

STUDIO

OK MR. COLE,

INTERVIEW BY JON HITTEL, NATALIE TOBIAS AND LELAN YUNG
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHANICE AGA AND ALEX BOARDWINE

BEGIN.



Willie Cole, a well-known and leading American sculptor and visual artist, discusses abstract creativity and the spiritual relationship between art and artist.

Can you explain your first experiences with African art?

My first experience was at the Newark Museum. They had a huge piece there, as soon as you walked through the front door. I think it was called 'the Nimba.' Although at the time, I was feeling the whole museum so that piece didn't jump out to me in any special way. It was my first time in a museum. More than when I was a little kid, I think my greatest reception of African art came when I was in college, when I studied African art.



How did your college experience inspire what you create now?

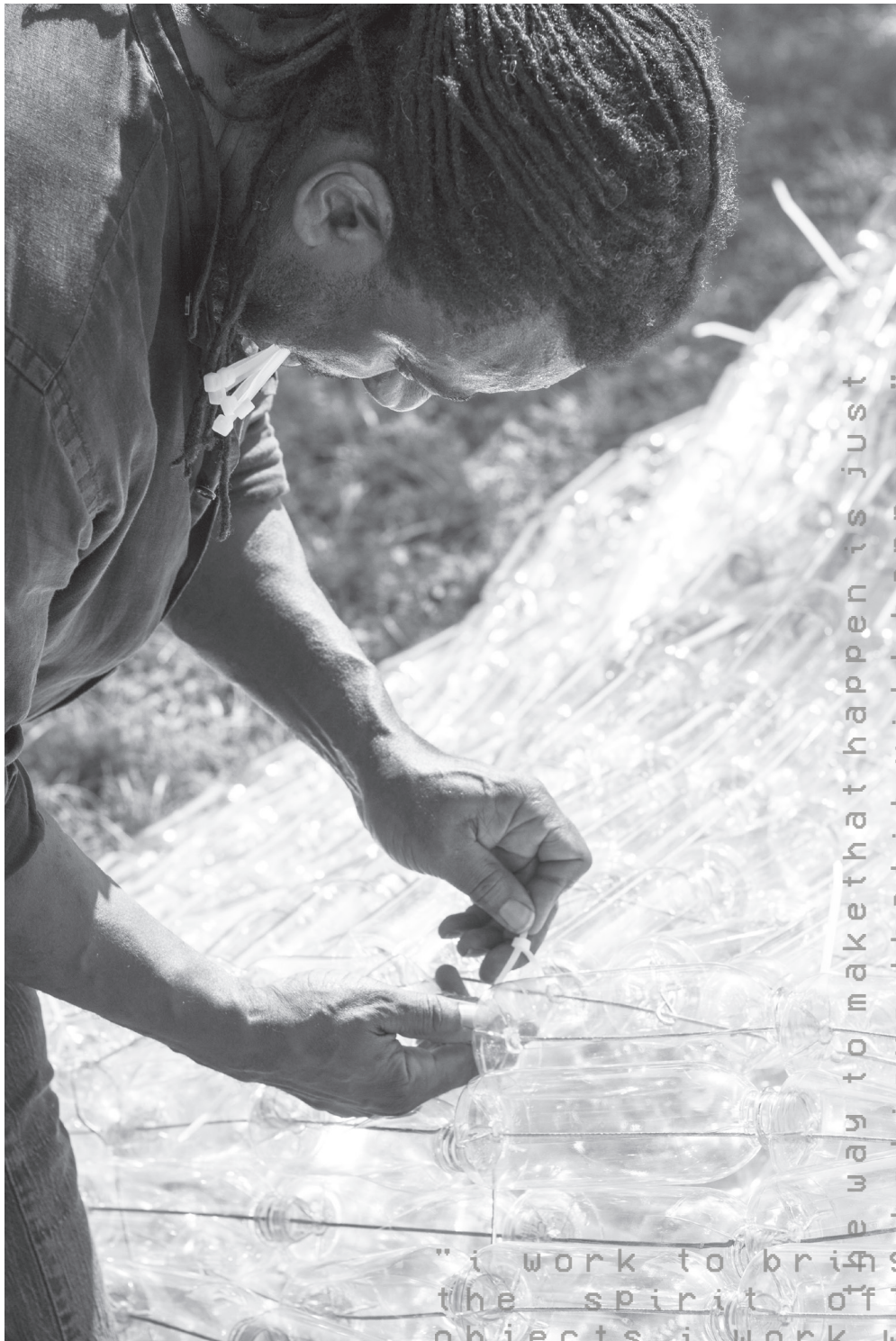
I went to the School of Visual Arts in New York, and at that time, even though it was a hippy school, it was the best art school in the country. I had Chuck Close for painting, and Jonathan Borofsky for sculpture. They were all professionals working as freelancers. And the school had a motto, two mottos really. One was, 'What good is a talent if you don't know what to do with it?' The other one was, 'Our times call for multiple careers,' which meant that if you have a talent, your talent is not just the physical thing you create; it's the way that you think about things. So you can be an artist and work in other fields because your creativity will come through and make those things shine. That's what it means to me, so in school I pursued graphic design, illustration, acting, music...everything. Everything that was art—was me. Then once I started making money, those things ended. But now, years later, my goal is to bring elements of that back in.

