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Black Image and Identity

African-American Art from the Permanent Collection



SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY AND SCULPTURE GARDEN

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I am an invisible man....I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me....When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination--indeed, everything and anything except me.

Ralph Ellison, The Invisible Man, 1947

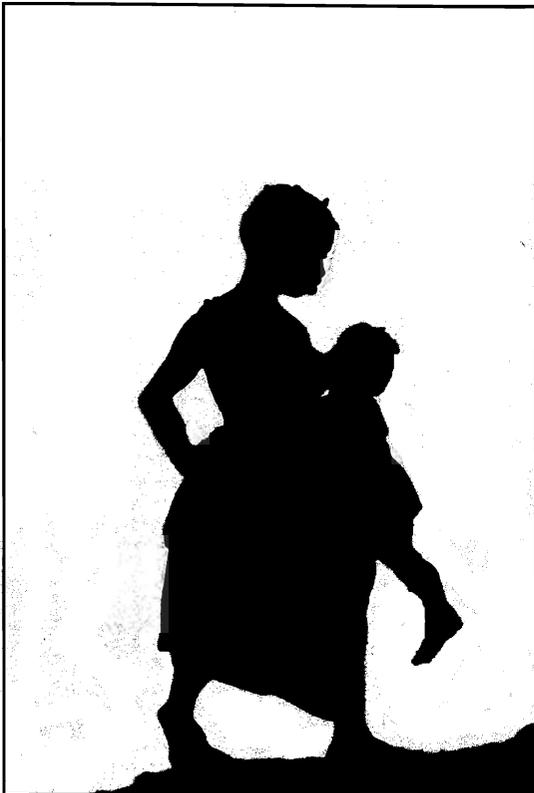


Fig. 2. Kara Walker, *The Means to an End... A Shadow Drama in Five Parts (Part I)*, 1995.

The presentation of Robert Colescott's groundbreaking solo exhibition, which represented the American Pavilion at the 1997 Venice Biennale, offers a unique opportunity for the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden to display a selection of African-American art from its permanent collection. This exhibition, entitled *Black Image and Identity*, serves several important purposes. First, it locates Robert Colescott, one of the most important and influential African-American artists of the twentieth century, within the broader historical context of a dynamic and diverse African-American visual arts tradition. Second, it focuses attention on the important influence that Colescott has exerted on younger artists who have been concerned with racial identity. Third and finally, *Black Image and Identity* reveals that there is no monolithic, static, and constant set of features called "black identity" but it is in reality subject to constant negotiation and construction. It is the contested and "unstable" status of what constitutes a "black identity" that has challenged artists who have chosen to engage the issue of black identity.

I.

The history of the African-American contribution to national and international culture in the 20th century deserves a much more nuanced treatment than is possible in the scope of this brief essay. But it is useful for the purposes of this exhibition to sketch out at least the outlines of a series of developments as a framework within which *Black Image and Identity* can be viewed. W.E.B. DuBois's influential book, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) attempted to destroy the 19th-century racial stereotypes by emphasizing the presence of a consistent and coherent "black culture." Artists such as Henry Ossawa Tanner contributed to such racial reconceptualization through paintings that communicated the humanity of black family and community life through the cultural idiom of white, middle-

Fig. 3. Michael Rav Charles, *White Power*, 1994.



class Victorian America. These intellectual and aesthetic attempts to articulate a black culture "fully human" formed the foundation for the so-called Harlem Renaissance of the teens and twenties.

Over against the "Old Negro" of the 19th century, which dominant culture represented as subservient, always willing to please, and unable to engage serious culture, the Harlem Renaissance participated in reconstituting the "New Negro," a concept that was both "isolationist" and "integrationist." On the one hand, the Harlem Renaissance focused on the distinct Harlem community as a "black community." On the other hand, the Harlem Renaissance portrayed the black intellectual and artist as fully equipped and capable of interacting and advancing high culture. James

VanDerZee's photographs, two of which are represented in this exhibition, communicate quite profoundly the tension of this two-pronged conception of "Blackness," a phrase Richard Powell described as "always signifying] more-visually and conceptually--than it has been allowed to represent officially." ¹

The era of the New Deal witnessed an increased interest by artists and intellectuals in the U.S. in the so-called "average man," or the "working class" citizen whose voice is rarely heard. Likewise, African-American artists and intellectuals focused on the plight of the black working class. From the late thirties through the forties, artists such as Jacob Lawrence, John Biggers, and Charles White focused attention on the black underclass.

