Oral History Project: Willie Cole by Nancy Princenthal

“To me it was about energy, persistence, optimism, will, desire, and manifestation. I believed that everything I wanted was already in the world and that it was my job to be aware enough to see opportunity when it’s headed my way.”

Part of the The Oral History Project series.

Willie Cole at ASSEMBLAGE: AN ORGANICALLY GROWN EXHIBITION at Culture Lab, West Palm Beach, FL, 2018. Photo by Related Companies, Courtesy of Culture Corps.
Born in New Jersey and still residing there, Willie Cole is a global traveler in life and art. Working with objects found in the streets and junkshops of Newark and Harlem—including steam irons, hair dryers, lawn jockeys and plastic water bottles—and with sources ranging from Yoruba and Senufo masks and sacred figures to major works of early Modernism, Cole forges assemblages distinguished by their sharp wit and formal elegance. Calling himself, in a two-part 2019 interview, an “archeological ethnographic Dadaist,” he explained his unified theory of matter to me, a source of the spiritual current that runs throughout his work: “I’m sure a physicist could say it better than me, but if you break everything down to the smallest particle, everything is the same. It’s the rate of vibration that creates the illusion of solidity.”

A precocious artist, Cole made installations in his childhood bedroom, and met Amiri Baraka while attending Newark Arts High School. At the School of Visual Arts in New York City, his teachers included Chuck Close and Jonathan Borofsky. Irrepressibly restless, Cole pursued theater and music as well as visual art after graduating. He also wrote children’s books and sitcom scripts, and in the early 1980s launched a nonprofit in Newark called the Works Gallery that fostered the city’s nascent art community. A 1988 residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem proved a turning point, helping Cole consolidate the visual language of sculptures that now often reach monumental scale.

—Nancy Princenthal

The Oral History Project is dedicated to collecting, developing, and preserving the stories of distinguished visual artists of the African Diaspora. The Oral History Project has organized interviews including: Wangechi Mutu by Deborah Willis, Kara Walker & Larry Walker, Edward Clark by Jack Whitten, Adger
Nancy Princenthal
Let’s just start at the beginning. You were born in 1955 in Somerville, New Jersey, and you have a sister one year older than you. You’re essentially a first-generation Northerner (on the patriarchal side). But your mother’s family migrated from Georgia to New Jersey in the ’20s. Most of your father’s family still lives in North Carolina. How did your parents end up here?

Willie Cole
Well, let’s see. In 1937 my then-pregnant grandmother Christine Epps, who lived in New Jersey, attended the funeral of her grandmother, Jane Johnson, in Macon, Georgia and gave birth to my mom there, before returning home to the Garden State. Her father, my great grandfather, Reverend Charles H. Groce, left Georgia in 1928 to attend Northern Seminary School in Illinois. By the time I was born both my grandparents and great grandparents lived in New Jersey.

My dad, Willie Cole Sr., came north in the late ’40s to get away from the family farm in Riegelwood, North Carolina and to find a good-paying job. He was part of the great African American migration from the South that took place in the ’30s and ’40s.

NP
And he wound up—

WC
He went to Connecticut first, and then he came to New Jersey.

NP
What was he doing there?

WC
In New Jersey, he worked at American Cyanamid, which was a chemical company that has since been closed down for environmental violations. My grandmother got him the job. She worked there in the chemical labs.

NP
Your grandmother must have been quite a woman.

WC
She worked her way up from a janitor to a lab technician. She was the first woman, and the first African American, to work in the chemical lab at that factory. She was a high school graduate but never attended college.

NP
What was she like? Were you close to her?

WC
Yeah, yeah. She was a church lady. She sang in the choir and taught Sunday school. She was also a traveler, as was her father. He was a big-time minister and traveled around the world frequently with the National Baptist Conference. I always saw her as the sophisticated family member. She loved Broadway. And she was also the president of the New Jersey chapter of the National Conference of Negro Women, which was an organization started by Mary McLeod Bethune in 1935.

NP
So she was worldly and traveled?

WC
And she spoke French.

NP
She learned that while traveling?

WC
Maybe. Funny thing though, if you, as a kid, were in a conversation with her and you left the “t” off the end of a word she would softly add it for you. (laughter)

NP
And was she especially interested in the arts?

WC
She was very into music and theater. I spent every summer with her in Somerville, New Jersey, and attended summer Art in the Park camp there until she moved to California in the ’70s.

**NP**
How old were you?

**WC**
I was probably in elementary school, so from age seven to eleven. I did that every summer with her. She also taught me how to sew, knit, and crochet.

**NP**
Do you still know how to do those things?

**WC**
I probably do because of muscle memory, but I haven’t tried in a long time.

**NP**
And you didn’t resist—

**WC**
No. Every summer I would be the only boy in the house. I played with my sister, my female cousin and their friends, so I just saw it as normal. Plus, I was a loner kid. I didn’t hang out a lot. For me then it was either play house with the girls or knit with granny.

**WC**

Yeah, I enjoyed it. I want to get back to doing more stuff like that. My work with the bottles is rooted in weaving techniques I learned as a kid from my grandmother.

**NP**

I see that in this new work. Also, early on, there were several coats that you made —

**WC**

Yes, woven metal.

**NP**

Woven strips. That could not have been a simple thing to do.

**WC**

My grandmother made a lot of clothes for me as a little kid, including my Halloween costumes. In 1980 when I was living in a Newark factory building where the heat went off every day at 5 PM, she made me a beautiful green coat sweater with big pockets. I wish I still had it.

**NP**

So your grandmother was a big presence in your life. Your mother was too? Or was she busy working?

**WC**

My mother, Jacqueline Barr, was very much present too. She didn’t work full time until I was eleven or twelve years old. Before that though, she occasionally worked seasonally at Remco toy factory. In the ’60s the toy factories would hire additional workers for the Christmas rush. Free toys for Christmas was an added benefit. *(laughter)* Other than that, she was a homemaker. Her art form to this day is cooking.

**NP**

Did you acquire that talent, too?
WC
Yeah. My kids think so.

NP
How many children do you have?

WC
I have four: two seeds and two sprouts. Do you know what that means?

NP
No, I don’t.

WC
I have two children who are biologically mine and two stepchildren that I acquired through marriage.

NP
And they are all close to you?

WC
Yes, my youngest daughter lives in Los Angeles, and my oldest daughter lives in Austin, Texas. My youngest son lives in Vermont, and my oldest son lives in New Jersey.

NP
Anyone in the art world?

WC
Well, my youngest daughter Caridad is a writer and actress. My oldest daughter Esperanza is also a writer. My youngest son Kute is a heavy metal and punk rock guitarist. And my oldest son Shawn is a physical therapist and gym owner. But they all know how to draw, if that’s what being an artist means. I would give them art supplies for Christmas every year. Most kids learn how to read and write, but my kids learned how to read, write, dance, play music, and draw. I still have a box for each one of them filled with their childhood drawings.
Lucky kids! Returning to chronology for a moment, by 1958, the year you turned three, you were in Newark, which is the year that evidently you told your mother you wanted to be an artist.

Well, that was the year she told me that I was an artist. She says she came into the kitchen and found me drawing pictures from the Sunday comics. From that day forward my family called me their “Little Artist.”

That must have self-generated and been something you wanted to do.

Yeah, I brought it from a previous life; that’s what I believe.

You do? Just knowing how to make things come alive visually?

Well, yeah, or just being open to creative energy. My sister Deborah wrote a lot of poetry as a little kid that got published in the local paper. She was like the smartest kid in her school, so I had serious competition with her. The arts helped me to shine because she was hard to compete with. (laughter)

You were also becoming a writer.

Yes, because when I was in high school, from ’68 to ’72, at Arts High School in Newark, the biggest creative influence in town was Amiri Baraka. My best friend Otis Chancey and I were so inspired by him that we started a theater club in our
school. We even performed his play *Jello*. But eventually we started writing and performing our own stuff.

**NP**
Baraka must have been a powerful model. What was he like?

**WC**
Back then I didn’t know him personally. I knew him only as “Imamu.” *(laughter)* He was very respected in the city though, especially by the young people. To me as a kid he was the personification of both black pride and black power. But also during those years in Newark, Rutgers University hosted a program called Model Cities that allowed high school kids with talent to study performing arts. I was part of this program [from sophomore to senior year] and studied theater, playwriting, and acting.
BEST ARTIST

Gloria Dixon

Darryl Spencer
NP
What do you remember about Newark Arts High School?

WC
It’s the nation’s oldest school of the arts! Being a student there was a lot like being in the movie *Fame*.

NC
Impressive.

WC
Sarah Vaughan went there. Wayne Shorter and Connie Francis are early alums.

NP
So it was not just visual arts—

WC
No, it was music, too. Nowadays though it’s art, music, and theater. A lot of actors especially a lot of today’s young African American actors—went there. Like Michael B. Jordan from *Black Panther*, Tisha Campbell from the sitcom *Martin*, and the Broadway star Savion Glover.

What’s funny to me is that I *started* the theater program at that high school. In my sophomore year I went to the English teacher and said, “Hey man, I want to start a theater club.” And he said, “Okay.” So we started one. And now, almost fifty years later, it’s a major that’s producing world-class talent.

NP
So there was a lot of opportunity and fluidity in the school when you were there. The ’60s were an interesting time to be in high school. It was such a shattering time for everyone. You were a teenager when every sense is opening.
See, I was what my mom would call a shy kid. But I wouldn’t agree. I just had a different focus. I wasn’t interested in partying, taking drugs, underage drinking, or “hanging out,” doing what most young people at the time called “fun.” I was having my own fun drawing, writing, and making music.

You were an introspective kid.

That’s better than introverted. Introspective. But, yeah, it was the ‘60s. We were “far out,” as they say. (laughter) We started school as Negroes and graduated as Black. A lot of self-awareness came through in those years.

