

NEWS

from the Worcester Art Museum

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WORCESTER ART MUSEUM ANNOUNCES *AFTERBURN - WILLIE COLE: SELECTED WORKS, 1997-2004*

(WORCESTER, Mass., October 21, 2005) – *AFTERBURN–Willie Cole: Selected Works 1997-2004*, on view at the Worcester Art Museum from November 13, 2005 – January 7, 2006, is a comprehensive exhibition of the work of Willie Cole (b. 1955), an artist who creates riveting metaphors out of every day objects. His work is playful; full of puns and irony, continually challenging the way we see. Like other contemporary artists, Cole works with anthropology as a way to critique our culture. He became interested in African culture in the 1960's while in high school in Newark, NJ, learning about art, sculpture, and dance and later studied the Yoruba of West Africa at the School of Visual Arts in New York.

In his assemblage, installation, and wall works, Willie Cole transforms domestic objects such as hair dryers, bicycle parts, irons, and lawn jockeys into powerful works embedded with references to the African-American experience and inspired by West African religion, mythology, and culture. The appropriation of discarded mass-produced American products, objects that have their own history from earlier handling and use, become the raw material of Cole's creations.

For Cole, the iron has become an important icon, not only because of its association with the labor of laundry and the branding of slavery, but also because it references a key element of West African culture –the importance of the blacksmith, maker of tools and weapons. Cole's innovative approach to the iron as a symbol and object has resulted in a litany of creative works, both sculptural and two-dimensional. By scorching sheets of plywood with a hot iron, Cole creates the ominous *Infestation*, as bug-like lozenges seem to breed on the surface. The same technique is used in *Commemorative Scorch*. The imagery, created by the patterning of scorched iron shapes on canvas, is reminiscent of Adinkra cloth found in Ghana. There, it is the men who imprint cloth with carved stamps of varying symbols, each with a specific meaning.

Cole's three-dimensional "irons" are often over-sized, several feet high or long, suggesting at first glance the work of Claus Oldenburg. However, Cole is always focused on African references in his work. *Kanaga Iron*, owned by the Worcester Art Museum, refers in its title and shape to the Dogon Kanaga mask. In another case,

Cole self-consciously references Picasso's *Bull's Head* (1943) made from a bicycle seat and handlebars, with an emphatically African twist. In his *tji-wara* series, Cole uses bicycle parts to mimic the elegant antelope headdresses of the Bambara in Mali. In the Bambara culture of West Africa, the antelope holds special significance as a mystical animal important in agricultural festivities. It is represented by "*tji wara*" (which means "working animal") and is important to increasing the fertility of the fields for a bountiful harvest. Cole's hybrids of bicycle parts are poetic and lyrical manifestations of both male and female *tji wara* (the female form is always presented in association with a child).

Cole's work is intellectually engaging and at the same time full of surprise and delight in both scale and materials. As he states, his own research is done, and by reordering learned information in a kind of improvisation, he creates art. Drawing on his personal experience and collective cultural histories, his work is an inquisitive and intelligent approach to synthesizing the physical and spiritual worlds.

Born in New Jersey, Willie Cole attended the Boston University School of Fine Arts and received his BFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York. Cole has received an Augustus Saint-Gaudens Memorial Fellowship and a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant, and he was an artist-in-residence at The Studio Museum in Harlem. His work is in numerous public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

The Worcester Art Museum owns the artist's sculpture *Kanaga Field Iron*, which will be on view in the concurrent contemporary exhibition *Frontiers: Collecting the Art of Our Time*.

AFTERBURN–Willie Cole: Selected Works, 1997- 2004 has been organized by the University of Wyoming Art Museum and funded in part by Jennifer McSweeney and Peter Reuss, the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation, the Norton Family Foundation, the National Advisory Board of the University of Wyoming Art Museum, and the National Endowment for the Arts. The Worcester Art Museum presentation is supported by the Don and Mary Melville Contemporary Art Fund and is funded in part by the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities. Additional support provided by Worcester Magazine.

RELATED EVENTS

Exhibition Opening Reception

Saturday, November 12, 2005, 7-10pm

Celebrate the openings of two exhibitions of contemporary art, *Frontiers* and *AFTERBURN: Willie Cole* with the sounds of Solomon Murungu, cocktails, and eclectic sweets and savories. \$10 members, \$20 nonmembers.

RSVP by November 8 to 508.799.4406, x3105.

Willie Cole at the African Cultural Center

Saturday, November 12, 2pm

Join American artist Willie Cole for a discussion of the cultural influences found in his work as he speaks amid the African art display at the Worcester African Cultural Center, 33 Canterbury Street, Worcester, MA. Come and preview his working methods and ideas prior to the Saturday evening opening for *Frontiers and Afterburn* at the Worcester Art Museum. Free with suggested donation to the WACC.

Artist Talk: Willie Cole

Sunday, November 13, 2pm

Willie Cole's work has been described as "playful" and "ironic," a double-entendre of sorts. Join artist Willie Cole at the Museum for a discussion of his two- and three-dimensional art and his artistic process. Free with Museum admission. Seating is limited and available on a first-come-first-served basis.

Talks About Art: Willie Cole

Sunday, December 4, 2pm

Join African Art Historian Jean Borgatti, and Worcester African Cultural Center Director Emil Iguanagu for a talk about their responses to Willie Cole's work. Dr. Borgatti will present an introductory talk on African Art that will be followed by a discussion by Dr. Borgatti and Mr. Iguanagu in the exhibition *AFTERBURN*. Free with Museum admission.

About the Worcester Art Museum

The Worcester Art Museum, which opened to the public in 1898, is world-renowned for its 35,000-piece collection of paintings, sculpture, decorative arts, photography, prints, drawings and new media. The works span 5,000 years of art and culture, ranging from ancient Roman mosaics to Colonial silver, Impressionist paintings and contemporary art. Dedicated to the promotion of art and art education, the Museum offers a year-round studio art and art appreciation program that enrolls over 6,000 adult and youth students each year. Public tours are offered Saturdays at 11 a.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m., September through May. Audio tours are also available in English and Spanish.

Museum hours are Wednesday through Sunday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Thursday, 11 a.m.-8 p.m. (evening hours sponsored by Commerce Bank), and Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Admission is \$10 for adults, \$8 for seniors and full-time college students with current ID, and FREE for Members and all youth 17 and under. Admission is also FREE for everyone on Saturday mornings, 10 a.m.-noon (sponsored by The TJX Companies, Inc. and Massachusetts Electric, a National Grid Company). The Museum is located at 55 Salisbury St., Worcester, Mass., easily accessible from the Massachusetts Turnpike (I-90), Route 290 and Route 9. Free parking is available near entrances on Salisbury, Lancaster and Tuckerman streets. For more information, call (508) 799-4406 or visit the Museum web site at www.worcesterart.org.

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