

ARTFORUM

Willie Cole

ALEXANDER AND BONIN

For many US residents, the term *post-black* may describe a nation in which an African American can become president; citizens of the New York art world may also remember the Studio Museum in Harlem's

"Freestyle" show of 2001, and curator Thelma Golden's use of that phrase to name what she thought was a new attitude toward the role of "black artist." The title of Willie Cole's recent exhibition, "Post Black and Blue," seemed to touch on both references, and also reminded me of Fats Waller's great song "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue," written in 1929 and still startling in its take on the politics of race. And in fact music ran all through Cole's show, and particularly through a strong group of drawings that drew their scenarios from the blues.

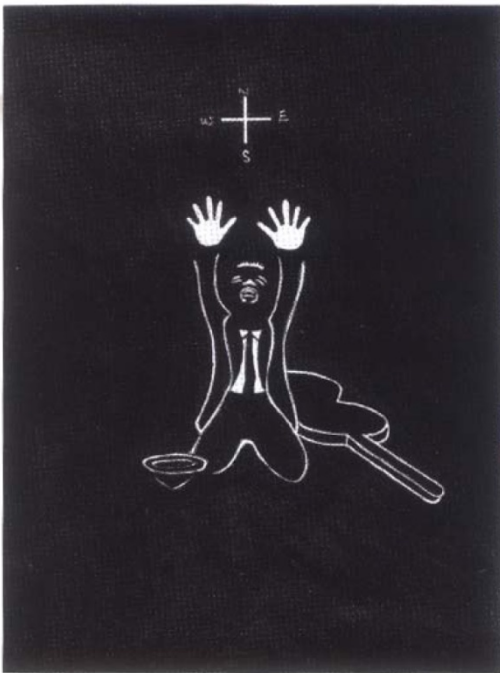
Cole's best-known earlier art translates the forms of classic African objects through the shapes of everyday American ones. In evoking the term *post-black*, perhaps he was putting aside the large concerns embedded in those works to focus instead on more private issues, at least for the moment; perhaps

"post-black and blue" meant "post-black, still blue"—that being "post-black" doesn't solve all your problems; or perhaps the title was to be read as "post black-and-blue," meaning simply that the poor guy's been through the wringer. The show's tone was set by *Medicine Man*, 2010, an Yves Klein-blue resin cupid whose weapon of choice is not a bow but a rifle, which vastly ups the ante. In *Three Dog Night*, 2010, three blue-black sculptural dogs lap at a puddle, represented by a sheet of vinyl cut into a heart shape; part creepy, part comic, part histrionic—take it! Take another little piece of my heart, why don'tcha!—the emotional note it struck was pretty odd. More effectively sorrowful was the three-screen video installation *Sumsara*, 2010, a succession of faces quietly weeping. A work like this could not be a joy to watch, but the altarlike trinity of projections, encompassing the viewer from three sides, established a focused gravity.

The drawings on view illustrated the lyrics or titles of blues songs, some well known and specific, such as Robert Johnson's "Crossroad Blues," some tropes that must appear in countless lyrics, such as "cause he was doin' her wrong." Like elegant comic books in style, most were in black ink, with white fields and outlines supplied by the white of the paper. In *Crossroad Blues*, 2010, which evokes the famous story of Johnson's supposedly selling his soul in exchange for guitar skills, the page is blackened almost entirely, with the body of the black figure supplied by graceful white outlines—except for his hands, which are solid white, in an apparent reference to minstrelsy. Other drawings use more white space, so that in *Back Door Man*, 2009, the woman bringing her very black lover surreptitiously into her home is herself very white. Like Robert Colescott, in details like these Cole slyly references the complexities of a harsh social history in images that are nevertheless gleefully enjoyable. What comes through most is his feeling for the music itself; both funny and poetic, the drawings are beautiful analogues of the songs they treat.

The show also included *Shoe Bouquet*, 2009, one of several sculptures in which Cole returns secondhand shoes to flowery handsomeness, and *Hers* and *His*, both 2010. In *Hers*, a female mannequin's legs support a stack of suitcases, each dated on the front—and getting progressively smaller, and progressively newer, from bottom to top, as if the older this woman got, the lighter she traveled. *His*, on the other hand, is a mural-scale painting of another stack of suitcases and boxes, weighty, jumbled, precarious. Take another piece of my heart, why don'tcha! That poor guy.

—David Frankel



Willie Cole, *Crossroad Blues*, 2010, ink on paper, 23 x 17 1/2".