What is the power of history and storytelling in your work?

I was an illustrator so I guess that's why the storytelling part exists. The power of history is the power of the now that we all live inside of. Time, past, present and future are very interdependent. In many ways the present creates the past and the future because we have memories and memories are mutated through time. So we think these memories are the past, but they're not, but they are because we believed it for so long. I think that curiosity in general, and my social status as an African-American, has made me very curious about not so much my family history, but my genetic history. I think about the history and evolution of art, especially art as a commodity. It provides for my life, but it kills the spirit of art sometimes. I think about how even Michelangelo was pretty much an illustrator for the church, with all his commissioned pieces. But the art of free expression like Kandinsky or any of the abstract art that just came from the spirit, is to me more akin to the way that art should serve an individual and a society. For example, in the Yoruba tradition the wood carver is going to ask the tree 'Do you mind? Can I cut off a piece?' It's a spiritual act—the piece remains alive. I try to give my work that same kind of power. I work to bring out the spirit of the objects I work with. The way to make that happen is just to believe that it will happen.



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**How does your work relate to the Yoruba religion?
What kind of stories does that religion tell?**

The Yoruba religion is very popular in the U.S., and all the Americas. One thing that came with the enslaved Africans was religion. And Yoruba was one of the dominant ones. In my immediate experience on the east coast in New York, it's a big tradition. I came to it first through African dance because the dances that the university taught were mostly Yoruba. Every race, every background, maybe every human, is curious about their culture at some point in their life. I was in high school and college at a time when African Americans were absorbing and seeking knowledge because you know enslavement had stolen and denied that. Most of my work portrays the presence of spirit—that can be any religion, not just Yoruba. The Yoruba influence in my work has been most prominent in my sculpture, but the Yoruba tradition in many ways has put me more in touch with the ideas of spirit in everyday life. I'm not a Yoruba practitioner. I've been many religions in my life, and before my life probably. I feel that we are deceived to think that we are just physical beings. Once you recognize your spirit—this body is like a rental car, and I'm like a driver inside—making that connection just opens up the world in many ways.



“There’s something spiritual about a brain and hand connection.”

Why do you choose to transform ordinary items, like shoes and water bottles, in your sculptures?

I don't really choose these things. I get addicted to them but I don't make the initial choice. I guess it's because I have lived my life being open to ideas, so I'm inspired by things. That's what an artist is: a person who sees potential in things. The eye goes 'Man, those shapes. Those colors. I could do something with that.' So I get them and I play with them and before I know it I've got something. Once that happens, then I can take what I'm feeling from the object and apply my personal history to give it even more meaning. For example, when I started working with shoes I had become aware that a steam iron and a shoe are very similar. They're very related structurally. So everything I learned from the steam iron—because I used steam irons from like 1988 to probably 2000, almost exclusively—everything I learned from that was priceless, and I transferred that to shoes.

I should also say that I like the things that have had human contact because I believe that we're dripping our essence everywhere we go. There is probably a certain kind of light that will allow us to see your whole trail for the day. They say ninety, maybe ninety-nine percent of the dust in your house is you. So, if you use an iron and you have it in your hand everyday, that iron has some of you in it. Water bottles are also really your essence. Your life force, it's coming from your mouth and you can put a bottle to your mouth and you put your essence into the bottle. That way of thinking helps me to go from the physical to the spiritual.

