the gift now signalled "efforts—and this is happening across the world—to discover neglected artists or neglected times," Wagstaff said. "Here, we have a situation where the art was right on our doorstep—it's been there all along."

The donation includes ten pieces by Dial, whom one Met curator called an "old master" (Dial, an Alabaman in his mid-eighties, makes exquisite drawings as well as massive, complex mixed-media meditations on topics such as race, poverty, and war); twenty quilts by the celebrated women of Gee's Bend, Alabama; and works by artists including Lonnie Holley, Mary T. Smith, Ronald Lockett, and Joe Minter. Twenty-one of the artists are female, nine male.

I first reported the possibility of the deal last year, in "Composition in Black and White," a feature in the August 12th issue of the magazine. The story chronicled the relationship between Dial and Arnett and described Arnett's effort to meticulously document a disappearing cosmos of art and the challenges its artists have tended to face, including ridicule and rejection for their unconventional materials and lack of formal schooling. The most devastating moment for both men came in 1993, when "60 Minutes" portrayed Arnett as an opportunistic abuser of black talent and Dial as a simplistic dupe; the piece set back Arnett's efforts and delayed acclaim for Dial, who is now in his mid-eighties, and frail.

This past summer, the negotiations between the Met and Souls Grown Deep intensified. Plans were finalized after both parties agreed on the list of works to be housed in the museum's permanent collection. When accepting a donation, an art institution is seldom given its choice of pieces, but the Met "pretty much had carte blanche," Wagstaff said. In terms of importance, she compared the gift to that of the Leonard A. Lauder Collection, an "unsurpassed" collection of Cubist art. Eighty-one Lauder pieces are on display at the Met until February. The Souls Grown Deep collection will

début in the fall of 2016, with an exhibition and a Met-produced catalogue published by Yale University Press.

Marla Prather, who will be the curator of the 2016 show, said that the Souls Grown Deep gift represents “significant shifts in the pattern of how the Met has collected art to date.” She said, “African-American art is not a completely overlooked area, but there’s work to be done. To my knowledge, we’ve never looked at a concentrated group of works by black artists” until now. “These artists have been neglected; there isn’t necessarily a substantial art-historical record for them,” she said. Souls Grown Deep’s research has documented a “whole important, legitimate world for scholarly research” that might otherwise have been lost, she added. “It’s been a kind of rescue operation that I’ve found incredibly moving.”

The work of certain artists without classical training is often labeled “folk” or “outsider,” a characterization that collectors such as Arnett have decried as reductive and demeaning. The Met’s embrace of the Souls Grown Deep gift will “make an enormous difference in the way we interpret our own collection,” Wagstaff said. “The most important aspect is that the collection adds to the American story of twentieth-century art—not the African-American story but the *American*__ story.”

For years, Souls Grown Deep has prominently displayed, in its rigorously organized warehouse, an untitled piece by Emmer Sewell, an Alabama woman who arranges objects on her property: a chunk of concrete resting in a white plastic yard chair, which is perched atop an upturned semi-whitewashed automobile tire.

“The chair is significant in a number of African cultures,” Arnett once told me. “Emmer Sewell never welcomed anybody into her yard, but her yard looked like a welcoming center. She’d have a row of chairs, and it really wasn’t to invite people there; it made people passing by think it was safe, a nice place. It looks cordial, but it’s shielding her nature. She doesn’t want anybody around, but she doesn’t want somebody to come by and see it all wild. All the wild stuff was back in the woods. There’d be something hanging out of a tree with barbed wire around it and a mirror stuck in it, and a piece of broken glass and a hubcap—whatever.”

He added, “You used to find that all over the South, but you won’t find it anymore. I mean, you are looking at the end of it.” As we toured the Souls Grown Deep warehouse one day, he passed by Sewell’s chair and said, “I mean, MOMA—right?” As Scott Browning, the foundation’s collections manager and assistant director told me last week, when the Met deal was announced, Arnett was “only off by twenty-nine blocks.”