Using the growing mid-century interest in Jungian archetypes, African-American artists participated in visually constructing a "universal Man" within which African-Americans could be understood as participating. In addition, the rise of existentialism, through the writing of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, brought the artist's subjective and psychological state to the level of aesthetic representation. Like many artists in the mid-century New York art world, African-American artists such as Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff, Richard Hunt, and Sam Gilliam utilized abstraction to communicate both the universality of their experiences as human beings ("Modern Man," as the art historian Michael Leja calls it) to the particularity of their subjective experiences as African-Americans. ²

The 1960s witnessed radical change in American society. This most turbulent decade intensified the public discourse about the state of race relations in an allegedly "enlightened" and "progressive" society. The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the bloody riot at the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention, and the rise of the Black Panthers, all seemed ample evidence to the contrary for those in the dominant culture who assumed that the "problem of race" had been solved. All of this occurred with the looming specter of the Vietnam War, which communicated quite clearly that American interests were far from altruistic.

The art world in the 1960s also witnessed radical change. The return of the figure to the visual arts was an attempt by many artists to recover an art that communicated a message. In addition, many artists became interested in making "art" interact more closely and clearly

with "life," an attempt that led to subject matter that communicated socio-cultural or political concerns, responding to and being shaped by current events. Theoretically and philosophically, this movement in the art world was driven and sustained by the so-called "linguistic turn," in which the focus of scholarly attention shifted from the search for "Truth" to an analysis of language used to describe that "Truth." What emerged was a reinvigorated focus on racial and gender issues within the broader intellectual world-view of the relativity of all truth. This relativity made itself manifest in the art world through a reassertion and reintensification of the subjectivity of the artist, not as an "Artist," but as a racial, gendered, socially, politically, and historically located human being. And it is this "truth" that artists are subjectively and communally located human beings that African-American artists have exploited from the sixties to the present. *Black Image and Identity* focuses particular attention on the impact that the "linguistic turn" in the sixties has played in contemporary African-American artistic expression.

II.

Seminal in the contemporary African-American art world has been Robert Colescott. From the late fifties to the present, Colescott's work has affirmed the subjective and communal nature of art-making and art-viewing while at the same time affirming the importance of creating works of art that, in his own words, "stand on their own." ³ Miriam Roberts, the U.S. Commissioner for the American Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, argues that Colescott's paintings are "filled with contradictions and dichotomies--between art and life, tragedy and comedy, men and women, black and white, oppressor and victim, Europe and Africa, past and present." ⁴

Fundamental to Colescott's visual imagery is the aggressive and unapologetic use of socio-cultural stereotypes, stereotypes that are often used by communities to affirm membership through exclusion. It is Colescott's desire to wrest these stereotypical images from their broader socio-cultural foundation as a means of exclusion and invest them with personal meaning. Colescott observes, "Unfortunately, stereotypical images are part of the American heritage. I had to come to terms with it for myself, ultimately controlling the images by making them say something to me." ⁵ It is the clash between the broader socio-cultural intentions of these stereotypes and Colescott's own meaning that creates the humorous, ironic, and satirical tension that is so much a part of his art. An outstanding recent example of this tension is manifest in *Pontchartrain*, 1998 (fig. 1). "It's allusive," Colescott explains, "[It's] not a description that's complete in itself. In a way, it's biographical. And there's some self-parody here." ⁶ The title of the print refers to the name

