

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Willie Cole

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Cole, Willie, 1955-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Willie Cole,
Dates:	February 3, 2017
Bulk Dates:	2017
Physical Description:	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:50:03).
Abstract:	Sculptor Willie Cole (1955 -) was most known for his found object assemblages, which featured steam irons, high heeled shoes and plastic water bottles. His work addressed themes of domesticity, femininity and racial identity. Cole was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 3, 2017, in Mine Hill, New Jersey. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2017_053
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Sculptor Willie Cole was born on January 3, 1955 in Somerville, New Jersey. In 1958, he moved to Newark, New Jersey, where he took art classes at the Newark Museum, and later attended the Arts High School of Newark. Cole went on to receive his B.F.A degree from the School of Visual Arts in New York City, New York. He continued his art education by attending classes at the Art Students League of New York.

After graduation, Cole worked as a freelance artist and graphic designer. In 1988, he completed his first major art installation, *Ten Thousand Mandellas*. The installation led to his first major gallery show, which took place at Franklin Furnace Gallery in New York City, New York in 1989. The following year, Cole served as the artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. In 1997, Cole created the piece, *Stowage*, garnering him a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Cole had a number of solo exhibition shows that followed, including a show at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 2001. In 2010, an exhibition show of his work took place at the James Gallery of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. In 2013, *Complex Conversations: Willie Cole Sculptures and Wall Work* opened at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan, before the exhibition began travelling across the country.

Cole has received many awards for his work as an artist, including the Penny McCall Foundation Grant in 1991, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant in 1995, the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award in 1996, the David C. Driskell Prize in 2006, and Timehri Award for Leadership in the Arts in 2009. In 2004, Cole received the Lamar Dodd Fellowship at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia. Cole served as an artist-in-residence at several institutions, including the Pilchuck Glass School in Seattle, Washington, the Contemporary in Baltimore, Maryland, the Capp Street Project in San Francisco, California, and the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

Cole has one son.

Willie Cole was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 3, 2017.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Willie Cole was conducted by Harriette Cole on February 3, 2017, in Mine Hill, New Jersey, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Sculptor Willie Cole (1955 -) was most known for his found object assemblages, which featured steam irons, high heeled shoes and plastic water bottles. His work addressed themes of domesticity, femininity and racial identity.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Cole, Willie, 1955-

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Cole, Willie, 1955---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Sculptor

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Willie Cole, February 3, 2017. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Cole, Section A2017_053_001_001, TRT: 1:28:34 ?

Willie Cole was born on January 3, 1955 in Somerville, New Jersey to Jacqueline Epps Cole and Willie Cole, Sr. His paternal grandparents, Mary Willis Cole and Janis Cole, lived in Navassa, North Carolina, where his grandfather worked as a carpenter and farmer. Cole's father was born in Navassa, and moved north to New Jersey to find work. Cole's mother was born in Macon, Georgia, and never knew her father. She moved to New Jersey with

her mother and maternal great-grandfather, who became a minister at New Bethel Baptist Church in Jersey City. Cole's parents met in New Jersey, where his father worked at the American Cyanamid Company. After marrying, they started a family in Somerville, and then separated when Cole was young. From that time, he lived with his mother and sister in the Stella Wright Homes in Newark, New Jersey. Cole was interested in art from an early age. He often traced comics from the newspaper, and drew using materials that his father brought home from work.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Cole, Section A2017_053_001_002, TRT: 2:28:47 ?

Willie Cole grew up in Somerville, New Jersey, and took art classes at the Newark Museum in Newark, New Jersey. When he was eight years old, he moved with his mother and sister into the Stella Wright Homes in Newark, and enrolled at the Quitman Street Community School, which was located across the street. Cole went on to attend Newark's Arts High School, where he saw alumna Melba Moore perform on campus. After graduation, Cole enrolled at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York City, where he majored in media arts. He graduated from SVA in 1976, and began working as a freelance graphic designer. He created album covers for Savoy Records, and worked on promotional campaigns for the General Motors Corporation. His illustrations were also featured in Ebony, Jr! magazine. During this time, Cole continued his education through the Arts Students League of New York City. In 1978, he moved to Newark, Delaware to teach children's theater through a CETA program.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Cole, Section A2017_053_001_003, TRT: 3:28:40 ?

Willie Cole studied at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York City, where he also attended a workshop with the Negro Ensemble Company. After graduating leaving New York City in 1978, Cole taught classes with the Stepping Stone Theatre Company at the University of Delaware. During this time, Cole's son was born. After separating from his son's mother, he lived in South Jersey and then in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, while working as a freelance designer and selling his art. In 1982, Cole converted his loft in Newark, New Jersey into the Works Gallery, where he hosted events and exhibited his friends' work. Cole returned to New York City in 1984, and secured a position as an art teacher at a Job Corps center. He also continued his freelance career. In 1988, Cole was awarded a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where he shared space with Renee Greene and John Rozelle. While there, he began sculpting with found objects, including a steam iron, and incorporated African influences into his work.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Cole, Section A2017_053_001_004, TRT: 4:29:23 ?

Willie Cole started using found objects to make sculptures during his residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1989. Through the use of steam irons and scorches, he interrogated the African American relationship to domestic work and servitude throughout history. Upon completing his residency, Cole successfully sold almost all of his pieces, and was able to purchase materials and continue his sculptural practice. In 1993, he began using high heeled shoes to create masks inspired by African traditions. Cole also used shoes to create floral designs, which emphasized the femininity of his materials. His piece 'House and Field' focused on the divisions within the African American community, and was inspired by the writings of Malcolm X. Cole's works were housed in a three thousand square foot studio in Newark, New Jersey until 1999, when he rented space in a helicopter hangar. In 2005, he moved his studio to his home in Mine Hills, New Jersey.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Cole, Section A2017_053_001_005, TRT: 5:29:44 ?

Willie Cole used high heeled shoes as a medium to create sculptures that explored the theme of femininity. He also used shoes and other fashion objects to create African masks and figures. In 1997, Cole created 'Stowage,' an eight-foot woodcut that used ironing boards and steam iron scorches to evoke the infamous prints of the Brookes slave ship as well as the unique branding marks of African tribes. The piece was featured in Cole's first solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1999. The following year, he became an artist in residence at the John Michael Kholer Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Cole created 'Malcolm's Chicken,' a pair of chickens made from matches that represented the consequences of U.S. foreign policy. In 2006, Cole received the David C. Driskell Prize from the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia. Cole began working with plastic water bottles in 2014. He also talks about making music and marketing his art.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Cole, Section A2017_053_001_006, TRT: 6:24:55 ?

Willie Cole began using plastic water bottles as an artistic medium in 2014. He incorporated the bottles into sculptures and installations, including chandeliers, floral designs and a full scale automobile. Around this time, Cole developed the concept for an animated character named ShooFly, who was modeled on one of his massive bronze shoe sculptures. At this point in the interview, Cole reflects upon his life and legacy, and shares his advice to aspiring African American artists. Cole concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.