I wanted to ask about some aspects of being in Newark at that time. I know that you watched the riots in Newark on TV; you were in Los Angeles on a family visit. But after that, when you came back, you participated in some of the marches and civic actions.

The riots were in ’67. I started high school in ’68 and we mostly protested the war, the draft, and teachers’ strikes.

You protested the teachers’ strikes? So, you wanted to go back to school. (laughter)

We were very aware that many of our ancestors gave their lives so we could be educated. Many of us would become the first generation in our family to go to high school or college. So we saw education as our right.

I remember the teachers’ strikes at that time. They were incredibly divisive. So, you were protesting the Vietnam war when you were fourteen, fifteen years old? In Newark, or were you going into Manhattan?

In Newark. Because Arts High School was close to downtown Newark, just a few blocks from Broad Street, and about two blocks in the other direction, headed
west, was Rutgers University, and between the two was another high school, and two more colleges, we would all converge on the Rutgers campus then march downtown.

NP
There was real solidarity between high school students and college students?

WC
Yeah, back in those days.

Willie Cole

April 8 – May 16, 1992
Opening: Wednesday, April 8, 5 – 7 pm

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Detail of “Domestic ID” 1993
iron scorches on paper in window frame
3 1/2 x 29 in / 89 x 73.1 cm
NP
Was this Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)? One thing I’m curious about, you were just a youngish teenager then, but how did that antiwar movement interact with or mutually support the civil rights and the Black Power movements?

WC
That’s a really good question. For me, there’s like two things I heard back then. One was Muhammad Ali, who said “No Viet Cong ever called me nigger.” That was in my awareness back then. Also, Martin Luther King’s attitude about the war affected us a lot. Or maybe it was Stokely Carmichael who said something like, We have a war right here in the city streets. We’re not going to fight in Asia. We were aware of that as well.

NP
So the important thing was getting the job done at home.

WC
That’s probably why we marched against the teachers’ strikes, because we wanted education. But also, at that time, it was the thing to do. It was like a rave! We’re all running out and suddenly we’re marching down the street chanting and stuff. It was a good feeling. (laughter) I marched and demonstrated up through the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

NP
So that goes into the ‘90s.

WC
My son Shawn, who was not quite a teenager then, marched with me in the anti-Apartheid rallies in New Jersey in the ‘90s.

NP
He has strong and positive memories of being a part of that?
I’ve never talked to him about that; I should reach out to him. I know he remembers Hands Across America but I don’t know if he remembers the anti-Apartheid marches. I had a nonprofit in Newark called the Works Gallery and we were the center of the Art Against Apartheid movement in New Jersey. Every weekend we had something going on there like a speaker or performance, or an art show that was tied to liberation. I was a single dad then.

And young.

We lived in the studio.

Your son lived with you?

Yeah, from the age of ten to the age of eighteen.

Big responsibility for a young man.

Yeah, but one I couldn’t walk away from. My parents separated when I was eleven years old and I recognized the importance of a father in the life of a child so I couldn’t walk away from it.

Ten years is a long time. Just to go back a moment, I’m wondering if you felt at the time, in the late ’60s when you were in high school, that art was something that could be a part of these civil activisms—the antiwar and the Black Power movements?

I do remember reacting to illustrations in *The Black Panther* newspaper and the *Muhammad Speaks* paper, but I don’t remember making any protest signs. We had signs, but they were just word signs. My art at that time was mostly classroom assignments and portraits of my grandmother’s dog. I did a lot of portraits of her dog. I also did cityscapes of Newark.
NP
And portraits, using pastels?

WC
Using tempera or model car enamel paint, mostly. I remember subscribing to *The Black Panther* newspaper and *Muhammad Speaks*, the Muslim newspaper. My mother subscribed to *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines. And of course, we had a beautiful Bible in the house too. I did drawings from the pages of all of these.

NP
And that’s something you did on your own?

WC
Yes. It was my own thing. I also built things. When I was about nine years old my father’s youngest brother, Freddy, came up from the South and lived with us for a couple of years. He would give me a dollar a week as an allowance and I would take that dollar and buy an Aurora 1/24 scale model car kit. Sometimes I would buy a figurative plastic model kit instead. I remember building a model of the Wolf Man and adding real hair.

NP
Nice!

WC
If it was a 1/24 scale model car, I would customize it using paint, thread, foil, and the throwaway pieces from the plastic frames that the snap-out car parts were attached to, and anything else that seemed perfect for my ideas. I’d then enter my cars into contests at S. Klein Department Store in downtown Newark, to compete for trophies and ribbons and other stuff. I also did installations in my room. My mom would allow me to bring in dirt and twigs from outside and I’d build miniature military installations in cardboard boxes that included forts, mountains, and other stuff. (*laughter*) My sister had Barbies and I had G.I. Joes so I would make clothing for my G.I. Joes so they could date her Barbies. I remember making a Spiderman suit for one of my G.I. Joes using the armrest cover of our living room chair because it was the perfect color.

NP
You had no shortage of creative energy.

WC
But that was when I was little kid, like fourth or fifth grade. I made jewelry in high school as a hustle, like rings out of forks. I also did silkscreen T-shirts to make money, mostly Santana and Jimi Hendrix T-shirts. Around 1969 our art teacher suddenly began teaching us about African art. We had been studying mostly Greek stuff up until that point.

NP
That must have been an interesting shift!

WC
Suddenly we were studying African art and we had assignments to carve African stuff out of Styrofoam.

NP
Did she have any knowledge or background in African art?

WC
I don’t know. But she was a great teacher so I’m sure she did some sort of research to prepare herself to give us a good experience.

NP
Did that feel satisfying?

WC
It did because the thing that we were looking for most in those days, if I can speak for the whole race, was a sense of pride and a sense of self. So to have thirty little aspiring art kids suddenly learn that there was no country on earth called Negroland, (laughter) and that civilization and culture didn’t begin with the Greeks, that we had roots in Africa, and Africans made art too—and now we African American students were about to carve African art objects out of Styrofoam—felt great.
NP
So, to that moment, what was it like in the Newark of your childhood and adolescence, and particularly after the riots in 1967?

WC
To give you an idea of how safe Newark was before the riots: My family moved into the housing projects when they were first built. We thought they were high-rise luxury living.

NP
You see that in Kerry James Marshall’s paintings—

WC
Yes. Before the housing projects I lived in a neighborhood of old rundown two- or four family wooden houses.

NP
Oh really? Old semi-attached brownstones?

WC
No. All wood. When we moved into the housing projects in 1963, my sister and I still attended school in our old neighborhood almost two miles away. And we walked there every day. Newark was that safe.

NP
That’s a long walk for a little kid.

WC
Once we moved into the projects, my mother allowed me to walk downtown to the arcade and movie theater by myself. I remember walking downtown with another little kid to see James Brown perform in a local theater when I was eight years old and it was totally safe.

NP
Was it a life changing experience, seeing James Brown?
Yeah, I stayed for both shows. My mother had to come down and get an usher to find me in the crowd. They had a hard time finding me though because I was backstage getting autographs. *(laughter)*

Wow.

Safe enough for that. And then we also had a lot of church stuff going on in Newark at the time. Father Divine, a black mystic and spiritual leader had food programs for the needy as well as a luxury hotel. The "Clay Cole’s Discotek," a popular teen rock and roll TV show, broadcasted live from the Lincoln Park District in Newark. And there were countless jazz clubs too.

And your father had connections with musicians?

My father was like a low-budget Berry Gordy until his equipment was stolen. He had movie projectors, movie cameras, tape recorders, and a harmonica. He would regularly record singers and musicians performing in our living room.

Was that fantastic?

It was fun to watch. I have great memories of some of those moments, but then somebody broke into our house and stole all his equipment. That kind of ended it for him after that. He never replaced the equipment.

Does that say something about when the level of safety started to decline?

Possibly, but it had to be somebody he knew who took the equipment. That was before we lived in the housing projects. When we were in the housing projects, we didn’t have any break-ins there. *(laughter)* It was a nice place for a while; I was there from ’63 to ’65. Then my parents got divorced, and my mom and my sister and I moved to a much better neighborhood in a part of Newark that was once
called the Jewish neighborhood, where there were two-family houses with parks. My dad stayed in the projects for a couple years more.

**NP**
And then he went back down to North Carolina?

**WC**
No, no. He stayed in Jersey until about twenty-five or thirty years ago.

**NP**
Are your parents alive?

**WC**
Yeah, my mom is in her eighties and my dad will be ninety in December. My family lives a long time. My great grandfather lived to almost one hundred years old. His mother lived to be over one hundred too, as did his sister. I remember going to her 112th birthday party in 1968.

**NP**
So, you have a long way to go! (*laughter*)

**WC**
I hope so, there’s so much I need to learn still.

**NP**
Very impressive. It must give you a sense of history.

**WC**
They grew up on farms eating fresh food. I grew up in this time, but I’m working towards that awareness and creating that belief for myself, that my life will not end at sixty-five.

**NP**
What was your model of what an artist could be when you were growing up? Were you looking at museums in New York City, or at artwork in Newark? And who were the artists?

**WC**
It’s interesting how we could go to a high school for art and music, but they never took us to any museums or galleries.
They didn’t?

WC
My mom took me to Newark Museum often.

NP
Which is a great museum.

WC
It is, it is. They had a huge Nimba carving from Guinea in the front lobby back then. Now they have a piece of mine in that same location. (laughter) Other than the Newark Museum, though I didn’t go to museums or galleries in high school. I did occasionally visit an artist in my neighborhood. He had a storefront for a studio. I remember going in to see his work but I don’t recall any of the conversations we shared or his name. Some noted living artists that I was aware of at fourteen though were Andy Warhol, Salvador Dali, Peter Max, and Andrew Wyeth.

NP
That sounds like a really dangerous assortment of artists, although very typical for high school. So, what did you make of that?

WC
Well, Peter Max was popular among the young people because of Yellow Submarine. And I remember seeing Wyeth at the Newark Museum. I think my biggest inspiration was knowing that Baraka was down the street and that he was a writer and a painter. When I graduated from high school I wanted to be a writer too.

