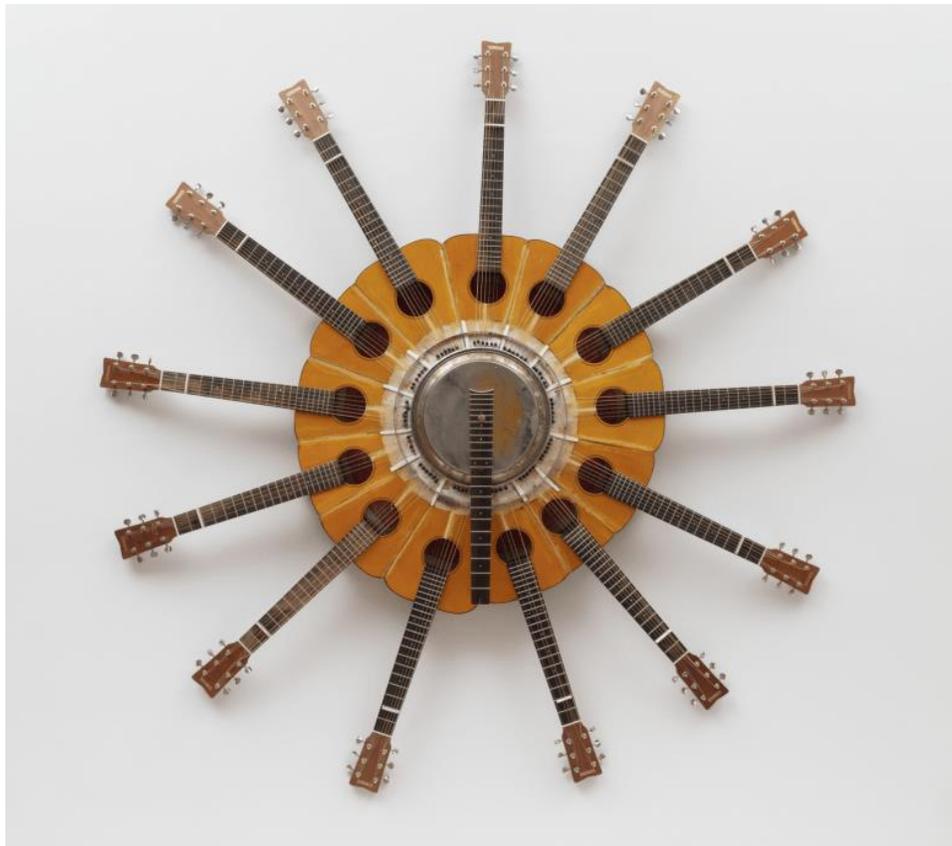


Willie Cole Recycles Musical Instruments Into Outstanding Sculptures

Time is itself a recycling process for Cole, whose freewheeling spirit transcends linearity in his excavations of art and music history.

By Billy Anania. May 23, 2022



Willie Cole, "Dial-a-Tune" (2022), Yamaha 3/4-size acoustic guitar parts
(courtesy Alexander and Bonin, photo by Joerg Lohse)

At the entrance to Willie Cole's *No Strings*, a peacock of piano keys greets visitors from the center of the room. Instead of a rainbow plume, the New Jersey artist layered black sharps and flats atop a fan of white keys, fragments of gold pedals comprising its beak and claws. While not a songbird, the piece nonetheless sets a dulcet tone throughout the gallery of Alexander and Bonin, strutting the line between listening and looking.

Alexander and Bonin

The exhibition is Cole's latest foray into assemblage at the Soho mainstay. For this show, the artist partnered with Yamaha, whose upcycling program donates blemished instruments that did not pass final inspection. New acoustic guitars are split open, divided into pieces, and rearranged into bodily forms, with some proceeds from sales going toward the music department at Arts High School, Cole's alma mater in Newark.



Willie Cole, "Strummer" (2022), Yamaha 3/4 size acoustic guitar parts, 28 x 16 1/2 x 15 inches
(courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York, photo by Joy Whalen)

Known for large-scale installations composed of water bottles, hairdryers, and women's shoes, Cole once again exhibits his talent for seeing life everywhere. Two musicians made entirely of halved guitar bodies appear to serenade viewers from one corner of the gallery, but their tune is drowned out by car horns and ambulance sirens outside on Broome Street. It brings to mind the downtown folk, jazz, and blues scenes of the mid-20th century, before luxury retail overtook the neighborhood. Crucially, Cole made both pieces with guitars of two different shades and blended them into each body, giving them shared characteristics. This leads me to wonder if these instrumentalists, titled

Alexander and Bonin

“Strummer” and “Picker” (2022), are long-term bandmates or just linking up for a momentary jam session.

Across from them, two pieces constructed with sleek black guitar parts resemble busts of human heads, their teeth made of tuning pegs, tongues of fretboards, eyes of tailpieces, and hair of bridge pins. Cole even punches out the electronic preamps to create ear holes. Given the recent discourse around Black representation in sculptural busts, the works subtly illuminate the long record of cultural appropriation by white artists.



Installation view of *Willie Cole: No Strings* at Alexander and Bonin (courtesy Alexander and Bonin, photo by Joerg Lohse)

“I am more of a perceptual engineer,” Cole told *Hyperallergic* in 2013. “I change the way people see everyday objects.” In that same interview, he describes his passion for music, particularly playing guitar, noting that his art is an improvisation on the “visual harmonics” of everyday objects. This comes through most triumphantly in a huge

Alexander and Bonin

mandala made of guitar necks, titled “Dial-a-Tune” (2022) — a reference to old answering machines that would play back music for callers. At the center of its ornate design, a metal hard-body banjo hints at a tough but reflective core. Despite the exhibition’s title, nickel-wound strings are present in every guitar.

Time is itself a recycling process for Cole, whose freewheeling spirit transcends linearity in his excavations of art and music history. He confronts this directly in a newer piece in a back office of the gallery, titled “The Birth of the Blues” (2022). Two bare-chested Black mannequins gaze toward the floor with black guitars placed over their heads, resembling the wooden yokes forced on enslaved African people. Behind their backs, white chains bind their hands, their torsos submerged in white rice. This sublime piece hearkens to the political ties that still bind aesthetics in the United States, which are in dire need of breaking.



Willie Cole, “FRONTMAN” (2022), electric acoustic guitar parts, 28 x 29 x 19 1/2 inches
(courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York, photo by Joy Whalen)

Alexander and Bonin



Willie Cole, "Two-Faced Blues" (2021), Yamaha acoustic electric guitar parts, 23 x 29 x 15 1/2 inches
(courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York, photo by Joy Whalen)



Willie Cole, "Yamaha Dog 2" (2021), Yamaha 3/4 size acoustic guitar parts, 18 5/8 x 11 x 27 inches
(courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York, photo by Joy Whalen)

Alexander and Bonin



Installation view of *Willie Cole: No Strings* at Alexander and Bonin (courtesy Alexander and Bonin, photo by Joerg Lohse)

Willie Cole: No Strings continues at Alexander and Bonin (59 Wooster Street, Second Floor, Soho, Manhattan) through June 18. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.