



Willie Cole, *Jonny Mae* (detail), 2012, intaglio and relief on paper, 63 1/2 x 22 1/2".

CAMBRIDGE

Willie Cole

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Iron scorch on wood, scorch on paper: Over the past thirty years, Willie Cole's work with irons and ironing boards has summoned heat and steam to create imagery that draws on that of the slave trade and West African masks. His series "Beauties," 2012, diverges from his scorch practice and emerges from pressured touch, as well as complexity's accidents. The artist traces his printmaking genealogy to decades of domestic work over ironing boards.

"Beauties" more specifically invokes black women, mothers and mothers dispossessed, from his great-grandmother's generation: *Anna Mae*, *Calpurnia*, *Queen*, and *Saphire* are four of the twenty-eight prints. Black women have long been subject to yield to the submission demanded by law, the incursions of dominant touch. Cole's series renders material the violence of this touch. He hammers ironing boards against the earth to thin the objects to a width of four centimeters. Cole and an ensemble of printmakers then ink the nearly pulverized, thin-shouldered forms and run them through the press.

The resulting image-bodies speak to different registers of domestic labor: The boards' inked bands of metal reinforcements and screw holes resemble corsets, now broken apart by the artist's poetic processes. The gentle registrations of scars and scrapes invite embodied sensations while asking us to reconsider the racist, historic links between skin color, being, and beauty. For example, Kant's 1764 *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* and his lectures into the 1780s drew on slave traders' and sailors' travelogues and argued that what he saw as black skin was caused by the presence of subcutaneous iron. "Beauties" conveys the plurality of blackness, displacing a white-tribalist-as-universal notion of beauty, and relieving bodies from being mere skin. We would do well to listen to the imprinted memories haunting Cole's series—today's social currents flow from the wells of the eighteenth century.

— Ren Ellis Neyra