NP
And knowing there was power in the graphic arts. You won a prize when you graduated from high school. What was that for?

WC
That was just the “best artist” award.

NP
Must have been gratifying.

WC
It was, it was, but it wasn’t surprising because I had won that same thing in grammar school and in middle school. (laughter)

NP
So you knew you were on a path?
I always knew I was an artist, but I didn’t quite know what art form I would pursue or how to make a living in any art form at all back then. When I got out of high school, I auditioned and got accepted into The Negro Ensemble Theatre Company’s Actors Training Workshop in Greenwich Village NYC, and at the same time became a full-time art student at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

What did you study at SVA?

My family told me I should get a degree in graphic design so I could make a living. So at SVA I majored in media arts. Media was not what it is today, though. It was mostly graphic design, and skills like how to use a ruling pen and an X-ACTO blade. It was also illustration, photography, and type design. However, I did have fine art courses in the primary year. I had Chuck Close for painting and I had Jonathan Borofsky for sculpture.

What were they like?

Well, Chuck was into himself a lot, so we spent a lot of time watching him paint.

Really? Was that useful at all?

Yeah, we learned the enlarging by grid technique that he does, and I still use that today. He didn’t teach us about paint or color too much. The next year, I had Irwin Fleming who taught more about color. And Borofsky was a far-out kind of teacher. He gave us strange assignments. He would say things like, “Go down to 23rd Street, choose a stranger, follow them all day, and make notes.” Overall though I would say that they were both very inspiring.

When was this?

This was probably 1972 or ’73.
So, a couple years after Vito Acconci introduced that idea of following people around [in Following Piece, 1969]. Do you remember what interested you at the time?

**WC**

I thought of myself as an illustrator back then. I was more interested in the Society of Illustrators or Master Eagle Gallery than I was in the Museum of Modern Art, because they showed the work of a lot of great illustrators. But I left SVA after two years and went to Boston University. One of my assignments there was to go to the Museum of Fine Arts and copy the masters. After that I became more interested in fine art.

**NP**

What made you decide to go up to Boston?

**WC**

When I decided I wanted to be a visual artist, everyone around me said that it would be impossible to make a living. So I asked myself, What could I do to make a living that I would enjoy and still have time to paint? Naively I decided that I would become a radio DJ. Immediately I enrolled in the New York School of Announcing and Speech and upon completion of a three-month course I earned a third-class FCC license, which is what was required back in those days to be on the radio. I then applied for a job at WGBH, the Boston University jazz station. I sent them a recording tape of a radio show I had done in New York and they promised me a job.

**NP**

Because you knew a lot about jazz?

**WC**

Yes, I had the certificate, I had the training, I had the voice, and I had the record collection. But when I got there and they saw I was a black boy from Newark, and they didn’t hire me.

**NP**

What were they expecting?

**WC**

I don’t know, I don’t know. But Boston was a very racist place in the ’70s. Anyway that’s why I chose that school, because of the radio station.
So it wasn’t about whether they had an MFA or a BFA program, it was about the jazz.

Yes.

Did you take classes at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts?

No. I was enrolled in the Boston University School of Fine Arts.

Willie Cole, *Warrior Seeds*, 2012, iron scorches and acrylic on wood, 47.75 x 43 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Maus Contemporary.

NP
Then after one year you went back to SVA?
Yes. I went back to SVA. They accepted BU’s credits, so I just did just one more year there and graduated in 1976 with a BFA in Media Arts.

And then you went out to Los Angeles?

Yes, that was 1977. I went to Los Angeles and tried unsuccessfully to sell sitcom scripts to NBC. I thought I had an in because my sister worked there as a producer. During that same year, I also wrote, illustrated, and published an excerpt from a children’s story about vegetarianism. I also sold a painting to the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company.

Later that same year I saw an ad in the New York Times job listings seeking an actor to work in children’s theater with the Stepping Stone Theatre Arts Company, a resident children’s theater group on the campus of the University of Delaware. I applied and got the job and did that until the winter of 1979.

We’re looking at a wonderful—is it pencil or charcoal?—drawing.

It’s a Conté crayon drawing.

Very lively incredible chickens sitting around considering whether or not that’s the right thing to be eating.

Yes. It’s a parody of The Last Supper. I call it The Last Chicken Supper. I have a pencil version of it hanging in the stairwell. Notice there are only eleven chickens around the table. (laughter) The kid in the middle is the stand-in for Christ and the chicken on the table takes the place of the bread and wine.
NP
And you had family out in Los Angeles?

WC
Yeah, my mother’s family. Back in the ’70s I had a grandmother, a great-grandmother, and a lot of cousins, aunts, and uncles living there.

NP
Were you planning to sink roots in Los Angeles? It’s got such a great music scene.

WC
I did. I was planning to stay there. But I was living with my sister, and she wanted to come back East. My mom asked me to help her drive back so I did, and I never went back.

NP
To Newark?
WC
Yes. To Newark. That’s when I saw the ad in the *Times* about the theater job.

NP
And you had a son.

WC
Yes, he was born that same year.

NP
That must have changed things up quite a bit.

WC
After the University of Delaware I had planned to go to graduate school and major in English literature to become a better writer. I intended to apply to Florida A&M because my great-grandfather lived in Florida, and I wanted to be closer to him since he was an old man, but instead I came back to New Jersey to become a dad.

NP
When did your Maxfield Parrish moment arrive?

WC
After I left BU and came back to SVA I had a painting teacher, Gil Stone. Do you know Gil? He was an illustrator. His biggest claim to fame in the ’70s was that he was *Playboy* magazine’s favorite illustrator. He taught all of his students to paint just like him, with a buildup of transparent color glazes over squiggly little lines. But after graduation, I thought that if I wanted to find work, I needed to find my own style. I remembered that when I was a kid, my great-grandfather had a collection of beautifully illustrated children’s books. I had a clear memory of those illustrations. I even remembered copying some of them as a kid, but I never paid attention to the artist’s name. As an adult, I discovered that they were by Parrish.

NP
So you developed your chops as a painter and as a colorist.

WC
Yeah, and I’m trying to get it all back now. (*laughter*) I used the Parrish approach to painting for my illustration work in the ’80s, but my preferred fine art technique then was pastels. I was in love with the Pointillists and the Impressionists. In a way the Pointillist technique was a lot like Gil Stone’s, minus the glazes. All that to say
that in the ’80s I was known on the Newark scene for my bright and beautiful pastel drawings.

NP
You said something to Leslie King-Hammond about how you started as a painter. This is a quote: “I started limiting my palette to the primary colors with the knowledge that the idea of many colors was an illusion ... then in the late ’70s, when my primary medium became pastel, I began to disperse my subjects in an atmosphere of dots and dashes of primary color.” This is the important part here: “This grew out of my growing belief that all things are made from one thing.” So tell me about that. There’s this thing about energy.

WC
Well, it’s a fact. I’m sure a physicist could say it better, but if you break everything down to the smallest particle, everything is the same. It’s the rate of vibration that creates the illusion of solidity. Everything we see is because of our programming, our software so to speak. It allows us to see things the way they are, but they’re really not that way at all. Nothing is really solid, as you probably know, and the colors we see have to do with the light spectrum, what rays are missing and which rays are abundant. So, I tried to show that in the pastels, but I was into the Impressionists a lot, and I knew painting outdoors had more to do with light than the subject. So I took that same approach. When I was living in Delaware in 1978, I lived next to a beautiful graveyard. My windows looked out over it. It was a graveyard in the woods. It was beautiful in the light so I started painting it.

NP
Using kind of impressionistic marks?

WC
Yes, yes, but closer to Pointillism. But I decided to do dashes instead of dots. (laughter) Most recently I’ve done portraits of my girlfriend in pastel from screen shots that I took of her during our FaceTime conversations. That’s what has currently rekindled my interest in painting and pastels.

Willie Cole’s paintings and sculptures *War Dog* (left) and *Post Atomic War Dog* (right) for *Dog Days of August* at Littlejohn-Smith Gallery with artist Lester Johnson, 1986. Photo by D. Spruill. Courtesy of the
I see from being here in the studio, everything is going on, painting, writing—

Yes, because not only is solidity an illusion, but time is an illusion also. I think anything that ever happened and ever will happen is happening right now.

I’m going to use this as a segue to go back to something that came up in our conversation about your family. It’s about the role of religion in your work. It sounds like you grew up in a pretty committed Christian, Baptist home.

In my mother’s family, she’s the least extreme. But her sister, mother, and grandfather were all born-again, maybe even evangelical Christians. And to this day they still are. For what it’s worth—though my mom never forced religion on my sister and I—I did go to Sunday school as a little kid. And in middle school, I became Catholic because I wanted a shorter Sunday service (laughter) so I went to Catholicism classes after school. Then in high school I had many friends who were Muslim, and went to the mosque a few times.

There was a point at which you became a vegetarian under the influence of—

—the Honorable Elijah Muhammad; the founder of the Black Muslim movement in America … among others. Mr. Muhammad wasn’t even a vegetarian, but his book, *How to Eat to Live*, made me more aware of food and healthy eating. Dick Gregory, the comedian turned vegetarian and political activist; Arnold Ehret, the German naturopath and alternative health educator; Nat Jones, the jazz pianist; my college yoga teacher; and Gary Null, the national health, nutrition, and alternative living radio personality; picked it up from there and led me to my current awareness and the diet I’ve been on for over forty-five years. Gary Null, whose radio show comes on every weekday at noon on WBAI in New York, has been a major influence on my health and dietary practices since 1980. I have read many of his books, and even joined his running club in New York City to train for the New York Marathon in 1984 and 1985.
NP
I get the feeling that being physically aware and healthy is connected to a sense of being spiritually grounded. Was that your relationship to Islam from your first exposure to it?

