

# Willie Cole Transforms Commonplace, Everyday Items into High Art

By [RaVal Davis](#) January 2, 2013

**A household iron;** a woman's high heel shoe. Simple domestic items or art? For award-winning illustrator and sculptor Willie Cole, everyday items can convey the deepest of human emotions and spirituality. By assembling and transforming ordinary domestic objects, Cole is single-handedly recreating the way we see our world and tell our stories.

With social and cultural influences ranging from the speeches of Malcolm X to Tibetan prayer flags, Cole's use of commonplace consumer items critiques the very consumer culture they represent. Using the world as his canvas (and thrift stores as his art supply), Cole creates thought-provoking, three-dimensional work that has the art world talking.

**EBONY.com caught up** with Willie Cole to speak about inspiration, his reputation as one of the decade's most influential African-American artists and more. Take a look at his breakthrough artwork at [WillieCole.com](#).

**EBONY: What inspires you about ordinary domestic objects like irons, ironing boards, high-heeled shoes, etc.?**

**Willie Cole:** Inspiration is only a part of it. It begins with attraction. I see them, and at the same time they seem to see me, and we click. I imagine that it is the residue of human contact with the objects that fosters this attraction. Inspiration is hard to explain. Like I said, it all begins with attraction. Attraction reveals potential. For example, I'd been seeing irons my whole life

but they never appeared as anything other than irons until the day I “saw” them. That “seeing” was fueled by the kind of awareness and familiarity that goes along with being a student of visual culture and having a desire to see things differently.

**EBONY: You have been called a contemporary African-American artist. What makes your work “African-American”? Is this in any way limiting?**

**WC:** Being called an African-American artist can be limiting or not. It depends on who says it and how often. Obviously, because of my race, I am often referred to as an African-American artist. Still, even though my subject matter sometimes does appear to reflect African and African-American issues, my main focus is spiritual energy. I suspect that if Picasso had been a Black American, he too would have been called an African-American artist. Is it limiting? As a racial identifier, yes. It has the potential to repel some, while on the other hand attracting others.

**EBONY: How do you classify or explain your work in your own words?**

**WC:** I think of it as perceptual engineering, which means I create new ways of seeing old things. Most recently, I [am exploiting] the concept of “oneness” by multiplying an object against itself until it nearly disappears. I like to think of it as “taking over” or directing perception. Groucho Marks’s quote is appropriate here: “Are you going to believe me or your lying eyes?”

**EBONY: Transformation of everyday items into art is a major theme within your work. What are you conveying regarding transformation in a larger sense?**

**WC:** Sometimes I feel like I am revealing the spirit of the object. Other times, I feel like I am compressing time and presenting the past, present and future all at once. Other times, I am working to prove to myself that all things are the

same thing, and that we live in a world of illusion. If you subtract the illusion and break everything down to its most basic subatomic physical components, then all things truly are the same thing. You and I are made from the same thing, and so is everything else.

**EBONY: Do colors in your work denote certain things?**

**WC:** I have been drawn quite often to red, black and white. In many traditions these three colors are warrior colors. They are also the colors with the strongest impact in graphic design and therefore powerful communicators. More recently though, I've been drawn to the colors from Tibetan prayer flags, because of their spiritual assignment and their psychological impact.

**EBONY: Your work is highly evocative. What do you hope to evoke in people?**

**WC:** I'm happy to evoke anything. I love involuntary reactions best, like laughs, and/or cries. It's a sign of the art taking control of the viewer when someone suddenly bursts out in laughter or tears. I primarily seek to create an unforgettable visual experience that sticks in the mind of my viewers and resurfaces subconsciously every time they encounter my source object or my inspiration. In other words, I want to make new memories, but also induce the resurfacing of deeply embedded old memories from the personal and collective subconscious.

***RaVal "Vee" Davis has interviewed legends like Chaka Khan, Prince, Quincy Jones and more at publications like EBONY, Essence and Vibe. A true cultural commentator, this girl-about-town always lets her cosmopolitan sensibilities be her guide. Check her out on Twitter @WatchHerWork.***