WILLIE COLE
Biography

Born in 1955, Willie Cole is a lifelong resident of New Jersey. His artistic ability was apparent from the age of three, when his mother enrolled him in Saturday children’s art classes at the Newark Museum. He was accepted at Newark’s respected Arts High School, where he majored in fashion design. In Manhattan, where he commuted after graduation, he received his BFA at the School of Visual Arts and studied at the Art Students League.

The earliest work in Anxious Objects dates from 1988, when Cole was an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. It was at this time that his artistic vision matured and he began assembling artifacts from a throwaway culture into iconic artworks. It was also at this time that he began using one of his signature motifs—the steam iron.

For Cole, the iron has personal meaning. His parents separated when he was 11, leaving him and an older sister in a woman-centered family. As man of the house, he frequently repaired broken irons for his mother and grandmother, both housekeepers. But it wasn’t until much later that he realized their artistic potential.

Not only does Cole use steam irons, cords and plates as components of his sculptures, he also uses irons to create scorch marks on paper, ironing boards, even—in works such as Man Spirit Mask (1999)—his own photograph. The patterns recall African masks and shields and bring to mind ritual scarification.

Cole’s work isn’t just about irons, though. High Security Jacket for Executives Only (1988) is woven from galvanized steel scraps from air-conditioning ducts and emblazoned with the emblem from a Cadillac sedan. Assembled from blow dryers, Wind Mask East (1990) calls to mind a carved wall mask from Sri Lanka. Made in the Philippines (1993) evokes Imelda Marcos, the Philippine first lady notorious for her love of shoes; the work consists of hundreds of colorful high heels from thrift shops fashioned into an opulent, throne-like chair. The cobra-like Gas Snake with Blue Nozzle (1996) is a commentary on the Gulf War and our world’s gas and oil dependence.


He lives and works in Mine Hill, New Jersey.
Ideas for Teachers

Fun, funky and provocative, Willie Cole’s work is in part defined by his creative use and re-use of materials. Forms and patterns found in a variety of African art also play a large role in influencing much of his mixed-media sculpture, paintings, drawings and prints.

At its best, African art embodies one of humanity's greatest achievements—fusing visual imagery with spiritual beliefs and social purpose. Religious beliefs and cultural ideals find artistic expression not only in masks and figures created primarily for ceremonial purposes, but also in the utilitarian objects of daily life.

Willie Cole carries this same idea through in much of his current work. By Africanizing or ritualizing common—often discarded—Western objects, he constructs bridges to other times and cultures, even as he comments on contemporary society.

African artists often use depictions of animals to convey lessons. An appropriate animal is selected according to distinctive physical or behavioral traits. The physical features of different animals are often combined to create mythical creatures whose symbolic powers are greater than those of ordinary beasts.

*Sears Ross tji wara (mother and child)*, 2002
Willie Cole
Bicycle parts

Cole made ten or so *tji wara* (CHEE-wah-rah, sometimes spelled *tyi wara* or *chi wara*) sculptures from spot-welded bicycle parts. This mother and child mask combines Sears brand elements for the “mother” figure with pieces from a Ross bike for the “child.” The beasts' heads and necks are upturned wheel braces and shafts; the bottom of the mother’s head is a handle grip. The figures rest on a coiled gear chain that suggests the woven caps that held the African masks on performers’ heads.

Each of Cole's *tji wara* sculptures was constructed from used and discarded bicycles—reminding us that bicycles are used all around the world, as the cheapest and most practical means of transportation for many of the world’s people.

*Antelope Crest Piece (Chi Wara)*, 20th c.
Bamana peoples, Mali
Wood, cane, shell and yarn

Few objects are so generally identified with African art as the antelope crest mask. The Bamana People of southern and western Mali made their wooden *tji* (work) *wara* (animal) masks to honor and capture the powers of the legendary antelope-man who taught them to farm. Worn on top of the head, they were performed as male and female couples to enhance agricultural and human fertility.

These crest masks combine the horns of a large antelope; the body of an aardvark with its big ears, short legs and thick tail; and the textured skin and curling ability of the scaly anteater—all animals who dig up the earth. This makes them fitting representations of Chi Wara, the supernatural being who, according to Bamana tradition, taught people to farm.
Young men once wore pairs of masks—male and female—for a dance performance in the fields that taught, praised and encouraged good farmers. The male antelope figure was associated with the sun, the female with the earth, and her child with human beings. The headdresses symbolically combine the elements needed for a successful crop: sun, water, and a solid rooting of the plant in the earth. While the dancers mime the animal’s movements, the beautiful lines and shapes of the Chi Wara or tji wara figures capture the natural beauty of the living antelope.

Minianka chi wara masquerades in Southern Bamana country, about 1905-06
Edmond Fortier (French, 1862-1928)
Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art
Thoughts on Art

The words of Willie Cole:

I made a conscious choice in 1989 to work with objects that had been handled—irons, doors, shoes, maps, hairdryers, windshield wipers—because of the energy transference, which to me has to do with telekinesis and chi transfers.

I’m open to female energies for sure. I look on females as being the real powers in the world, because I grew up in an all-female family—a single mother, a single grandmother. I was the first male child born. I always recognized the power of the female.

I want them [my artworks] to be links between worlds.... You live in the U.S., but here is a piece of art that looks like it is from another culture and another time, even though the materials in the work are strictly American. That shows there is a world culture.

Cole’s choice of the phrase “Anxious Objects” to title this exhibition links his work to that of American artist Jasper Johns’ use of real things in his artworks.

Confronting this situation, the anxiety of art embodies the freedom of art to remake itself at will....This can only mean that the art object persists without a secure identity, as what I have called an “anxious object.” (“Am I a masterpiece,” it must ask itself, “or an assemblage of junk?”)

