

Alexander and Bonin

Kley, Elizabeth. "Gotham Art and Theater."
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Willie Cole at Alexander and Bonin

"Post Black and Blue," the title of Willie Cole's latest exhibition at Alexander and Bonin, conjures up a myriad of associations, from bruises to the devastating lyrics of a song by Fats Waller recorded by Louis Armstrong in 1929:

*How sad I am, each day I feel worse,
My mark of Ham seems to be a curse!
How will it end? Ain't got a friend,
My only sin Is my skin.
What did I do, to be so Black And Blue?*



Samsara, 2010

Sadness, of course, is universal. *Samsara*, a video playing in the back room, consists of three screens, each dominated by a series of close-up human faces -- male and female, black and white -- weeping. The title comes from the Buddhist term for the human cycle of birth, death and rebirth, when the soul is trapped in desire and the grief it causes. Looking at these people in tears, with liquid coming from eyes and sometimes nostrils, made me so uncomfortable that I took refuge in wondering what was making them cry. Were they acting, or thinking about past sorrows?

Relief can be found in the front gallery, a romantic noir narrative of loneliness and conflict told through a series of black-and-white drawings. Titles are appropriated from more blues lyrics, the classic example of turning despair into art. An allegory of racial interaction may be found in the intertwining dialogue between black and white. Sometimes space, sometimes thing, sometimes mass, sometimes outlines, areas of ink and white paper continually reverse themselves, materials of representation rather than the colors of skin. Black or white objects against black or white grounds are made visible by their interaction.

Crossroads Blues (2009), for example, is an image of a kneeling black figure manifested in white outlines against a black ground. The only white objects are his shirt, the white gloves on his upraised hands, and the cross of four directions above his head. And in *Midnight blues* (2009), a man sits on the edge of a bed, as light coming in from the side illuminates his feature and the sides of his legs and then falls on his guitar. Small white spaces in the window's painted ink sky turn into the moon and stars.

The idea of the body as a receptacle for past emotional baggage becomes concrete in a sculpture and a painting that are also in the main gallery. *Hers* (2010) is a pair of mannequin legs in high heels topped with a pile of seven suitcases labeled with dates, from 60-67 to 04-10. The male version is a painting on a large wood panel called *His* (2010). The numerous problems he carries are contained in a seemingly infinite pile of baggage delineated in black with white lines, heaped every which way against a white background.

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). Standing near the gallery's entrance, *Shoe Bouquet* (2009) conjures up lives filled with the rootlessness often referred to in the blues. Love leads to violence and loneliness, and someone is always getting ready to leave. Prices range from \$7,500 to \$25,000 and the show is up until April 24.