WC
I don’t quite understand that question, could you say it a different way?

NP
Well, the sculpture is so much about bodies, such as having your feet on the ground, in the case of the sculpture in progress I’m looking at now. The way you use shoes, which you’ve done so much. Is there a connection between being grounded in that physical way, and the various spiritual systems that you’ve been involved with?
WC

No, it’s a mystery. I mean, I would have probably answered differently maybe three or four years ago, but today it’s just curiosity. What is life all about? Are the things we see as important really that important? I’ve had artist friends who’ve passed away and are now totally forgotten in the art world that they struggled and strived in for importance. I had a friend who was an Olympic champion whose family didn’t know what to do with all of his trophies when he died. All those trophies that he was so proud of were in the end only valuable to him. His daughter even gave a couple to me for potential art use. That makes me wonder what life is really about. That’s been my curiosity throughout my adult life, and maybe even starting in high school. I remember reading a book called Peace of Mind when I was about fourteen years old. It posed this very question, what is life really about? All my childhood Sunday school and church stuff, all this art stuff, the idea of making a living ... how important is all this? And what is real?

As an adult, I’ve taken a lot of religion, mind science, and spiritual studies courses. Something just makes me want to understand more, be more connected. Maybe that’s what life is about. Maybe it’s about the experience, the learning, and nothing else. In my journey I’ve had many magical moments. They have been like signposts to awareness. And my sense of awareness makes me take them very seriously. For example, when I was at SVA, I lived on the twenty-first floor of a beautiful Mies van der Rohe high-rise building in Newark called the Colonnades. One day in the incinerator room I found a book called Three Magic Words. I read it and it blew me away. So much so, that to this day I give out copies as gifts. It’s about the God in you, the power of life itself. The author uses the word “God,” but you can substitute that with anything or any name that fits your personal belief system. For me it’s just “energy” aka “life force.”

NP

And that goes back to the way you talked about primary colors when you were talking to Leslie King-Hammond.

WC
Also, the oneness. I believe that there is one source for everything. One artist with
many hands. (laughter) And even though I never completely OD'd on Christianity
as a kid, by the time I got to college I was ready for rehab. The *I Ching*, Immanuel
Kant, Emanuel Swedenborg, yoga, and Carlos Castaneda became my new guides.
I asked myself, If Christianity is the “only way” then what are these philosophies
about? At the same time, my awareness of African culture and thought was
amplified by my studies in African art under Professor Rosalind Jeffries at the
School of Visual Art, and by a Sunday morning African dance class at the Black
Students Union on the Rutgers Newark campus. In this class, the energy was
always high ... just like in the Baptist church. There were even people catching the
Holy Ghost, but there was no mention of Christ. There were drummers and
dancers, singing about African gods in African languages, as well as vendors and
philosophers selling food for the body and the mind.

I left those years believing that the intention or goal of every and any approach to
God was valid because there is only one truth. People just tell it in different
languages, through their individual cultural lens. Like I’m surprised that people get
down on Muslims. I’m not talking about radicals, but just the religion itself. *Islam*,
the word itself, means peace. The word *Allah* means God. They’re not
worshipping a different God. They’re just speaking a different language. Then in
the mid-’80s, my studio assistant turned me on to Joseph Campbell’s writing on
comparative religion and mythology.
NP
That’s when you started doing the sculpture involving the irons and the shoes?

WC
Yeah, but not shoes. Just irons.

NP
Did your involvement with Yoruba culture and imagery come at roughly the same time?

WC
Yes. In Newark in the ’60s and ’70s, there was a Pan-African approach to black culture. We greeted each other in Swahili, celebrated Kwanza, adopted African names, and, in my case, through dance and art, discovered Yoruba traditions.

NP
What does that involve?

WC
For me it means respecting the forces of nature and acknowledging one’s ancestral lineage.

NP
Just out of curiosity, and this is a digression, does Yoruba practice allow women to serve as officiators or priestesses, if there is such a thing?

WC
Yes, yes, at least nowadays. I don’t know about historically. A lot of African as well as Native American traditions give women lots of power. Ostracizing women is more of a Western thing, I would say. If you recognize the earth as our mother how could you disrespect women?

NP
Don’t ask me! (laughter)

NP
Have you been to Africa?

WC
I’ve only been to Cape Town, South Africa. But I have been to Brazil, as well as Cuba, Brooklyn, and Harlem, which at times are all very African.

**NP**
Have you traced where your family ultimately—

**WC**
Yes, yes, very recently. For Christmas my girlfriend gave me a 23andMe.

**NP**
Oh, no kidding! What did you find out?

**WC**
I am 90.8 percent African, 40 percent Nigerian. None of that was surprising to me.

**NP**
What does that mean?

**WC**
It’s just a genetic thing.

**NP**
They can’t say where in Africa the rest is from?

**WC**
Yes, it’s all there. None of it was a surprise to me because I could just look in the mirror and see my connections. I have friends from Nigeria who tell me that I look Igbo.

**NP**
Is that the majority tribe in Nigeria?

**WC**
No, Nigeria is both Igbo and the Yoruba.

**NP**
And is some of the imagery that you use, the Senufo mask—

**WC**
I have a Senufo piece in my personal collection—they are mostly in Mali and the Ivory Coast. In the ’80s I had a very good friend, an African art dealer named Lawrence Ramsey. He was a partner in the Jane Kahan Gallery in SoHo. I acquired my Senufo piece from him.
NP
In those years, you took a number of jobs. One thing I’m curious about is, how did you wind up in Donald Manes’s, the Queens borough president’s office?

WC
Well you know the Comprehensive Employment Training Act? CETA?

NP
Yeah.

WC
My son was born in 1978. And raising kids cost money. Back then, and even to this day I’m not into money so much, but because I had that responsibility I went out and got a job. Prior to that time I only worked freelance jobs. So, I went down to the New York State Employment Office, and they actually had “help wanted” listings under the category “artists.” And this ad read, “Graphic designer needed in Borough Hall, Queens.” The job was partially funded by the Comprehensive Employment Training Act which was like the WPA of the ’70s. It was a full-time gig initially. I was there every day. I had a secretary; I had a drawing table and went to lots of meetings. After about three months though, I convinced them I could do this job better at home in my own studio. They said okay and I started coming in to the office only one day a week to pick up or drop off any assignments. But I did all the work from home.
Fig. 3 & 4. Sunbeam Male, Ceremonial.
NP
Sounds like a pretty good arrangement.

WC
Sometimes I had to be on location. For example, one of my projects was to design the 1979 Myrtle Avenue Shopping Guide. For this I had to visit that neighborhood to meet with the vendors and to get a sense of the community.

NP
Donald Manes was a colorful character.

WC
I rarely saw Donald. His man, Julie Wagner, was my boss. I quit this job after a little less than one year for a better opportunity. My partner at that time was hired pre-launch date as a news anchor for a new TV station in South Jersey. She introduced the station to my work and they hired me to be their graphic designer. Unfortunately for both of us the station never aired. The state denied them the right to build a transmitter, supposedly because they wanted to build it on restricted land. Fortunately for me though, the six months I worked with them resulted in an amazing design portfolio that I used to get my next opportunity as a computer graphics artist for a company called National Slide Makers. I worked there for two years.

NP
So, we’re talking really early computer graphics.

WC
Yeah. That was back when the console was longer than my piano. But the screen was the size of this book. (laughter) Our CPU was seven feet tall and stood in a refrigerated room by itself.

NP
That’s where you developed the computer graphics skills that you’re still using?

WC
Yeah. The differences between then and now are mostly size and speed. The software goals were the same, except we were storing things on floppy disks and printing things out on sprocketed paper.

NP
Yup, that tractor paper.

WC
Our machines used the MS-DOS operating system.

NP
At some point in here, you had the great big studio—

WC
—in Newark on Lum Lane, yeah.

NP
You were developing or sustaining an idea of yourself as someone who wasn’t doing just commercial work. You were doing your own work. That was going on at the same time?

Willie Cole’s Lum Lane studio in Newark, New Jersey, 1990. Courtesy of the artist.

**WC**

No, that came later. I moved into the loft when I started the computer job. After two years I got fired in a covert way. They told me they were putting me on call. This was a new era when a lot of big companies and corporations were acquiring their own computer graphics equipment, but didn’t have people to operate it. My company, National Slide Makers, supposedly was positioning itself to send their artists, we were called Geni-artists, out to work in these facilities. I was put “on call” in anticipation of this. But after two months of never being called, I challenged them in court and the judge declared me “terminated” and therefore
eligible for unemployment benefits. My sense of optimism saw this as a good thing. I was now officially unemployed and eligible for unemployment benefits. To me this was like receiving a scholarship. I spent the next two years as an art hustler; doing all the things creative and visual to earn a living, while creating the portfolio of painting that got me my first New York dealer in 1984.

NP
And was that Jacquie Littlejohn?

WC
Yes. The Littlejohn-Smith Gallery on Greene Street in SoHo. I showed mostly paintings of dogs back then. But I also started doing sculptures of dogs made out of tree limbs and found stuff that year. I was also very inspired by a show I saw at MoMA called “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern.

NP
Yes. I wanted to ask you about that. That was a show in 1984 with huge repercussions in the art world. Do you remember what your impression was at the time?

WC
I thought it was amazing. The piece I remember the most is by an artist I can’t remember: Little babies glued onto the body of a larger doll.

NP
I’m wondering who that was. That was by a contemporary Western artist?

WC
I think it was a contemporary artist. But also, in ’84, I went to Paris to FIAC and I saw stuff there that blew my mind.

NP
That was your first trip abroad.

WC
Yeah. That was ’84, and then maybe like a year or two later, I went to a fair in Nice, Art Junction International, and I exhibited.

