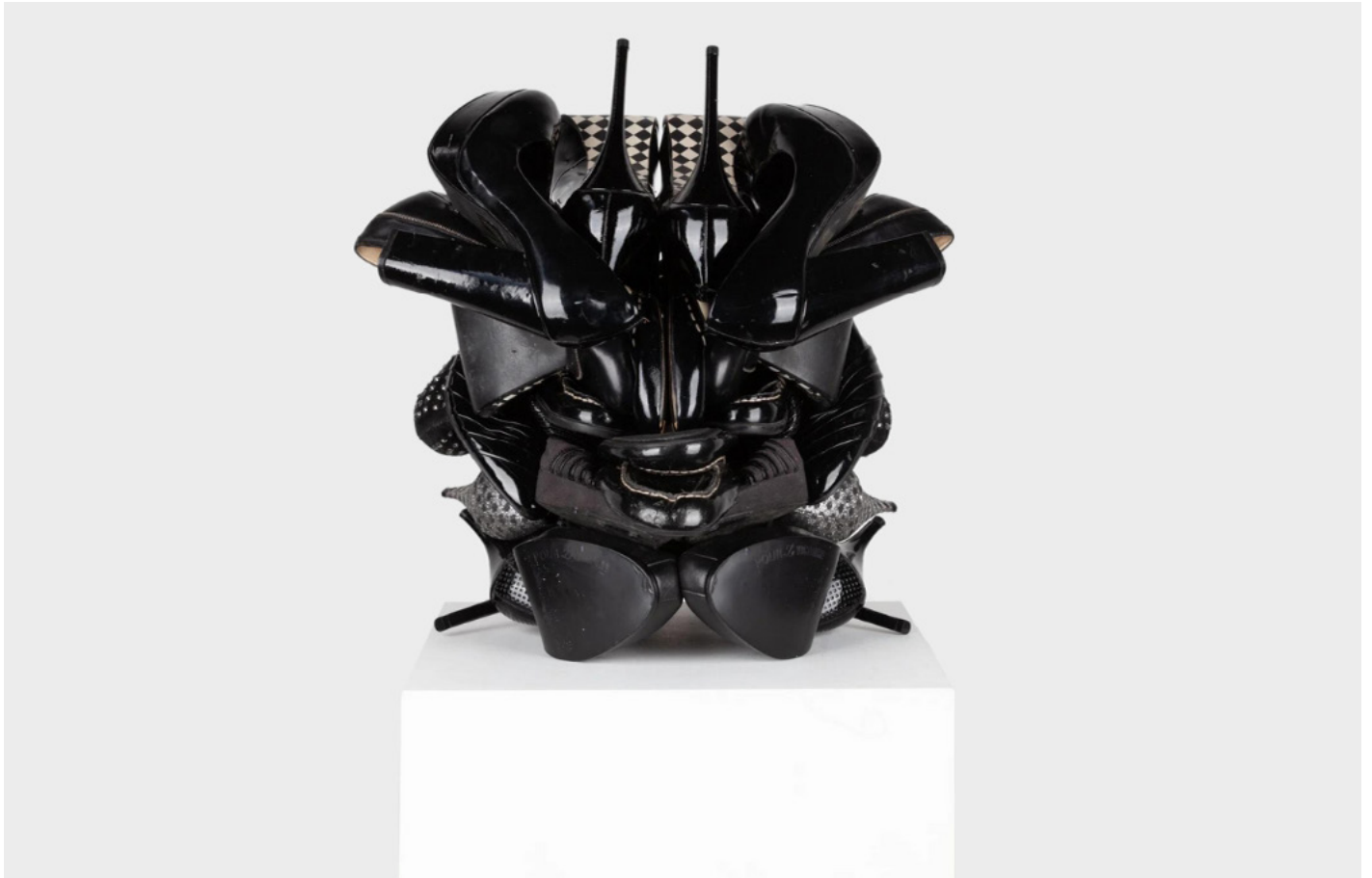


Willie Cole

The B-Sides: 1989-2022



Willie Cole, *Untitled*, 2020. High heel shoes and wire, 17 x 18 x 18 in.