Arnett went to visit Sewell one morning in the early spring of last year. She lives alone, in a tin-roofed house, at a dip in a two-lane highway. Her broom-swept yard, an expanse of bare earth, was known to host an ever-shifting arrangement of objects. Axes had been planted in the dirt (Sewell believes they split storms), and the tips of tree limbs held glittering bits of wadded aluminum foil. The dusty panes of one window displayed baby pictures, a dollar bill, strips of weathered cloth suggestive of the American flag, and images of Barack Obama: a kind of shrine. Four American flags hung from the eaves, alongside a row of laundry. Two decommissioned automobiles stood rusting near the porch, which teetered on cinderblocks. An empty Spam tin lay angled atop a stubby tree root, like a jaunty hat.

“That’s a charm,” Arnett said, noting a tradition of warding off spirits. “Something like fifty per cent of the population used to believe things like that,” he said. “I don’t consider it any more out of the ordinary than drinking the ceremonial blood of God. I mean, that’s pretty crude, too, you know? What’s the difference?” He said, “The traditions of black culture, they’re homegrown. Those traditions are meaningful and they make sense. If you live in a place like this, you’ve gotta protect yourself.” It was hard to say whether he was talking about the house, or America.

The place appeared deserted, but Arnett marched halfway up the front steps and hollered, “Are you the famous Ms. Emmer Sewell that I read about in a book?” Arnett had written about Sewell in at least one of his self-published books—enormous, meticulously produced volumes containing biographies of the artists he has known.

When a deep female voice answered, Arnett urged the voice to come out to the yard. A soiled white head wrap and a pair of brown eyes appeared above the laundry. “I would come out, but I’m so ugly, you know,” the voice said, from behind the dangling clothes.

“You ain’t ugly!” Arnett yelled. “Why don’t you come out and talk?”

Sewell had been known to sprint from her house and off into the woods rather than entertain visitors, but this time she agreed to chat. As Arnett waited for her to put on some shoes, he noted a small pasture beyond the house. “She used to have these beautiful scarecrows—I’m not suggesting it’s artwork, but in some ways it is,” he said. “It’s the final phase of a long tradition that’s dying. Come back in ten years and there won’t be anything.”

Sewell emerged wearing a pink housecoat and bedraggled leather sneakers, and holding a tattered stuffed panda. She handed the bear to Arnett’s son, Matt, who worked with him at Souls Grown Deep. “Set that thing up there,” Sewell ordered, meaning the station wagon. Matt obeyed, propping the bear on the hood of the car. “Turn it around,” Sewell said, and Matt did. “You think it look nice that way?”

Arnett took up the subject of Sewell’s favorite symbol: the X. When Arnett first met her, he found X’s everywhere. “You had ‘em painted on the trees, and you had chairs lined up so that the legs of the chairs would make the X,” he



Lonnie Holley, “Grown Together in the Midst of the Foundation.” African-American artists “was not beir respected,” Holley wrote in an edition of “Souls Grou Deep.” “I mean people could just go take the artists’ work for no real cost, and people could say: This culture is nothing—their art ain’t worth for nothing. And Bill said to me, ‘Lonnie, we will change all that.’”

reminded her. The passenger side of a thoroughly rusted car still held X's, as did the door of a castoff refrigerator that sat tucked beneath a cedar tree.

“Look, it’s just like Pat Sajak,” Sewell told him, as if the answer were obvious. “Them things come down and hit, and you be a winner.”

“That’s right!” Arnett said. “You said it symbolized winning, success, being on top.”

He shifted the conversation to her other work. “I bought a piece from you once—remember that? It was an automobile tire with a plastic chair on it, and a rock sitting in the chair.” (The assemblage, which will now reside in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, could be found on page one hundred and eighty-six of the second volume of “Souls Grown Deep,” a book, edited by Arnett, about untrained black Southern artists.) Sewell told him, “When I rum’ around all my things I hope to find that book. You got some important things in there.”

“Including you,” he said. “You important.”

Before leaving, Arnett hugged Sewell, and shook her hand. Sewell said to come back in the summer by appointment, when her hair was fixed and her house was clean. Arnett told her he doesn’t travel much anymore but that he would try. She took his right hand in hers and turned it over, and with her finger, on his exposed wrist, she silently traced out an X.



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