

## Finding Soul in High Heel Shoes

Repurposing irons, shoes, and other discarded commodities, Willie Cole creates visceral artworks that communicate potent messages about African history

By Stephanie Strasnick  
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A massive bronze sculpture by Willie Cole depicts an abstracted seated figure, meditatively resting its head in its hands. At first glance, the piece, titled *The Sole Sitter*, appears to be made up of a series of geomorphic shapes. After a closer look, it becomes evident that the shapes are actually larger-than-life shoes. A pair of clogs forms the knees and thighs. Mary Janes represent the feet. A cluster of high heels serves as the head.



*The Sole Sitter*, 2013

Since the 1980s, the New Jersey–born, African American artist has been assembling like objects to form works that communicate potent messages about African history and the slave trade, among other themes. Cole’s ironing board woodcuts, shoe and hair-dryer masks, and bicycle-inspired headdresses reclaim African artistic traditions in ways that are both visceral and unexpected.

*The Sole Sitter*, one of Cole’s most recent works, is based on principles of the West African religion Yoruba, in which specific deities are believed to lead worshipers to the gods. The *Sitter* is waiting and hoping for a deity to come. Cole constructed this work along with eight other paintings and sculptures for his upcoming solo exhibition “If wishes were horses....” The show opens on Saturday at Alexander and Bonin gallery in New York. (A concurrent exhibition of Cole’s recent work is on view at Beta Pictoris gallery in Birmingham, Alabama, through October 25.)

The paintings featured in the exhibition draw from a Haitian religious allegory in which worshipers are depicted as horses, not humans. In *Special Delivery*, a petite jockey holds the reins of a large black horse. The jockey is a spirit, leading the animal to the gods. A set of cream-colored wooden doors flanks the painting, representing the Yoruba deity Elegba, the protector of travelers.

The show also includes a selection of the artist’s leather high heel sculptures. Just as African tribes on the Côte d’Ivoire employed humble, everyday materials to create fierce masks in the 19th and 20th centuries, Cole assembled women’s shoes into ornate and beautiful icons of his own. In *Lizzy*, for example, more than a dozen snakeskin shoes in shades of brown, green, and purple are fastened together to form a symmetrical face with exaggerated features.

Although shoes are not a new motif for Cole, he continues to experiment with them in innovative, clever ways. “Once you get beyond the obvious,” he says, “there are infinite possibilities.”