Opening November 18, 2023

Opening Reception November 18, 4 - 7 pm

Kavi Gupta presents a solo exhibition surveying the career of acclaimed artist and perceptual engineer Willie Cole.

Cole's aesthetic position has long been associated with upcycling: the creative reuse of materials that might otherwise be destined for the junkyard. He has made artworks out of old clothes irons, vintage shoes, plastic water bottles, and, most recently, musical instruments.

But there is much more to Cole's art than implied by a perfunctory analysis of his materials. Unlike so many other objets trouvés artists of the present and the past, whose ideas relate more to simple accumulation,

combination, or anti-art sentiment, Cole's work possesses an underlying humanity that shows he is part of something more profound than aesthetic, or even ecological, trends.

"I feel my work has spirit," Cole says. "I'm creating art the same way the universe does. I use multiples of single objects. I'm taking a single cell and multiplying it. I work an object to the point where I'm gonna get one beat away from the living thing, and the art tells me when it's there."

Assembled from a multitude of plastic water bottles arranged in concentric rings, Cole's plastic bottle

chandelier *Red Spirit Light* cascades down upon viewers as if descending from the heavens. Its menacing, red, cabalistic form shines light on us and directs our attention upward, towards the sun.

Cole's long-running chandelier series is about more than accumulation. It's about transformation—familiar objects multiplied, combined, connected, forming something that transcends whatever importance the individual objects once had.

Cole's use of old clothes irons connects to the various forms of energy associated with this common consumer product. Irons transfer heat energy to a surface in order to eliminate wrinkles. The energy instigates beauty, but if applied too long in one spot, the energy becomes an instrument of destruction, scorching and corrupting something it was supposed to make perfect.

Cole mobilizes the residual energy of irons and the burn marks they leave behind to create evidence of the human condition. In *Domestic Shield XV*, burn marks are arranged in the shape of a crown, testifying to the nobility of domestic labor. Meanwhile, the skewed, mask-like face of the iron in *Untitled (You steam out wrinkles as you iron!)* speaks to the ancient and enduring, if often anonymous, significance of such work.

Cole's shoe sculptures transform women's vintage, luxury shoes into forms reminiscent of African masks and figures. *With My Heart in My Hands* resembles a crouched, masked figure adorned by a magnificent headdress; *The Smile that Bites (TSTB)* suggests a hidden entity endowed with a playful but sinister disposition; cast in bronze, the cheekily titled *Woman in Heels* depicts an overtly feminized figure rendered from an assemblage of high heeled shoes.

Cole's latest project is a series of sculptures assembled from musical instruments. In summer 2023, he unveiled his latest monumental public art installation, a commission for the new Kansas City International Airport terminal. Titled *Ornithology*, the installation consists of 11 hanging birds made from saxophones, and one more saxophone bird positioned at ground level so passersby can get a look at it up close. The work is an homage to the famous song of the same name, first recorded by Kansas City-born jazz saxophone legend Charlie "Yardbird" Parker, aka "Bird."

Bird's "Ornithology" is one of the most famous examples in jazz history of a contrafact, a technique where a musician lays a new melody down over a well-known existing chord progression. Contrafaction is about transforming something familiar to give people a chance to understand it in a new way. It's a perceptual tool, and Cole's specialty.



Willie Cole, *Domestic Shield XV*, 2020. Iron scorches on canvas with resin and wax mounted on wood, 54 x 16 x 2 1/2 in.

Whether in the form of saxophone birds, shoe sculptures, water bottle chandeliers, or iron masks, Cole's interventions add layers of meaning to the familiar foundations we normally associate with his materials.

Recalling one of the earliest inspirations behind his desire to use multiples to instigate such novel connections between his art and the people who view it, Cole talks about the painter Georges Seurat. Seurat is credited with the invention of pointillism, a visual position in which tiny dots of color are placed next to each other to give the illusion of solid forms.

Seurat was inspired by nature. We live in a world of particles; even though we see solids, it's an illusion. Where Seurat used multiples of a single dot of paint to achieve his effects, Cole uses multiples of a single object.

Like Seurat, Cole's intention is to create new ways for people to see.

"Seurat was a perceptual engineer," Cole says. "That's also what I call myself."