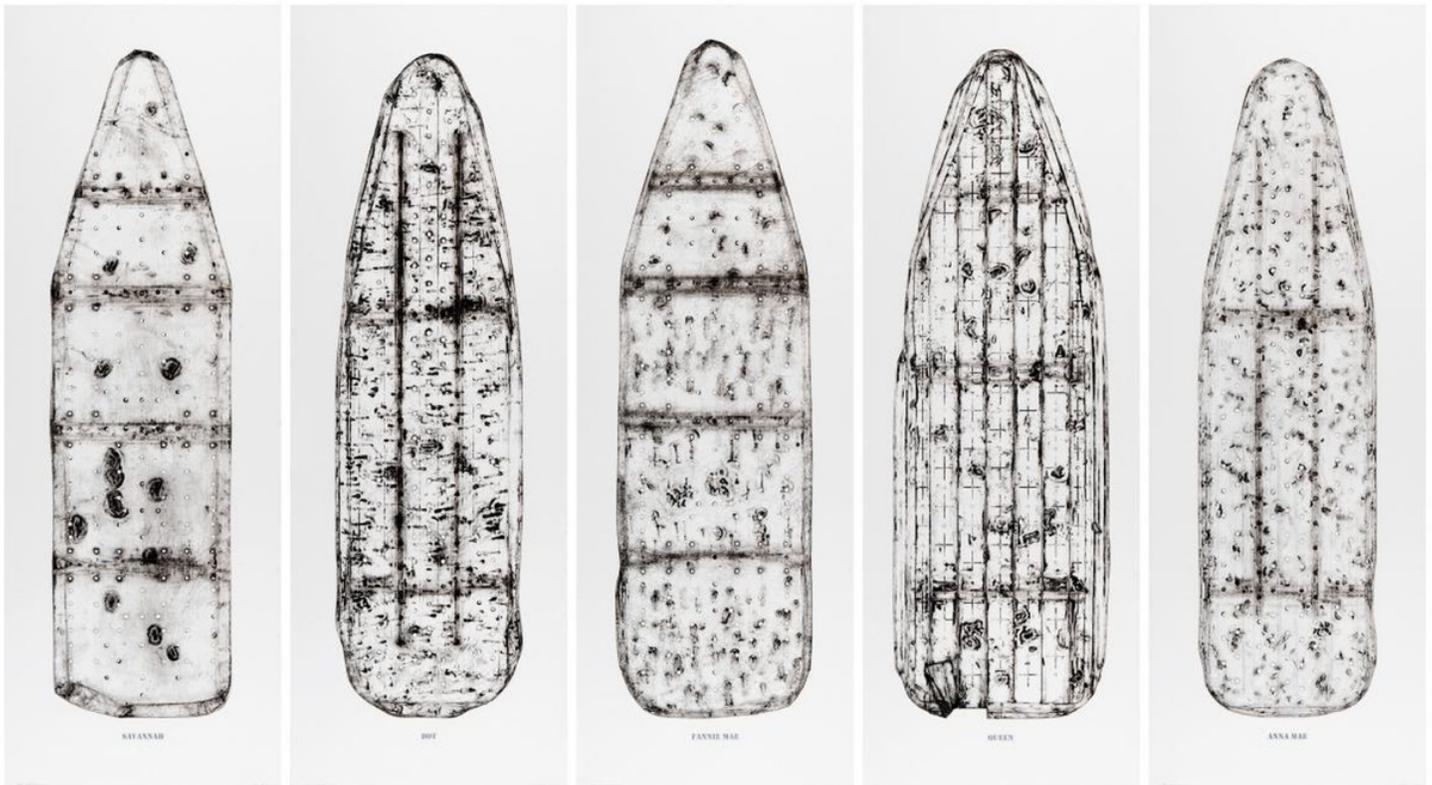


GALLERIES

Impressions of ironing boards, honoring labor

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, May 22, 2019, 3:00 p.m.



Willie Cole's "Five Beauties Rising" (2012), intaglio and relief on paper, are prints of ironing boards named (from left) Savannah, Dot, Fannie Mae, Queen, and Anna Mae. WILLIE COLE

CAMBRIDGE — When he was young, Willie Cole repaired steam irons for his grandmother and great-grandmother, who were housekeepers. He honors them, and the backbreaking labor of legions of other women, in "Beauties," his luminous show at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.

Cole cracks open the symbolic and metaphoric power of everyday objects. Here, he chooses the ironing board, an image he has used before; in “Stowage,” a 1997 woodblock print nearly 8 feet long, the shape of an ironing board stood in for a schematic of a slave ship.

The artist, with master printer Cole Rogers and his team at Highpoint Editions in Minneapolis, tracked down and flattened more than 20 old ironing boards. They pounded them with hammers and bricks, drove cars over them, and ran them through a printing press to get them down to 3/16-inches thick before they inked them.

The resulting intaglio prints are mounted upright, side by side, each with a name at the bottom taken from women of Cole’s grandmothers’ generations: Bertha Mae, Calpurnia. The names are relief prints, a gentler process than intaglio, called kiss impressions. A tender gesture after all the rough treatment.

The horizontal “Stowage” read like a boat. Vertically, the ironing boards recall church windows and sarcophagi. In “Queen,” named for the artist’s great-grandmother, the board’s rim drapes at the top like a cloak Mary might wear in a Renaissance painting. Crosses float down the columns between struts. Hammered dents might be scars. These marks pull us deeper into history to lashings of enslaved people, and across continents to ritual scarification in certain African cultures.

Intaglio is a sensitive process, drawing ink from every scratch and dimple. These prints look like X-rays, revealing impressions of ribs and struts on the boards’ opposite sides. That impression of transparency suggests we are looking through flesh to the seared yet shining souls within. The gallery feels like a place of worship, and the “Beauties” make for a holy assemblage.

WILLIE COLE: BEAUTIES

At Johnson-Kulukundis Family Gallery, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, 8 Garden St., Cambridge, through June 29. 617-496-1153,

www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/event/2019-willie-cole-beauties-exhibition

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