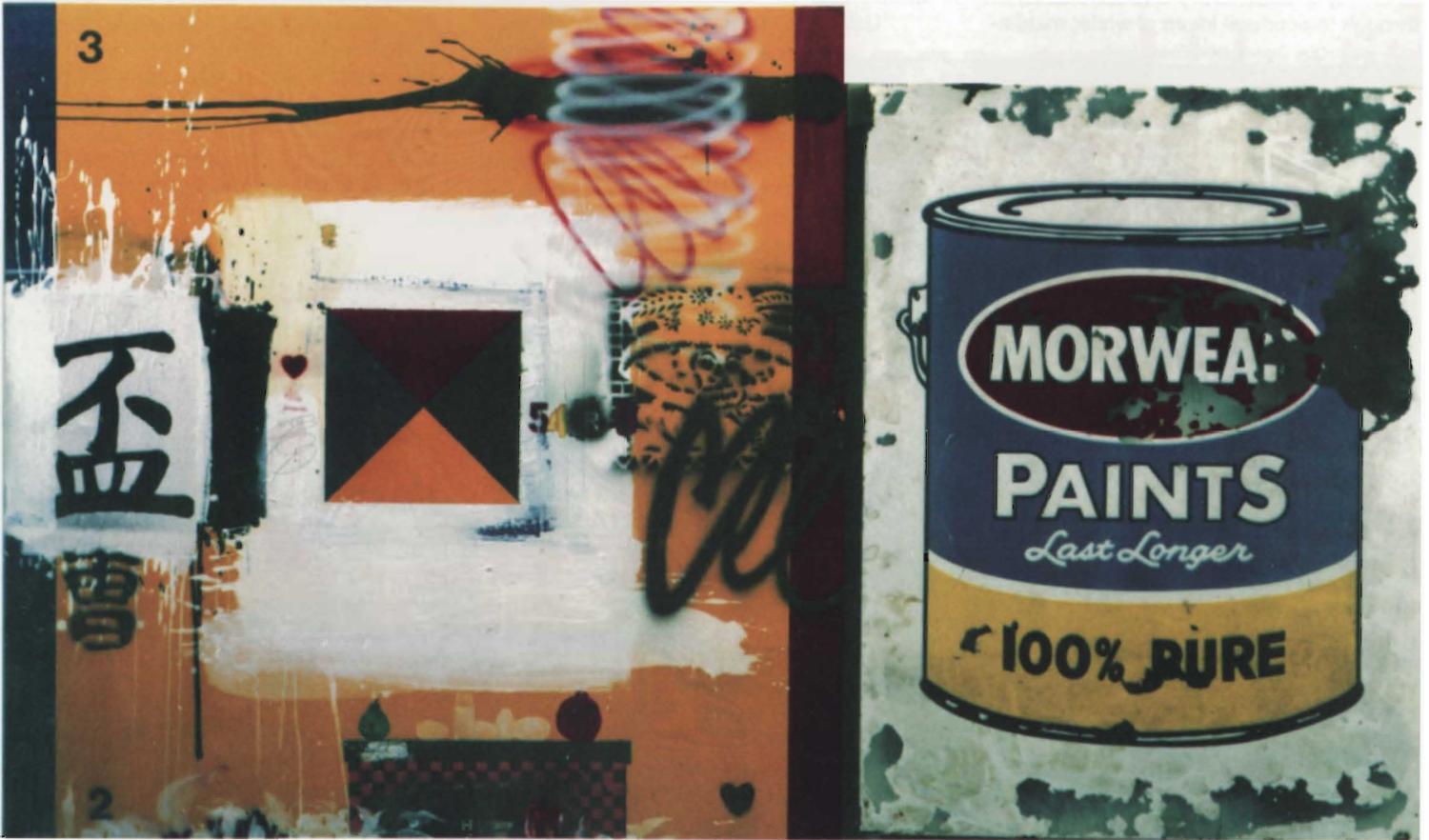


Fig. 4. Raymond Saunders, *East and West Coast Paints*, 1998

of a lake bordering New Orleans, the birthplace of his parents and grandparents, and the site of many of his father's stories having to do with speakeasies and jazz musicians, clichés, stereotypes, and preconceptions.

III.

An artist who is a few years younger than Colescott but whose own influence, like Colescott's, has been strong on younger artists is Raymond Saunders (b. 1934). Trained during the fifties at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the University of Pennsylvania, Saunders's precocious intelligence offered to him many avenues for professional success. "I had a chance to be a doctor, a lawyer, all that," Saunders explains, "but as a black kid, I had a greater chance as an artist to be more who I really am... I realized what art would allow me."⁷ For Saunders, the decision "to be an artist" was less a professional decision as it was a life-world or existential one, one related to developing the best strategy possible for living in a rather ambivalent society.

