

Newark's Willie Cole leaves an 'impression'

By [Dan Bischoff](#) | [For The Star-Ledger](#)

Updated Mar 30, 2019; Posted Jan 15, 2012



"Man Spirit Mask" (1999), triptych, photo etching, silkscreen, and woodcut on paper, is part of the Willie Cole exhibit at Rowan.

When the Rowan University Art Gallery opens this week, "Willie Cole: Deep Impressions," some 42 works — mostly prints and a few sculptures — will go all the way back to the Newark-born artist's beginnings and look forward to the new, somewhat rural life he's just begun.

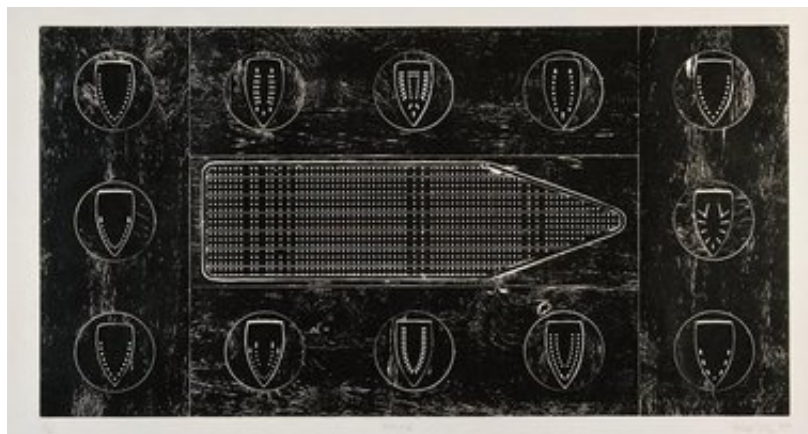
Curated by former Montclair Art Museum director Patterson Sims, "Deep Impressions" actually begins with a poster for the Works Gallery, the alternative space Cole ran in Newark in the 1980s, and ends with some of the narrative drawings and paintings he has been working on over the past few years.

It is not a true retrospective, since it includes so few of the assemblage sculptures — made from hair dryers and lawn jockeys and plumbing parts and, of course, women's shoes — that have been Cole's stock-in-trade for more than two decades. But concentrating on his works on paper imposes a certain

consistency on his art: It was drawing on paper in the Newark Museum program for city kids that started Cole's artistic career, and his skill at rendering is what brought him to the attention of teachers and patrons. And in a way, drawing provided a kind of universal solvent that produced the densely layered artworks that became Cole's masterpieces.

"Willie's art has always been about using whatever he could find around him to make art, and in a way paper has always been a most plentiful and almost free medium," says Sims. "I believe drawing is the foundation of his art. Even when, as he was when I first met him, he uses (steam) irons to make scorch marks on paper, that too was a kind of drawing. Making prints, which he has also always done, is really a lot like drawing with many, many layers, and natural to his aesthetic."

The irons were the first everyday objects Cole manipulated into contemporary symbols — back in the 1970s and '80s, when he and his group of mostly African-American friends were growing up on the economically abandoned streets of Newark, he collected used irons he'd find in abandoned buildings and dumps throughout the city. For Cole, they had a special resonance. His mother had supported him by doing domestic work in Newark homes and businesses, so to him the iron represents not just work but the love that drives it, and the specifically African-American social reality he confronted as a child.



Stowage,1997, woodcut on kozo-shi paper.

Probably the best-known print in this show, and a treasure of Newark's art history, is "Stowage" (1997), a 9-foot-wide print made with two sheets of plywood with a metal ironing board embedded in their frame. Printed in black ink, the assemblage looks remarkably like a diagram of a 17th-century slave ship, the many air holes in the board echoing the row upon row of slaves pegged out in the holds, and the grain of the plywood simulating the waves on which it sailed. Around the border are impressions made by different brands of irons, which here echo the shapes of African shields and hint at different tribal identities that would be dissolved into common slave labor on this side of the Atlantic.

