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Galleries: 'Willie Cole: Deep Impressions' emphasizes artist's ties to Newark, N.J.

by Edith Newhall, February 05, 2012

If you admire the fertile imagination of Willie Cole, do not miss the excellent and easygoing survey of his work, "Willie Cole: Deep Impressions," at the Rowan University Art Gallery, organized by independent curator and former Montclair Art Museum director Patterson Sims. (Sims was also the curator of Cole's first comprehensive survey show, "Anxious Objects: Willie Cole's Favorite Brands," which originated at Montclair Art Museum in 2005 under his directorship.)

This succinct, well-rounded gathering of the artist's drawings, prints, and sculptures from the last 35 years emphasizes Cole's lifelong ties and current close proximity to Newark, N.J. It begins with his 1977 self-portrait, one of many pastel portraits he drew every year on his birthday in his teens and 20s, made from his reflection in his bathroom mirror in his Newark apartment building.

Another early pastel drawing, *Yard Dog*, from 1985, of a barking pit bull tied to a pole (one of many images of fierce dogs he produced in the 1980s), was inspired by the aggressive canines in his neighborhood. Cole's graphic-design prowess, which supported him in the late 1970s and early '80s, is revealed in an exhibition poster he designed for the Works Gallery, which he started and ran out of his Newark loft from 1982 to 1987.

Cole's real artistic blossoming, however, occurs in the late 1980s, when he begins to make iron scorches on paper, using hot steam irons to make single-iron images and patterns, and making assemblages of hair dryers (which he found in a deserted warehouse) and used high-heel shoes.

The show contains several scorch pieces, as well as his largest print, a woodcut showing images of irons and an ironing board in a composition arranged after the 18th-century broadside illustration of the overcrowded Brookes slave ship. *Wind Mask East II*, a hair-dryer assemblage c. 1990, has the features of an East Asian mask. (Cole, who took classes at the Newark Museum as a child, got to know its collections well.)

Over the last decade, Cole has experimented with new presentations of his signature found objects. The bottoms of irons are transformed into a tribesman's finest garb in the photographs of Cole that make up *Silex Male*, *Ritual* and *Sunbeam Male: Ceremonial*, both from 2004. And high heels are arranged in grid patterns reminiscent of Chinese characters written in columns in his colorful "Rapture" lithographs from 2008. He also has begun a graphic novel, as evidenced by his marker drawing, *Dead Dog Blues* (2009), and turned bicycles into African mask dance sculptures, such as *Pacific tji wara* (2002).

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Fortunately, he knows when to preserve and tweak a good thing, too.

MBF, his slightly kinky 2011 assemblage of black patent leather men's shoes that looks like a seated dog (hence the acronym for man's best friend), is the licorice antidote to Jeff Koons' innocent giant, *Puppy*.

Rowan University Art Gallery, Westby Hall, 201 Mullica Hill Rd., Glassboro, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays (Wednesdays to 7 p.m.), 12 to 5 p.m. Saturdays. 856-256-4521 or www.rowan.edu/fpa/artgallery. Through March 10.



Home and Hearth 2011