*At some point in my upbringing, I discovered society did not want me to participate, so I preferred not to be in it. You derive from that what freedom is. Being educated creatively educates you for anything. You're capable of inventing rather than being a tool.*⁸

Saunders's paintings, or constructions, or assemblages, are related almost exclusively to his own physical encounters with the world in which he acts. The works are less works of art in an objective sense and more "relics" of personal experience. Critic Gay Morris describes this process well. "Saunders creates an exuberant, democratic mélange of artifacts drawn from the cities in which he has lived and the cultures he has encountered in his peripatetic existence."⁹ It is in Saunders's refusal to stray into the vagaries of theory, concept, and "Interpretation" and his obsession with remaining in the concrete, the personal, and the vicarious that his own identity as an African-American is affirmed. These painting constructions, consisting of objects retrieved from his personal encounters with his environment, whether in the San Francisco Bay Area, Paris, or wherever the artist finds himself as he explores the world, are brought together through the scratches, painted passages, and other symbols and marks that affirm Saunders's presence--his mark on the world.

East and West Coast Paints (fig. 4) is a monumental example of Saunders's aesthetic process. Referring to the artist's different life experiences in the San Francisco Bay Area

and New York, his adult life as an artist and his early childhood years, this diptych evokes his bicoastal existence by imaging the symbol of his identity as an artist: paint.

IV.

The African-American artists who have come to maturity in the last ten to fifteen years have been nourished by the aesthetic contributions of Robert Colescott and Raymond Saunders whose aesthetic practices have relied on and affirmed the human subjectivity of the artist, not just as an artist with a capital "A," but an artist with a gender, a race, a unique identity that is his own and no one else's that must be affirmed.

An underlying assumption on the part of these artists included in this exhibition is the importance of "community." Whether it is in "community-building" or in "community-affirming," these artists believe in the significant role that concepts of community play in the experience and interpretation of their work. The artists included in *Black Image and Identity* force the viewer to consider these questions about community, communication, and the role of the viewer in this process.

Not only do these artists believe strongly in the value of community, in the importance of affirming or constructing communities, they also believe strongly in the important role that the visual arts play in this process of affirming or constructing communities, in making visual, aesthetic, symbolically concrete the often abstract and amorphous communities within and through which we all, as human beings, must negotiate our social world. *Black Image and Identity* focuses attention on the important role that the visual arts play in the construction and maintenance of these precarious social communities.

It is, however, Colescott's aggressive use of stereotypical images in a narrative form, which relies heavily on the power of irony and satire, that has energized this younger generation of African-American artists and that provides a useful lens through which to view such artists as Willie Cole, and Michael Ray Charles, and Kara Walker.

Born in New Jersey and reared by women who worked as domestics, Willie Cole's art focuses on the accouterments of domestic labor, most commonly, the iron. Like Colescott, Cole attempts to appropriate stereotypical images, or, in Cole's case, "icons," for intensely personal use. These objects and images function for Cole as personal allusions to the artist's own lifeworld. But they also serve a more universalizing or symbolic role of referring to African-American identity in general.

In his monumental woodblock *Stowage* (fig. 5), Cole transforms this very personal imagery of the iron and the ironing board into a powerful historical allusion to the transportation of African slaves throughout the world. The image connotes the

diagrammatic maps of the slave trade that measure how to maximize the number of bodies (referred to as "cargo") transported in the ship's galley space. By utilizing the powerful iconographic object of the iron, Cole inserts a humanizing effect into the dehumanizing assumptions inherent in conceiving of African slaves as "cargo." Cole juxtaposes "cargo" with the image of the isolated domestic, laboring with a hot iron, creating a powerful dichotomy between the dehumanized masses and humanized individuality. However, *Stowage* also implies that the "cargo" will be put to work, "used" for domestic work as well.

In addition, the iron's status as an icon of modern art, à la Man Ray and the tradition of the *objet trouvé* allude to Cole's identity as an "artist." In a manner akin to Colescott's own appropriation of famous works of art, Cole adds another layer of complexity to the found object, making it much more difficult to view Man Ray's nail-studded iron entitled *Cadeau*, for example, as "merely" an object for aesthetic contemplation, but as an object laden with socio-cultural meaning.

Born in 1967 in Lafayette, Louisiana, Michael Ray Charles received his first solo show in New York (Tony Shafrazi Gallery) just one year after receiving his M.F.A. from the University of Houston in 1993. Charles's undergraduate training in advertising gave him a sensitivity to and respect for the power of images as a constitutive element in both affirming and undermining community identity. Charles's work is focused primarily on exploring and exploiting racial stereotypes, most of them derived from turn-of-the-century American popular culture. From Sambo, Uncle Ben, and Aunt Jemima to the Minstrel, "coon," and "lawn jockey" images, Charles appropriates these highly charged racist images that were originally disseminated through the print media of popular culture, in order to re-energize them, use their own racist energy against itself, as it were. Charles, like Colescott, firmly believes that stereotypes are not "taboo," that is, they don't possess a unique and inherent power in themselves--they derive that power from the contexts in which they are disseminated and the communities that consume them, feed off of them. Charles therefore believes, again like Colescott, that these stereotyped images can be used to deconstruct the very meaning structures they were intended to affirm.