NP
You were submitting works on paper?
WC
I exhibited woven metal sculptures at Art Junction International. But the first time I went to Paris was to catch up with two friends who were on an African art buying mission. By the time I got there though, they had moved on to Belgium. This was before cell phones. Suddenly, I found myself there all alone. I had studied French in high school, so I was able to find a room eventually by repeatedly saying in French at every hotel I passed, “Une chambre avec douche.” I ended up in a tiny hotel in what seemed like an all-Arab community. I didn’t have much money. I stayed there for two weeks, and then at the suggestion of someone at the Bureau of Tourism, moved on to Amsterdam where the tourism clerk promised I would “have a good time.” I caught a train there and stayed for a week. Then I came back to the same hotel in Paris and stayed for another two weeks. It was a life-changing experience for me.

NP
Just being in the Louvre must have been a big deal.

WC
Yeah, I hit all the museums in Paris. I met a couple artists and a lot of musicians. In Amsterdam I played music daily in front of the Bulldog Café with two expats from Chicago.

NP
You were travelling with a guitar?

WC
No, no, one of the guys I met was a drummer. The other was a bass player. But we just jammed on African drums and percussion in the streets every day.

NP
There was probably an American community of not exactly expatriates, but just kids hanging out, right?

WC
Yeah, these two guys I hung out with were from Chicago and claimed to have been in Amsterdam for five years. When I asked, “What are you doing here?” They said that they “came to Amsterdam to teach the funk.” (laughter) They looked the part, dressed outlandishly—flamboyant like Sly Stone or George Clinton, with tall lace-up boots, ruffled shirts, and leather vests. Their clients, they said, were the children of the rich people whose kids loved black American music.
So, before Adrian Piper was doing her funk lessons, there were other folks doing that. She probably saw that. (*laughter*)

Yeah, their band was called the Ice Cold band. The bass player’s name was Diamond and he dubbed me with the name Ice.

Of course. (*laughter*) Back in New York, you had a show with Franklin Furnace in ‘88. *Ten Thousand Mandelas.* Can you talk about that?

I had a dream that everybody was Mandela. I mean, literally in the dream, everyone walking down the street was Mandela. So, I decided to make it real in a series of exhibitions and performances. A good friend of mine, Ted Davis, who was a community organizer and also the chairman of the nonprofit gallery I ran out of my studio, became my project manager. Our intention was to make *Ten Thousand Mandelas* as big as any Christo event. When we debuted *Ten Thousand Mandelas* at William Paterson University in New Jersey, we placed a box of Mandela masks at the front entrance to the gallery and required everyone entering to put one on.

And this mask was from a photograph?

Yeah, a Xerox photo of Mandela mounted on cardboard. I have this all on video. The exhibition consisted of several installations of life-size soft sculptures wearing the Mandela masks. It took me back to when I was a kid, and my sister and I would make life-size dolls out of my dad’s work clothes and pose them around the living room to shock our parents when they returned home.

This was when?

Before the sixth grade. So, for the Mandela show, I made those kinds of soft sculpture bodies again, but with the added Mandela faces. The gallery at William Paterson had several tall glass display cases running right down the middle of the
space. In each case, I posed Mandelas in various positions or predicaments, like sitting bound and tortured, or kneeling and praying, or watching TV, or reading the newspaper, or aiming a gun, etc. The soundtrack in the gallery was the Mandela chant: “Mandela, Mandela, Mandela, Mandela, Mandela” nonstop, like a religious chant.
That sounds amazing.

That’s was at William Paterson University. I did a second installation at Aljira Gallery in Newark where I exhibited life-size figures cut out of cardboard wearing the Mandela face bundled together in bales.
NP
That was a small space, right?

WC
Yes. For Franklin Furnace I made hundreds of cardboard Mandelas in the “don’t shoot” position—aka “hands up”—and stuffed them in a big cage. The illusion was that the cage was filled with thousands of them. I painted a number on each Mandela forehead. On the gallery wall I displayed what I called the “solidarity kit.” It contained a gun, a Mandela mask, and a solidarity certificate.

NP
What do you mean? Not a real gun?

WC
No, a Xerox of a photo of a gun mounted on cardboard. There were also cardboard Mandelas along the walls too, and of course the “Mandela chant.” After that, or maybe before that, we did it on the streets in New York. This is where my friend, the community organizer, really helped out. In the wee hours of the morning, with three vans of people and a film crew, we plastered thousands of Mandelas all over SoHo and the Village.

NP
Stenciling them on walls?

WC
No, we had cardboard Mandelas, so we hung them on walls and on the sides of buildings with staples and adhesives. We placed a lot of them outside Leo Castelli’s gallery along a wooden wall surrounding a construction site. Whenever it worked, we would just sit them around on benches or pose them against a fence. We put them everywhere. Fortunately, we videotaped the whole thing because as fast as we put them up the New York Sanitation Department took them down. (laughter) It was like they parked, watched, and waited until we finished, then said, “Okay they’re finished now,” then ripped it all down. But I was more than pleased. A lot of my ideas come to me in dreams, and this was the first impossible one that came true.

NP
At 420 West Broadway. In those days, you could target the art world by doing that. You didn’t have to go to all five boroughs.

WC
Yeah, I miss the SoHo scene.

NP
I’m thinking of some other artists who did similar guerilla style street work—Jenny Holzer, and especially David Wojnarowicz, who was doing those Rimbauds all over the place.

WC
We even did balloons—helium-filled balloons with Mandela faces on them, and paper bodies attached. We would walk into buildings that were investing in South Africa and release them.

NP
Did you get any press or attention for that?

WC
I had a team member who was responsible for press. We got a bit of press attention in New Jersey but not in the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal. That was kind of disappointing. But I was so pleased that I got this idea out of my head and into the world that nothing else really mattered to me.

NP
It sounds so powerful.

WC
It was an amazing experience. In meetings leading up to what we were calling the “art attack,” I learned the word “reconnoiter” from my friend Ted, the community organizer. I didn’t know that word before that. (laughter) But we did, scouted out every location beforehand. It was just amazing.

NP
What were other important shows in that first decade or so of your career?

WC
Well, as I said, my first dealer was Jacquie Littlejohn, and how I met her may tie into the whole spiritual and energy thing. I believed that all things were possible, as I still do today. So, I would go to SoHo every month, starting on West Broadway, and zigzag all the way to Broadway, hitting every gallery. I did that every month for years. My friend who got me the press during the Ten Thousand Mandelas project ran a video production service called Newark Media Works, and through her, I was able to process slide film and make endless sets of duplicate
images of my work at no cost. I would regularly mail these sets of slides out to galleries around the country. And eventually they would all come back. But I also always kept a set on my person. During one of my zigzag adventures through SoHo I went into Littlejohn-Smith Gallery on Greene Street. Inside there was an exhibition of paintings by the Irish artist John Kindness. There was also a videographer documenting the exhibition for a TV broadcast. The only people in the gallery were the dealer, the cameraman, and me. After a couple of minutes, the camera guy comes over to me and asks, “Would you mind standing by this painting for a minute to give our viewers a sense of scale?” He didn’t know me, but I immediately knew that this was an opportunity. “Sure,” I said. And even though I had seen the show and was in fact ready to leave the gallery when he approached me, I chose to see this painting with new eyes to convey to anyone who would eventually see this video that this painting was one of the most intriguing works of art in the world. Without looking too contrived I did a sequence of double takes, chin rubs, and head scratches. Then I stepped back, tilted my head to one side and paused. When it was over the dealer, Jacquie Littlejohn herself, came over to thank me. “That’s amazing,” she said. “What do you do?” And that was my cue. I said, “I’m an artist, here’s my work.” (laughter) And I whipped out a page of 35mm slides from my jacket pocket and placed it in her hands.
NP
And what was on the slides?

WC
Paintings on paper of vicious dogs and a few Congolese-looking sculptures of dogs made from scrap metal, wood, and nails.

NP
So, when you’re saying paintings, you were already using metal and nails and so on.

WC
Only because I couldn’t afford paint. My loft was in a building that had a sheet metal factory on the first floor. They would throw away these strips of metal, so I started collecting them to make things.

NP
And there were words? The ones I’ve seen have words written onto the surface of the board.

WC
Yes, some of the paintings were like that; big, in oils, with text. Even though Jacquie never came to my studio (because I lived in New Jersey and New York dealers were really against traveling to New Jersey back in those days), she was able to sell my work. I would show her a stack of Polaroids every month of what I was working on, and she would choose what she wanted to show. She included me in a group show there in 1986 called *Dog Days of August*. All my pieces sold. Then she moved to Florida and closed her New York gallery down for a few years, and I lost touch with her. Sometime between then and now she returned to New York City and opened a space on 57th Street. In 2011 she relocated again to Chelsea. But that’s how I met her.

I guess that’s kind of a good story. To me it was about energy, persistence, optimism, will, desire, and manifestation. I believed that everything I wanted was already in the world and that it was my job to be aware enough to see opportunity when it’s headed my way. This was my thought each month as I zigzagged
through the SoHo gallery scene. I convinced myself that opportunity was right around the corner ... and it was.

**NP**
Energy and persistence and creativity.

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**Session 2: March 14th, 2019**

**NP**
You’ve mentioned your loft on Lum Lane in Newark a few times. It became the home of the Works Gallery. Tell us about the gallery, and what went on there.

**WC**
In 1982 I turned half of my 3,000 square-foot loft into an art gallery. We exhibited metro area artists, and occasionally hosted classes, workshops, and art events like poetry readings, plays, and musical performances. We also offered a design service and a party space for rent.

NP
I understand that the gallery was co-founded with Bisa Washington. Who is she?

WC
Bisa Washington is a very prominent artist in the Newark, New Jersey art scene who deserves greater recognition. She is a fiber artist, primarily.

**NP**
How did you come to start Works Gallery together?

**WC**
It came about in a strange way. In the years from 1976 to 1982, I was pursuing all of my interests at once. I believed I could be the next great everything, including an Olympic athlete. After a few years I realized that although I was having fun, I was still a long way from what I called success. Then I met Bisa and she said to me, “If you want to be an artist, you got to have a gallery.” And me, being Mr. Literal, took her words literally and started a gallery. When I think back to that time now, what she really meant was that ‘to be a successful artist one needs to represented by a gallery.’ That’s how the Works Gallery was born.