How did you come to create your water bottle sculptures?

I was drinking water in a meeting and squeezing the bottle, and I start shaping the bottle and before I knew it I had a fish in my hand. I said, 'Man, I can make anything out of a water bottle.' At night I dreamed about it. I'm attracted to the availability of water bottles. I like things that come in multiples, and you can always find a bunch of water bottles. My fine art life is not about water bottles, but I get invited to schools because of recycling. I'm here because it's sustainability week but my fine art has not had much of the water bottles in it yet.

You make some of your pieces alongside a community of people, such as with your water bottle sculptures. What is the significance in that?

The first time I experienced that I thought about when I was a little kid on my grandfather's farm and we would all sit around a basket and shell a bunch of peas. It's a communal thing, and I like that feeling. It's a chance for communication. It's a good vehicle for education. It's inspiration. It's shared energy.

Tell us about your work in abstract painting.

Right now we are sitting in a pool of waves of all different kinds and I'm just painting those waves. We have Bluetooth, microwaves, the wi-fi network, solar rays and sound waves. And they're all constantly present. Every wave from the past is still reverberating in the atmosphere or in the universe, it's still traveling. I'm working to make a physical representation of those things. But people may just see colors. I think sometimes perception happens on one level, so you may not know what you're seeing. But you know inside. Your immediate consciousness is just not aware.





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How do you feel about the introduction of technology into art?

I feel that the handmade things will become more valuable. Those are the artists who will be the most collected. From what I see, anything that technology touches is going to become robotic at some point. In the future, you guys won't be here, but a robot with a camera in its head is going to come into the room and park right there and it's gonna say 'Ok, Mr. Cole. Begin.' I really believe that. You see it in music now. There are some bands that are not real people. I remember when I was watching MTV a lot, there was a band, Gorillaz, and their videos were just cartoons. Music is spirit, but music is also math. Math is programmable. And it's easier to work with machines than humans. But the individual energy from the hand—there's something spiritual about a brain and hand connection. And the machine kind of subverts that.

You mentioned that you still have some of your pieces. Do you like living with your art and having a studio in your house?

For the past ten years I've been living alone in a huge house. The whole house is my studio and my showroom. So even though I collect art, I also have my own work on the walls. I don't mind that. It's like having children in the house again.

We heard you like blues music. Do you play any instruments?

I like all music, and I play whatever I have. I don't always master it, but I have patience. For many years, I had a piano in my studio. And I read that Melvin Van Peebles taught himself to play the piano by numbering the keys. So I did the same thing. I got some sheet music and I numbered everything and I practiced almost everyday.

Thelonious Monk is my all-time favorite. But you know, I love all music. Jazz is my favorite medium because of all the creativity. The evolution of John Coltrane is amazing to me. I like to think of myself as a Coltrane-type artist. I have the ability to improvise. I don't start with an idea, I just start with a need to do it. In the Bible, it says '... In the beginning was the word.' The word is sound. So is music. We're all held together by vibrations. They say in an unborn child, the first sense to develop is the sense of hearing. Ears before eyes, you know?





What is the attraction of printmaking, for you?

To me printmaking is almost a different kind of thing. In my world, the artist themselves don't make the prints, they make the ideas. We work with a master printer then they call you in and you say 'I like that green. I can do without that blue.' My printmaking is more like my days as an illustrator. I can't really think of any artist that has a great individual style in prints. Prints are more about subject than aesthetics, because the aesthetics of the print are a collaboration between the print studio and the artist. From a business point of view printmaking is a chance to make something anybody can afford, or at least some people can afford. If you buy a painting or sculpture, it's going to be tens of thousands of dollars. But prints can be much less. I recently bought a giant printer so I can do digital prints and sell them to people that don't have that kind of money. I want to invite all people to have art.

Willie Cole is known for his mixed media sculptures that take inspiration from West African art and spirituality. Cole's work has been exhibited in numerous galleries and museums worldwide; selected public collections can be found at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, National Gallery of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the Art Gallery of Ontario.