Charles often places these stereotypes within the aesthetic context of faux 19th-century circus posters or broadsides consisting of a black caricature figures performing various "tricks" for a white audience complete with "antiqued" worked-over surfaces to suggest a period quality and their status as historical relics, not contemporary creations. Written text, modelled after advertising "copy," plays an important role in all of Charles's work as

evidenced in *White Power* (fig. 3). This etching features the "sambo" or "coon" figure sinking his oversized mouth into a watermelon, a racist symbol of black appetites. The offensive and oppressive image is juxtaposed with the slogan "white power," an ironic statement on the necessity of the black "Other" for maintaining the dominant culture.

There is probably no more controversial artist in the African-American art community than Kara Walker. Young, outspoken, articulate, and extremely bright, Walker, who won a coveted MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant, has sparked a heated dialogue about the nature and function of "black identity" and the artist's role and responsibility to articulate it. Like Cole and Charles, Walker's own personal biography drives much of her aesthetic activities. Walker employs an elegant 19th-century technique of black paper-cutout silhouette imagery to represent shocking and even repulsive narratives. "The work engages viewers with its deceptive simplicity and seemingly playful narrative only to revolt them, compelling them to look in spite of themselves."¹⁰ Like Colescott's "one-two" punch, in which unsuspecting viewers are lured in by the power of the aesthetic, Walker's goal is to "provoke the audience in the most enjoyable way possible."¹¹ She is concerned not only to provoke and critique the dominant (white) culture but also takes aim at African-American communities as well. Often choosing to describe herself as the "Negress wench," Walker positions herself as an "outsider" whose work critiques all communities premised upon certain myths about race relations, revealing what one critic called a "tangled moral quagmire."¹² Walker's persona as an outsider has been crafted through her own life experiences. Born in California, reared in Georgia, and educated in integrated schools, Walker experienced negativity from both white and African-American communities. *The Means to an End...A Shadow Drama in Five Acts* (fig. 2) is an example of Walker's penchant for creating ambiguously shocking narratives, narratives that often reveal indescribable horrors visited on the black slaves by immoral whites as well as horrors visited on blacks by other blacks in the antebellum South. In Walker's world, no one--neither black nor white--emerges morally pure and blameless.

And it is precisely this moral ambiguity, which results from their aggressive and unapologetic utilization of stereotypical imagery that has made both Walker and Charles, as well as Glen Ligon and Carrie Mae Weems, the focal point of controversy within the African-American community. Such well-respected African-American artists as Howardena Pindell and Bettye Saar (mother of Alison Saar) have spoken out against the uses of such negative imagery. In addition, they and others have argued that Charles's and Walker's explosion onto the New York art world scene is cause

for concern as they view a dominant white culture consuming these negative images for their own institutional purposes, thus de-radicalizing Charles's and Walker's intentions.¹³ Many African-American artists and intellectuals regard the tremendous attention that these young artists have received in the New York art world, exemplified through exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and solo exhibitions, which sell out at important New York galleries, as evidence that their attempts to re-appropriate these images have failed. Charles and Walker seem to have inherited the role of "insider agitator" that has been performed by Robert Colescott, whose work has been criticized recently by the NAACP for his use of negative racial imagery.

This debate within the African-American community rests firmly, however, on important commonly-held beliefs: the importance of community-building and the significant role that the visual arts--that visual imagery--plays in this process of building, defining, and maintaining communities.

It is important to recognize the role that Colescott's art activities have played in both sides of this debate. Not only is Colescott a role model for those artists, such as Charles, Walker, Ligon, and Weems, who are confronting head-on the racist imagery of American popular culture to criticize not only the dominant white society but various African-American communities, but he is also a role model for those artists who want simply to make great art, a great art that can transcend issues of race to captivate audiences with the "formal qualities" of the work.