"Deep Impressions" also includes everything from an early pastel self-portrait (circa 1977) to recent prints like "Hearth & Home," a female nude that represents, according to Sims, "the way sex makes a relationship and thereby a home."

And home is very much on Cole's mind lately. Two years ago, he went through a divorce, and bought and started renovating a 1960s-era ranch house in semi-rural Morris County. Growing up in Newark, he often visited his grandmother in Somerville, giving him some sense of suburban life, but this is about as close to nature as he's ever lived. His wife went back to school in Austin with their 16-year-old daughter, who now visits him six or seven times a year.

"You know, a show like this helps me recognize that I have an identity in the art world that's different from the one I carry around with me," Cole says. "Most of my life, I just think of myself as, you know, a dad with kids and a mortgage. I spent years as an illustrator and graphic designer before I started making art. Then I was using a helicopter hangar as a studio — you know, you could open one whole side of the building and get whatever you wanted into it."

"Now I'm living in this house with nothing higher than a 10-foot ceiling, surrounded by trees," he continues. "There's really not room to do sculpture like I used to. I see 20 or 30 deer a day; I did some carvings, they're supposed to be dogs, but they kind of look like deer to me. ... Being alone for a while has made it easier for me to think about who I am."

Family life was always his inspiration — first his mother, then his friends, kids, the whole personal world. "When my son was younger and I was making sculpture, he was always playing with Transformers, so I made Transformer sculptures," Cole says with a laugh. "Now my daughter, she's totally into graphic novels, and I'm all interested in storytelling."

Latticed style

Cole has returned to drawing and painting, developing a latticed style that might be compared to the staggered, backward-reading narrative structures in pages of anime manga. He has copies of Frank Miller's elegantly brutal "Sin City" books, and his interest in movement, and in video, has intensified.



"MBF" (2011), a sculpture crafted from shoes, screws and wire, will be on display through March 10.

This is actually the fourth venue for "Deep Impressions," which has made a brief tour of university galleries outside of New Jersey. But this season will see Cole in several major venues in his home state: Later this month, he will have two keynote pieces in a group-show fundraiser for the George Segal Gallery at Montclair State University, and this spring he will open a show of all-new work at Grounds for Sculpture just outside of Trenton.

Sims says the way all Cole's experience is recycled through his work gives his new narrative style the ability to add layers to his earlier interests in unexpected ways. "I think it's that dense layering that is one of his greatest contributions — the layering of opposites into unities. The elements of pop art and minimalist practice that always existed side by side in his work suggest

that maybe pop and minimalism were never really that far apart as we all thought."

Found-object assemblage can be a disparate form, full of almost random associations, but Cole has always expressed a kind of fierce discipline in his work; everything he makes is constructed out of many examples of one material, for example, not hundreds of different things stuck together. "When I was just starting out, I loved the Impressionists," Cole says. "I think Van Gogh was my favorite — actually, no, I think Renoir was. I still have a Renoir as the screensaver on my computer. I just loved the way each brushstroke was a discreet thing, you could see it. I think there's something similar in my own work now. Like, each shoe I use to make an image, it's like a brushstroke, you can see it, but you see the overall design, too."

Cole travels quite a bit now, gone maybe one week a month for visiting artist jobs at universities and art schools. But the house is all but finished — he gutted it when he bought it, and now it looks a lot like a loft on the inside — and he's working on the barn, transforming it into a studio that will soon be ready for more sculpture.

Maybe it's time. Cole said he'd be busy over the weekend before "Deep Impressions" opens.

"I'm going by Goodwill to talk to the Salvation Army about 500,000 pairs of women's shoes."

Willie Cole: Deep Impressions

Where: Rowan University Art Gallery, 201 Mullica Hill Road, Glassboro

When: Tomorrow through March 10. Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. (open Wednesdays till 7 p.m.) and Saturdays, noon to 5 p.m.

How much: Free. For more information, call (856) 256-4521 or visit rowan.edu/colleges/fpa/artgallery.