**NP**
Was it established as a nonprofit?

**WC**
Yes. We were a 501(c)(3), not that we got any funding from anybody though. It was just a great place to be. Some might even say it was the center of the Newark scene in those years. I exhibited the works of Newark artists, as well artists from New York and from around the world. I even showed Dawoud Bey there once.

**NP**
That must have been some of his earliest work.

**WC**
Yeah, the Polaroids. We also had regular poetry readings, music, and theater performances, too. It was as much a cultural center as it was a gallery. I was just coming out of the graphic design world, but Bisa knew all the arts people in Newark. And she had some New York connections too. She was really a big part of making it happen. I was the guy with space and the checkbook. She had the vision and served as the gallery’s board president for the first year or two. It was a lot of fun.

**NP**
Did you choose what was presented? And did you ever show your own work?

**WC**
I never exhibited my own work in the gallery. That would have been too easy. But remember, half of the loft was my studio so I was able to show my work privately. Many of the artists I showed became inspiration for me to try new things. In my mind, they all were more educated, more experienced, and more prominent than myself. Seeing their work and having conversations with them really helped me to create a vision of myself as an artist.
James Andrew Brown, Terry Adkins, Lorenzo Pace, Candida Alvarez, Benny Andrews, Ed Clark, Twins Seven Seven, Howardena Pindell, Herbert Gentry, Bob Blackburn.

NP
This is quite a roster. Did you make prints with Blackburn?

WC
I didn’t, but I did get prints from him to show. He introduced me to Herbert Gentry and Benny Andrews. I gave Benny a one-person show. Herbert was in a group show, and there were a lot of other artists whose names I can’t remember. We scheduled exhibitions every four to five weeks. And every Friday we had something called Black Fridays. This was before Black Friday became a retail sales term. (laughter) Our Black Friday was a celebration of Black culture with music and poetry and vendors. The Ensemble Theater Company, a troupe of young actors who studied under Avery Brooks at Rutgers University, premiered their production of The Island at Works Gallery as a Black Friday event.

NP
By Athol Fugard?

WC
Yes. Bisa and I discussed most things together. I mean it wasn’t that formal in the sense that she or I curated the shows, we just had conversations and made choices.

NP
That sounds incredibly exciting.

WC
It was a great time for me. It was my bridge from the graphic design to the present.

NP
Were you still using a part of that space as a studio and a residence?

WC
Yeah, it was 3,000 square feet, which seemed huge to me at the time. It had a super high ceiling and lots of skylights. We could ride our bikes around inside. Sometimes we even played handball on the back wall. I was a single dad then, so my son and I both lived there. Half the space was gallery and the other half was studio and living space.

**NP**
How long did you hang on to it?

**WC**
I think I moved there in 1980. I moved out in 1994 but held on to the space for work until the building was torn down in 1998.

**NP**
When did Works close?

**WC**
I’m not sure. Around 1984 or ’85. When I told my board members that I’d found a dealer they confessed that they were more interested in supporting me than the gallery and it closed down a few months after that.

**NP**
That must have been a complicated conversation.

**WC**
I wasn’t married to the idea of being a gallerist or running a nonprofit. We never even applied for any state funding. We were more into the art than the business.

**NP**
1980 was just when Regan was elected, the National Endowment for the Arts and government support for the arts in general began to fall apart, so it was a difficult time for many nonprofits.

**WC**
We got our money from those Black Friday events, selling food, our graphic design service, and big dance parties. I remember once we had a live band from Brazil play in the gallery and people were doing the samba all around the artwork. That’s how the Works Gallery supported itself. I was willing to allow the gallery to continue in my loft, but a few months after my announcement it all kind of dissolved. I don’t even think there was a formal announcement. My board chairman became my personal advisor. His name is Ted Davis. He was a
community organizer, entrepreneur, and businessman. Currently, he’s a real estate developer. Our board vice president was Christine Vogel. She ran a company called Newark Media Works that did video projects all over the state. At one point, she hired me as an assistant, just to help me out financially. I learned old school video editing and production while working with her. This was before the digital age. She also did all of my slide development for free, so I had endless sets of slides to send to people. She and Ted became my biggest supporters. Another former board member, who was in the process of creating a course on motivation and self-actualization, gave me part of her manuscript pre-publication as personal study guide and coached me on how to organize my thinking and my life.

NP
Sounds like you were fortunate in your advice.

WC
I’ve always run into people who have given me good guidance and support. In the early ’70s, before I lived in the loft, I had a neighbor who supported me with a gift of cash once a month.

NP
Wow. Who are some of the artists you felt close to then, or do now? I’m remembering the title of your show Anxious Objects: Willie Cole’s Favorite Brands at the Montclair Museum in 2005, which makes reference via Harold Rosenberg to Jasper Johns and a couple of other artists who used recycled things, and brings up the question of influence.

WC
We all stand on the shoulders of everybody who came before us. I mean, I think of Picasso as a painter and sculptor. I’ve seen his sculpture over the past thirty years and I realized that he invented assemblage. When I saw his last show, I thought he was a horrible assemblage artist but then I remembered that he was the first one to do it. (laughter)
NP
Yeah, he started it all.

WC
So I’d mention Picasso. My friends in college were all into Surrealism. We were into an illustrator named Abdul Mati Klarwein who did the Miles Davis *Bitches Brew* cover. And Salvador Dali. That was college. I admired those guys back in those days. As a so-called “professional artist” in the ’90s I admired Dennis Oppenheim a lot. Also Donald Lipski. When I was searching for a dealer in the early ’80s I used to see his work and I always liked it.
This is when he was working with various objects inside glass vessels?

And before that he was working with stuff that was just straightforward assemblage. I also was enamored with Arman. Single objects multiplied. Maybe I got that from him. I admired that about Carl Andre, too. I like his work a lot. His reputation as a person isn’t good now, but I like his work from back in the day. I like Gerhard Richter as a painter, but I also like Anselm Kiefer. The last show I saw of Anselm’s work was amazing.

This is a very eclectic range of artists.

I can’t say I have a favorite. My hat’s off to anyone who has the nerve to take the time to make a work of art.

Let’s talk about your fall 1988 through summer ’89 residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which I think was a big turning point.

I would call that a turning point. I agree.

How did the residency come about? You applied and were accepted?

Yeah, I applied and I was accepted. I was living in Newark, so I would catch the PATH train each day to New York and stay in the studio as long as I could each day. The Artist in Residence space was different then. Three artists shared a very small space less than 1,000 square feet. Renée Green and John Rozelle were my studio mates. John was from Chicago, he’s a painter, and you probably know Renée Green.

I do. She’s more of a conceptualist artist.

That was a good experience for me. Renée seemed to be very gregarious and very targeted. John was a great guy but his workday was very different, maybe
because he was older. He might have been ten, fifteen years older than Renée and I, so he didn’t hang out with us.

**NP**
You were in your early thirties?

**WC**
I was thirty-three years old. I was born in ’55 and this was in ’88. Renée and I would go hear jazz after leaving the museum or discover Harlem in general. All the junk shops there are where I got some of my first irons.

**NP**
Which became a primary sculptural component of your assemblages—various steam irons. I read that you got your first one in Newark.

**WC**
Yes, on the street. I’m not sure how to state this without seeming like I’m out of my mind, but after that, the irons started looking for me. I didn’t have to really search for them anymore. Often the junk stores in Harlem were filled with all kinds of stuff and I would just say to the guy, “Is there an iron there?” and he’d dive into the pile and disappear for a few minutes then reemerge with an iron in his hands. But you are correct. Most of my irons were found on the streets of Newark.

**NP**
Found, not purchased.
WC
Deliberately found, yes. It’s only once I joined the Brooke Alexander Gallery in 1991 that my purchased iron count exceeded my found iron count. But this was necessary to keep up with the demand for my work.

NP
You had been using salvaged or recycled objects in some of your prior flat work, but the irons changed things. That was when the first African mask-like object appears.

WC
You can say that, but it’s debatable. I used found objects before steam irons. I know I did one piece with windshield wipers in ‘88, when I got to the Studio Museum in Harlem. I took a bunch of windshield wipers with me with the idea of making very linear sculptures and assemblages. That was before the irons. And in my studio in Newark, I had been making things out of my neighbor’s trash. I was on the third floor of this industrial building and on the first floor was a sheet metal fabricator and he would throw away eight- and twelve-foot-long strips of sheet metal that were maybe an inch or two wide. I would collect those strips and weave them into flat rectangles, dogs, and human forms. Before the steam irons, I also made things with telephones. That was also around the same time, maybe in early ‘89. The found object things started with making jewelry for myself to wear—in high school I made a lot of jewelry out of forks and things like that, just bending the two ends. And later on in life I’d make necklaces out of rusty things that I found on the streets.

NP
I don’t know those—they sound fabulous.

WC
I started making things out of telephones and hair dryers in my home studio at the same time that I was making things out of irons in my studio in Harlem.

NP
You produced the Senufo-inspired works while in residence at the Studio Museum?

**WC**
Yes, that’s true. I’m not sure how I came to that particular mask because these irons are more like the Dan masks from Liberia. But at that time, I didn’t know that.
NP
You did the research after the image came to you—you would fill in what the connections were?

WC
Sometimes the connections came to me in what I thought was a spiritual way. I had been living in my loft for two years and when I started making stuff with the irons, I began noticing scorches on the floor of my studio. I had never seen them before so that seemed kind of—(whistle). That, plus always finding irons on the street, is why I say, the irons were looking for me.

NP
And they coalesced first into these mask-like forms—
Yeah. Now at that time I was reading a lot of Joseph Campbell books about comparative religious studies and making connections between, let’s say, Candomblé and Catholicism, and wanting to find a similar parallel between African art and Western art. I can explain now in words, but it didn’t happen with words. It just occurred to me during meditation. It was like a vision. My aesthetic goal became to make things look African out of American-made objects.