In the last analysis, then, the notion of a "black Identity" reveals *multiple* perspectives, "images and identities." And it is this pluralism and diversity of artistic styles and perspectives that affirm the pluralism and diversity of the "African-American community." It is incumbent upon art museums and other cultural institutions to celebrate this philosophical and aesthetic diversity, to resist serving uncritically the art world industry's lust for the "shock of the new" and consider the broader issues within which these artists are deeply engaged, broader issues that consist not only of multiple views of racial identities but of human identity.

It is the humanity of these artists that is ultimately celebrated as they affirm their identities as individuals as well as participants in the communities through which they transact society.

Daniel A. Siedell
Curator

1 Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th century* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 8.

2 See Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993) for a discussion of the meaning of "Modern Man Discourse." See also Ann E. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997) for a discussion of mid-century African-American artists such as Norman Lewis and Hale Woodruff.

3 Quoted in Sally Eaucilaire, "One-Two Punchinello," *Art News* 96 (June 1997), 107.

4 Quoted in "Robert Colescott: Recent Paintings," in *Robert Colescott: Recent Paintings* (1997), 10.

5 Ibid.

6 Quoted in Kathan Brown, "Overview: Robert Colescott at Crown Point Press," *Crown Point Press Newsletter* (Winter 1998), 1.

7 Quoted in Chiori Santiago, "The Elusive Raymond Saunders," *The Oakland Museum* 18/1 (Winter 1994), 5.

8 Ibid., 9.

9 "Raymond Saunders: Improvising with High and Low," *Art in America* 83 (February 1995), 88.

10 Quoted in Lynn Gumpert, "Kara Walker: Anything But Black and White," *Art News* 96 (January 1997), 136.

11 Ibid.

12 Dan Cameron, "Kara Walker: Rubbing History the Wrong Way," *On Paper* (Sept.-Oct. 1997), 11.

13 See Pamela Newkirk, "Pride or Prejudice," *Art News* 98 (March 1999); See also "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," *International Review of African-American Art* 14/3 (1997), 3-16.

