

Alexander and Bonin

Princenthal, Nancy. "Willie Cole"  
*Art in America* (July 2010)

**Art in America**

# Willie Cole

NEW YORK,  
at Alexander and Bonin



Is it OK to laugh at other people's pain? What if they invite you to? Willie Cole has always kept viewers off balance, notably by using steam irons to produce, on the one hand, printed images somberly alluding to the Middle Passage, and, on the other, assemblages evoking African carvings that are wickedly funny triumphs of theory-busting commodity fetishism. Cole's ability to create recognizable forms from recycled objects can be called magical, though he is the most down-to-earth of artists. Witness, in this show, a smallish sculpture cobbled together (puns are

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unavoidable with Cole) entirely from shiny black pumps; the configuration plainly suggests a lady in a big hat sitting, with perfect aplomb, on a toilet.

In a significant departure, the focus of the exhibition “Post Black and Blue” was a group of works on paper (all 2009 or ’10) drawn in black ink and marker. Modest in size and execution, they are keyed to the lyrics—and the emotional hyperbole—of the blues songs for which some are titled. “*Crossroad Blues*” pre-sents a black man on his knees, hat and guitar beside him, his white palms raised to a cross made of a map’s N,S,E,W orientation symbol (oh, Lord, anywhere but here!). Edgiest among the drawings, which mix sophisticated comic-strip shorthand and adolescent doodling, are those that describe adulterous scenarios. The grinning protagonist of *Back door man*, the whites of his eyes minstrel-show round, pokes his nappy head out from behind a door held partly shut by a scantily clad white woman who peers fearfully over her shoulder at someone in the room behind her. In “. . . *cause he was doin her wrong*,” the double-timer is a man, who tries to shield a woman from a rival looming in the foreground, her back to the viewer and a gun in her hand.

These images of people in hells entirely of their own making were accompanied by the sound of weeping—or was it chuckling? The answer was provided by a three-channel video playing in a small room behind the main gallery space. Titled *Samsara* (2010), it is, in fact, an orgy of crying, performed by grimacing, shuddering, snot-nosed men and women cropped at the neck. Something about them—their relative youthfulness? their general air of well-being?—undermines the demonstration. One wanted to flee.

Balanced on the same sharp edge of grief and comedy is the sculpture *Three Dog Night* (2010), which lurked in an alcove upstairs. It features three big dogs, carved in Styrofoam and covered in deep blue flocking, noses down to a heart-shaped puddle of black vinyl. Rendered with considerable tenderness, each dog raises a tail that seems to have been made from an odd furniture part (a chair leg, perhaps, and maybe a tool handle or two). These old hound dogs may have been kicked out of the house, but they’ve taken a few mementos with them. And they’re still lapping up the bitter dregs of love. Somehow, you had to laugh.

*Photo: Willie Cole: Back door man, 2009, ink on paper, 23 by 17 1/2 inches; at Alexander and Bonin.*