It seems that things really came in a rush. There were irons, there were hair dryers, and there were shoes.

Prior to 2005, I only made maybe four or five pieces out of shoes.

Did the Studio Museum offer a different type of visibility?

Because I was sharing studio space with Renée Green, I was suddenly very visible because everybody seemed to know her. Not everybody—like Castelli and Sonnabend, they didn’t know Renée—but all the artists, all the nonprofits, and more specifically Fred Wilson.

Fred then put you in a show.

He came to visit Renée at the Studio Museum in Harlem, saw my work, and put me in a show. He was a gallery director then, and gave me a one-person show at the Longwood Gallery.

That’s in the Bronx?

Yes, in the Bronx. It still exists. This was before Fred was Fred Wilson, when he was just a gallerist himself.

So that was before Mining the Museum and before he had his breakout show.
WC
Yeah. I didn’t even know he was an artist then.

NP
You know, I was making this connection between Fred, Renée Green, and their interest in what became known as institutional critique. I was wondering if you were at all interested in that? If that ever seemed appealing?

WC
You mean Fred’s approach?

NP
For yourself, yes.

WC
No, not in the same way. I was motivated by the belief that everything in existence is just two or three beats away from being totally alive and free. I mean ... that water (pointing to a drinking glass on the table) is alive. In fact, the most alive thing on that table is the water. But actually, the whole table is alive too. I’m interested in tapping into the potential for life in all things. I call a work of art finished when I sense that it’s just a breath away from being alive. That kind of sums up my schtick, to reveal the life force in inanimate objects. You look at it. You feel it. It looks at you. And you feel it more. Fred’s anthropology is different than mine. He, in my opinion, is more into uncovering objects as objects. In contrast, I am interested in uncovering spirits ... or the life force inside of objects. In ’89 I used the term “archeological ethnographic Dadaist” to describe my practice—because I would go to a location in the city of Newark, find a telephone, or ironing board, or steam iron, and imagine that I was unearthing sacred relics from an ancient culture ... and then proceed to convince the viewer that it was so.

NP
Say that term again?

WC
Archeological ethnographic Dadaist.

NP
So, there’s spirituality, but Dadaist also implies a certain amount of absurdity.
Yes, well that’s what art school does for you. (*laughter*) Like I said, it came from comparing the Greeks to the Egyptians, the Egyptians to the Yoruba, the Yoruba to the Catholics. All of that became very interesting to me. I’m finding these objects and I’m telling myself, This is not just a steam iron. It’s a relic from another time. Of course, I knew that this was not true, but this is what I had go through in my mind. I had to suspend knowing in order to liberate my creativity. It’s like an archeologist who goes on a dig and finds twenty bones, puts them together, and then tells the world that it’s a brontosaurus and the world believes it. I find irons, take them apart, then I reassemble them into something else, and tell you that it’s an icon from an ancient civilization where people worship irons. (*laughter*) That’s the story I would tell myself each day in the studio.

And we viewers believe it!

*WC*

(*laughter*)

*NP*

We’re looking at a print of a hair dryer here in the gallery. It’s quite big.

*WC*

I think I did do hair dryers at the same time because my show at PS1 in 1990 was hair dryers and the show at the Studio Museum was in the fall of ’89, so they’re pretty much neck and neck.

Something that’s often said about the explosion in your work of these objects—the irons, the hair dryers, the ironing boards, and the shoes—is that they’re all connected with women and women’s work. And that they are possibly tied to growing up in a household full of women. The first sculptures made from high-heeled shoes are that throne-like chair from 1993, and then there is *Rosa Parks* of 1994, which is a kind of scary, gruesome mask.

Those were two of the first four shoe pieces at that time. There’s one called *Harriet*. 

*NP*
For Harriet Tubman?

WC
Yes. But also for my son’s mom, Harriet. It was called *Harriet with the Fire in her Eyes* because the Harriet in my personal life had fire in her eyes.

NP
Some of the masks get pretty fierce.
That’s what I mean when it’s (snaps) a breath away from life. (laughter) But it’s true. At the Studio Museum show, some people thought that Renée Green was the male and Willie Cole was the female. Her work and materials looked a little bit more manly I guess than mine. It could be the effect of growing up in a household full of women. But it’s also fueled by the availability of the objects. But I like to say I didn’t choose the objects. The objects chose me.

Especially if you’re drawn to things that have to do with the domestic environment and with the way life is lived.

Yeah, and it has evolved into me thinking that I’m attracted to objects that have had intimate contact with the human body. You iron your clothes and some of your molecules are in your clothes. Now it’s on the iron, so the iron is on its way to becoming alive. With the water bottle, you pour the water out and your air and spirit goes in the bottle. Of course, the shoes are even more obvious than that because they become the foundation of your being each day. And it takes the shape of your foot so now it even looks like you.

In the early ‘90s you had a show that Fred Wilson organized?

At Artists Space. Well, I’m not sure.

I thought it was at Aljira in Newark.

You know people tell me I did have an exhibition at Aljira in Newark but—

Do you remember it?

I definitely exhibited at Aljira but I don’t remember a show at Aljira being curated by Fred. The Ten Thousand Mandelas installation that went to Franklin Furnace grew out of a show I had at Aljira. Fred was not a part of that. But he was on the
board of Artists Space in the 1990s. And he did curate me into a group show there. That’s where Carolyn [Alexander], my current New York dealer, first saw my work.

NP
Was she on the board of Artists Space?

WC
Yes. At that time she was.

NP
So you were instantly in the thick of things at that point?

WC
Oh, yes. Also, times were so different then. I told you this before. What year did Basquiat pass away?

NP
At the end of the ’80s [Basquiat died in 1988].

WC
This was at the end of the ’80s and for African American artists, the door had just opened up a bit wider; everyone wanted a black artist. Every gallery got one black artist at that time. And I’m still that one in this gallery.

NP
Are you the only black artist here?

WC
I’m not the only artist of color. They have a Brazilian artist. I don’t know how he self identifies. He could be African or he could be Portuguese. Brazil is crazy like that. We have two artists from the Middle East, Mona Hatoum, who is Palestinian, and Emily Jacir from Saudi Arabia via Bethlehem. Then there’s Doris Salcedo, who is from Colombia. So, I guess that makes us the rainbow coalition gallery. (laughter)

NP
You were making the references to African source material pretty explicit, and there are a number of places where, say with the lawn jockeys on the field, you’re making a pointed reference both to slavery here in the U.S. and to Kongo power figures. Would you say you’ve moved away from that explicit political engagement? How would you talk about that lawn jockey work now?

**WC**
You know what? I wonder about that sometimes. I would say no. I’m just expanding perception rather than moving away. In this country every action a black artist makes is seen as or expected to be political. I think what’s happening with my work most recently is that my sense of art as a spiritual practice has expanded me to the point where, at least from my eyes, spirituality is bigger than politics or history. It’s like, if you’re driving a Ford, am I going to see you or the Ford? The African imagery was the Ford, but the driver was my interest in spirituality, not politics.

**NP**
It’s an interesting metaphor. I never thought about that. I’m thinking about the work you did at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in 2000 where you were making those fantastic sculptures that are very—

**WC**
—sexy.

**NP**
Sexy, curvy, and they also seem to make explicit references to Ganesh and other Hindu deities.

**WC**
My life, I would say from high school to college, has been a search for meaning and spiritual understanding. I did a couple of years as a Buddhist, of course as a Christian, as a Catholic, and as a Baptist. I even took a lot of adult Bible classes. Some in a church, but some with an eccentric neighborhood mystic named Papa Joe who wore long robes, had two long braids, and a New York Public Access TV show. I also hung out at the Tree of Life bookstore in Harlem and took many classes there on the subjects of spirituality and African culture. But the quest for spiritual enlightenment was uncommon. The ’70s and ’80s were a time of self-discovery and spiritual awakening all over America. In New York alone you could experience Krishna and Christ just by walking through Times Square. So in those Kohler pieces the Hindu deity Ganesh, known as the remover of obstacles,
emerged by surprise. Sometimes I think that I unconsciously make spiritual icons and vessels to access their help and powers as I move through life.

**NP**

Though you haven’t said so, from the connections that some of these sculptures call out, I think there is a lot of humor in the work. Would you agree?

**WC**

Well, humor is a strange thing in our society—what makes people laugh and why they laugh. I am not deliberately trying to be humorous, but I’ve heard that before and I find that interesting. You saw the red guy, the lovely cartoon character in front of my house? That’s humor. I made that for my daughter. It’s an enlargement of her favorite childhood cartoon character. But most of my so-called “fine art” was not consciously made to be humorous. Sometimes people laugh because they’re uncomfortable or shocked or need a release of some sort. For me as an artist any reaction is good.

**NP**

In your work the humor is in the unexpected transformation. Say, a fancy bit of plumbing, or fancy toilet bowl parts, are transformed into these very sexy sculptures.

**WC**

See, I didn’t think of them as toilet bowl parts, other than the fact that I got them at Kohler. I just saw shapes. It’s like with the bottles. I just see building blocks. But if you look at them as toilet bowl parts, I can see how that can be funny. (*laughter*)

**NP**

Of course, there’s sometimes a pretty potent amount of anger. Especially in any of the sculptures that have to do with irons and burning and branding.

**WC**

There was a student a few months ago that wanted me to share an explanation about my pieces in her university’s collection. She pointed out, or at least she suggested, that the work had connections to domestic violence. I never really thought of that before, but I did grow up with domestic violence. So the act of burning, especially with an iron, is a domestically violent act. I didn’t see it that way when I was making the work but I thought that was an interesting interpretation of the work.