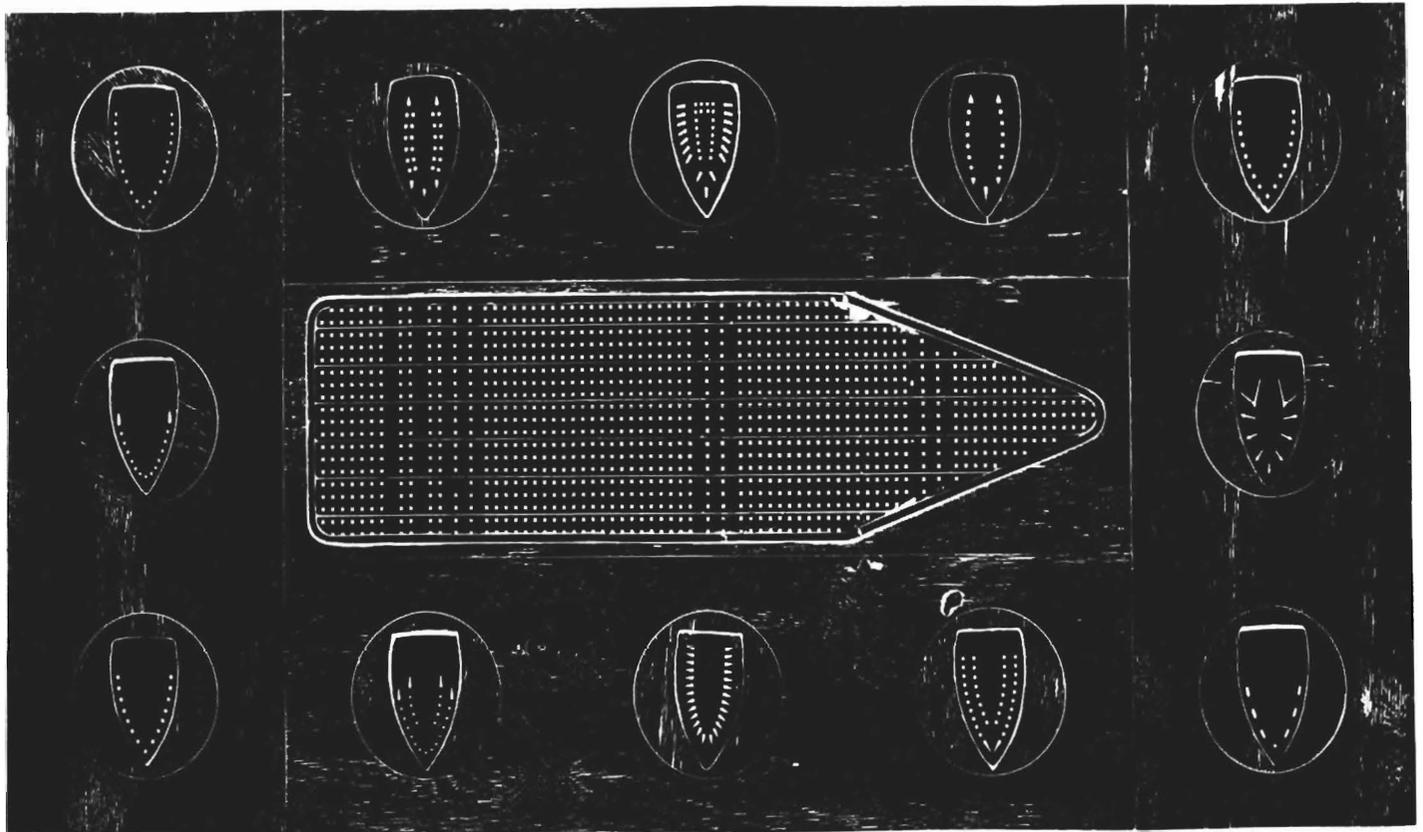


Fig. 5. Willie Cole, *Stowage*, 1997

Checklist

1. Romare Bearden (1914-1988)
JAZZ
1979, hand colored photo etching
22 1/4 x 30 1/8 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1992.H-2993
2. Michael Ray Charles (1967-)
WHITE POWER
1994, line and aquatint etching with hand coloring
30 x 22 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1997. H-3094
3. Willie Cole (1955-)
STOWAGE
1997, woodblock print on kozo-shi paper
56 x 104 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1998.H-3071
4. Robert Colescott (1925-)
PONTCHARTRAIN
1997, color aquatints with etching and drypoint
46 1/2 x 29 3/8 in.
UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust
1998.U-4933.1-.4
5. Kerry James Marshall (1955-)
BROWNIE
1995, color lithograph
19 3/4 x 15 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1998. H-3086
6. Alison Saar (1956-)
ULYSSES
1994, color woodcut
50 1/2 x 20 in.
UNL-University Collection
1995.U-4579
7. Raymond Saunders (1934-)
EAST AND WEST COAST PAINTS
1998, acrylic on canvas, paper and polychrome on metal
54 x 54 in.; 48 x 36 in. (diptych)
UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust
1999.U-5000
8. Mose Tolliver (1918-)
WATERMELON
n.d., acrylic on board
18 2/3 x 26 3/4 in.
UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust
1994.U-4554
9. Kara Walker (1969-)
THE MEANS TO AN END...A SHADOW DRAMA
IN FIVE PARTS
1995, hard ground etching and aquatint on Somerset Satin paper
34 3/4 x 23 3/8 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1996.H-3052.1-.5
10. Carrie Mae Weems (1953-)
COMMEMORATING
1992, fine china plate, silkscreened text (ed. 75)
7/8 x 10 3/4 in.
UNL-University Collection
1996.U-4896
11. Carrie Mae Weems (1953-)
GRABBING, SNATCHING, BLINK AND YOU BE GONE
1998, photograph
20 3/4 x 20 3/4 in.
UNL-Anonymous Gift
1999.U-
12. Fred Wilson (1954-)
TITUBA
1995, color photograph with wall text
20 x 16 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1997. H-3064
13. James VanDerZee (1886-1983)
THE VANDERZEE MEN
1905, silver print
6 3/8 x 5 1/8 in.
NAA-Purchased with the aid of funds from the
National Endowment for the Arts
1978.N-423.3
14. James VanDerZee (1886-1983)
GARVEYITE FAMILY, HARLEM
1924, silver print
9 1/2 x 7 3/4 in.
NAA-Purchased with the aid of funds from the
National Endowment for the Arts
1978.N-423.8
15. James VanDerZee (1886-1983)
THE HEIRESS, HARLEM
n.d., silver print
7 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.
NAA-Purchased with the aid of funds from the
National Endowment for the Arts
1978.N-423.17

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