**WC**
As it should.

**NP**
But a series like *Malcolm’s Chickens* is clearly incendiary.

**WC**
And that’s what makes it so funny, too. Deliberately so. And it was done after 9/11, because of my recollection of Malcolm X’s speech after the Kennedy assassination
—which suggests that terrorism will come back to the United States and wreak havoc. He used the metaphor “chickens come home to roost.”

**NP**
I hadn’t made that connection either. That was 2002, right after 9/11.

**WC**
Yeah, I received a request for proposals to produce something on the theme of 9/11. I didn’t apply for the project, but I made *Malcolm’s Chicken* and at the same time *The Suicide Virgin*.

**NP**
I’m not familiar with that work.

**WC**
My sculpture, *The Suicide Virgin*, is the Virgin Mary wearing a suicide vest made out of firecrackers and cherry bombs. A *Time* magazine article about the rise of female suicide bombers inspired it.

**NP**
It’s freestanding?

**WC**
Yes. It’s pretty much just a lawn ornament sculpture that I purchased and embellished. I made it at the same time as the chickens. They both were shown in this gallery together.

She’s in a collection in Rotterdam now. I haven’t seen her in a while. I also made a third piece around that same time called *No Time for Supper*. It was a light box of da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* with everyone holding an AK-47 and no food on the table. After being bombarded by the media with photos of Bin Laden and his guys sitting around in caves dressed like Old Testament characters, it was like seeing a signifier of peace transformed into a signifier of violence. With *The Suicide Virgin* I was thinking, Suppose the Holy Mother had thrown on a suicide vest to save her son. She would be remembered today as the first suicide bomber in recorded history, as well as a virgin.

**NP**
It makes me think there are a number of objects or installations that you’ve done that set things in motion. The game board pieces with lawn jockeys set up on a checkerboard or bowling balls.
WC

Yeah, my dad inspired the game pieces I’ve made. He is a Southerner and gambler who also still carries a lot of residue and scars from growing up in the South in the ’30s and ’40s. The lawn jockey signifies the South. The lawn jockey’s colors reference the Yoruba deity Elegba. And gambling is one of Elegba’s attributes. Those were the seeds and/or the triggers that led me to make the chessboard piece called *To Get To The Other Side*.

*House and Field* (1997) was about the transformation of black spiritual practice prior to the civil war. I was aware that in places like Cuba and Brazil, the African religious tradition is hidden inside Catholicism. So in *House and Field*, I imagined that the house worker, the one who lived in the master’s house, adopted and practiced the Christian beliefs of their masters. That’s why he has the cross in his hand. He accepts all that stuff that he’s been taught by the master. But despite that, he is seeing his future through the cowry shell eyes.
Whereas the field worker ...

At night, the field worker peels back his plantation self and becomes an African warrior. He carries a machete and is dressed in a warrior’s skirt. This piece is definitely about the contrast between my parents. Ironically, they both had grandfathers who were ministers, but in my mom’s family there are generations of ministers.

You’ve got ministers on both sides.

Yes. My mother’s family is all in California now, but they’re all deeply religious.

And you aren’t involved in any organized religion?

No. I call myself a “no-frills nature worshipper.” I don’t need objects. I just need awareness and respect. It’s not necessary to declare. I’m not being judged. I’m not going to heaven. I’m not going to hell. I’m just part of it. I’m a container for that great power that’s in all of us and I’m just trying to let it express itself through me.

Your thinking about the spiritual energy of the cosmos really runs through all of your work.

Well that’s what life is about for me. It’s making a connection to something greater than yourself. Without naming deities and giving it isms, it’s just awareness that nothing around me is what it appears to be, and that everything is a mystery. We
come up with stories to explain our origin and our evolution, but this is a greater mystery. What makes this all possible is in all of us. In that sense, without the shell of our identities, we’re all one. That’s why single objects multiplying have become a thing for me in the past ten years.

**NP**
Like in the sculptures made of recycled plastic water bottles?

![Installation view of From Water to Light at Pacific Street Fire Station Gallery, Newark, New Jersey, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.](image)

**WC**
Yeah, the bottle is my molecule or particle.

**NP**
Those sculptures based on bottles have gotten very big.

**WC**
Yes, because I can make them modular and because they don’t cost a lot to produce. (*laughter*) It’s true. The water bottle sculptures are like a part-time job. Most of the pieces I’ve made out of bottles have been commissions. But I’m
interested now in doing painting and drawing. That’s not what my art production has been about over the past twenty years, though. The only exception was a show I had here in 2009 after my divorce. After the fact, we jokingly called it my “divorce show.”

NP
Was that the one that had a lot of works on paper?

WC
Yes, it was drawings of my favorite blues songs and a two-channel video of crying people. I think it also included two sculptures. One was called Her Baggage. It was a mannequin from the waist up that was all suitcases. And upstairs, I had a heart-shaped puddle on the floor made of plastic with three dogs licking it up. There was no assemblage. Except for one piece with the suitcases, it was mostly a painting show. One show after that, maybe three years later, included two paintings about the lawn jockey as an Elegba stand-in. There is an artist that you know that has made Pinocchio one of his characters. He was introduced to me as the Prince of Bathrobes back in the ’80s. I saw him taking Pinocchio to another level and I decided I wanted to do the same thing with the lawn jockey. So, I try to bring him in in different scenarios. Do you know the artist I’m referring to?

NP
No, I’m not coming up with anyone. Is he well-known?

WC
It’s Jim Dine. He’s done all these paintings and woodcarvings of different scenarios around Pinocchio, which I liked more than what I had seen of his work years before. I want to take the lawn jockey to that same kind of place in my work.

NP
Can you talk about the work that’s going to be at Hudson Yards? I’m imagining that’s going to be pretty monumental.

WC
The show is called OFF THE WALL so they wanted something on the wall and something that would extend from the wall as well. It couldn’t come out from the wall more than two feet. The Related Companies and Culture Corps discovered my work in West Palm Beach. The Related Companies had a project called Culture Lab in West Palm Beach where I exhibited in Assemblage: An Organically Grown Group Exhibition in December of 2018 in a former Macy’s department store.
Eventually they’re going to renovate it into condos or a hotel or something, but until they do that, they decided to make it into an art gallery. They invited me to be in that show and that’s how I ended up in this show.

NP
The Hudson Yards show is indoors?

WC
It is indoors. There’s one piece outdoors, *Vessel*, which was designed by the English designer Thomas Heatherwick. I think to them it’s the most important piece they have. It’s their logo for the whole project.

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WC
Yes, that piece. *(laughter)* So that’s how I got in. My piece there, *Wheels, Totems, and Wishes*, is pretty much a mural that is a collage of my shoe masks stacked up like a totem pole against the beautiful blue sky. Then, on the face of that, they wanted me to do something with the water bottles. So I made two mandalas out of water bottles: mandalas, flowers, or a mandala-inspired piece, I should say. They are eight feet in diameter each. They looked big in my studio but in that building they seem small to me.

NP
Is that going to be temporary or permanent?
WC
It will be there for nine months. They plan to do rotations every nine months. I think there are twelve artists.

NP
In your upcoming show *Willie Cole: Bella Figura* here at Alexander and Bonin [May 3 – June 22, 2019] there will be a number of new sculptures assembled from women’s shoes.

WC
In 2005, I started making a lot of things out of shoes when I was a fellow at the University of Georgia. I didn’t take any materials with me so I went to the thrift store there and got all the shoes they had. To this day, I’m still in that same pile of shoes.

NP
Actually, I did see a big pile of shoes in your studio.

WC
What you saw there was small. I threw away a dumpster filled with shoes before I moved the studio into my house.

NP
A dumpster—wow. So these are vintage shoes you’re working with?

WC
I guess you could say that. I go to the thrift store every Wednesday and if I see a special shoe that catches my eye I’ll pay full price for it, which is three or four dollars. I’ve only bought new shoes once. Most of them are from the 2005 collection.

NP
I have to ask, what made you buy those new shoes?

WC
I needed a special tip that I didn’t find at the thrift store, so I bought a new pair. I don’t know if I answered all of your question. You asked me about the Studio Museum in Harlem—
NP
[One thing I want to ask about is that] You were involved, early on, with so many disciplines, like dance and music as well as theater and writing. I was wondering how many of those are ongoing?

WC
Writing and music are still necessary in my life. My iPhone voice recorder is filled with songs and song ideas. And my computer is filled with stories and story ideas.

NP
Are you still interested in performing?

WC
It’s funny because my daughter, Cari, is an actress now, and I tell her that I can’t imagine ever memorizing lines again. Just the thought of that. I haven’t done that since the ’80s. A few months ago I watched a performance by a young artist and got momentarily inspired, but it didn’t stick. But I do play the guitar every day. It’s relaxation for me. About eight years ago, I spent the four years studying classical guitar. I haven’t taken any lessons now in a few years, but I still play the guitar every day. Sometimes I play by ear, which is a great exercise for my ears, my mind, and my fingers. And occasionally I break out the sheet music. I go through periods with the writing though. Currently I am working on a children’s story inspired by one of my shoe sculptures. But even when I’m not writing, my stories are very present in my mind.

NP
So you’re still doing that pretty regularly?

WC
I have a story that I’m illustrating now that I want to have finished by the end of the month.
NP
And have published?

WC
Well that’s the ultimate goal, but I may also have the opportunity to sell my characters for cartoons and stuff.

NP
You’ve done that before?

WC
I’ve never done it before, but I’ve made some connections in Los Angeles recently that make it a real possibility.

NP
Fantastic. That’s exciting.

WC
Then I have screenplays that I’ve been writing for years. I have maybe four or five on my shelf that I think are good. Writing has been on the back shelf of my public life for years. But now that I’m older I’ve decided to bring everything forward. It’s all one energy: creative energy.

BOMB’s Oral History Advisory Panel includes Sanford Biggers, Thelma Golden, Kellie Jones, Odili Donald Odita, Lowery Stokes Sims, Mickalene Thomas, Carrie Mae Weems, Stanley Whitney, and Jack Whitten (in memoriam).

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