Harold Rosenberg’s The Anxious Object: Art Today and Its Audience, 1964

Notes from Jasper Johns’ sketchbook:

Take an object
Do something to it
Do something else to it

Take a canvas
Put a mark on it
Put another mark on it

Make something
Find a use for it
and / or
Invent a function
Find an object
Curriculum Connections:

Choice of Materials:
Despite the loss now of their original function as bicycle parts, the pieces retain their recognizable forms. Imagine the story these bicycle parts could tell!
What energy does the use of bicycle parts bring to the piece?
How would the Sears Ross tji wara (mother and child) be different if it were made from other materials or found objects?
Compare Cole’s use of bicycle handles with Picasso’s Bull Head (made from a leather seat and bicycle handle bars).
What materials or found objects would you use to create a sculpture commenting on—or reflecting—our 21st century world? Why?

Analysis:
• Look at Sears Ross tji wara (mother and child) as a collection of shapes, lines and patterns. How are they assembled into a whole? How are the shapes, lines and patterns used to express an idea?
• Willie Cole gives careful attention to the titles of his sculptures. Sometimes he is playing with words; at other times he suggests a direct connection to other works of art.
  What additional layers of meaning can you discover once you know the connection of the Cole’s bicycle tji wara to the African tji wara (or chi wara) tradition?
  What details of the sculpture can you read without any knowledge of the title?
• Compare the Bamana Chi Wara and Cole’s Sears Ross tji wara (mother and child).
  How does each artist use elements of line, shape, pattern, color and texture, and the principles of composition?
  How does the choice of different materials make us see the pieces differently? Why do the Bamana mask makers choose wood? What energy and symbolic significance does wood have for them? Why does Cole choose bicycle parts?
  Compare the subject matter or themes of the two pieces.
  Compare the function of the two pieces. The Chi Wara is a headdress that was once worn in spiritual/agricultural ceremonies and it shows evidence of its use. The antelope crest mask was never meant to be a museum “work of art.” The individual parts of the tji wara were once used also, but as bicycle components; Willie Cole has transformed these everyday objects into an artwork.
  Why might a 21st century African American artist choose to create work in the tradition of West Africa?
  Discuss whether or not these pieces are “works of art.” What are your criteria?

Responding to works of art:
• The creativity of Willie Cole’s sculptures inspires both descriptive and creative responses.
  Look closely and describe what you see when you look at Sears Ross tji wara (mother and child).
  What words come to mind when you see Sears Ross tji wara (mother and child)?
  What associations and memories come to you as you look closely at the sculpture?
  What “attributes” are suggested by the bicycle parts and materials? (Attributes are qualities such as strength, beauty, endurance, etc.)
  What memories and associations, ideas and thoughts do you have when you think about bicycles?
  Imagine the stories these bicycles could tell!
• Write a poem about a tji wara
  Write a poem about a bicycle.
  Write a poem using “bicycle” or bicycle parts as metaphor.
Cultural Context:

- Research the use of ritual objects in various historical and contemporary cultures. The Bamana peoples use the Chi Wara headdress during a spiritual ceremony. Cole draws upon the tradition of African ritual objects and is interested in spiritual energy of objects. What ritual objects are used by spiritual and religious groups today? What objects have special power or energy for you?
- The art of Willie Cole comments upon the American contemporary consumer culture. What objects do you see that embody 21st century American culture and why?

Resources:

- Art of a Continent: African Art at the Guggenheim Museum [http://www.artinuniverse.de/specials/africa-remix/english.htm](http://www.artinuniverse.de/specials/africa-remix/english.htm)
- Welcome to the Art of Africa Art, music, proverbs and peoples of Africa as well as classroom materials. [http://princetondol.com/groups/idad/lessons/middle/afr-lessons.htm](http://princetondol.com/groups/idad/lessons/middle/afr-lessons.htm)
Anxious Objects: Willie Cole’s Favorite Brands
Teacher In-service
January 24, 2007

Warren Mianecke
Assistant Registrar
Creative Workshop, Memorial Art Gallery

Objective:
The student will be able to describe various ways in which a common mark/impression can be viewed as a textural element of a creative visual composition.

Materials:
• Black water-based printing ink
• At least one sneaker or other flat-soled shoe with interesting tread design
• White 8 ½ x 11” label paper
• Index card sized scrap of thick cardboard or (preferably) an ink roller for spreading ink
• 8 ½ x 11” (or slightly larger) sheet of plexiglass or other thick plastic (need not be brand new)
• white paper between 9 x 12” and 18 x 24” in size for each student
• scissors for each student
• black magic marker for each student
• (glue stick for each student if using white copy paper instead of label paper)
• water, sponge (for cleaning footwear sole used for printing)

Teacher Preparation:
A print of a sneaker/shoe tread will be made ahead of time by the instructor to (a) present to the students and (b) to use as a master from which to generate photocopies.

Activity:
• Present a (pre-made) print of a sneaker/shoe tread and ask the students to identify the object which made the mark.
• Discuss where one might find/observe this sort of mark.
• The instructor may choose to demonstrate the cause-&-effect of how the print was made, using the ink, rolled onto the plexiglass, with the sneaker tread firmly pressed onto the inked plexiglass and then pressed firmly to a sheet of white paper. The resulting print is allowed to air-dry.
• Using a larger sheet of white paper, demonstrate ways in which individual copies of the print, of varying sizes, can be arranged in a variety of compositions. This can be done without removing the back of the labels to allow for quick changes of examples.
  • Place the prints on the paper end-to-end to create the look of letters, which can be used to spell out a word or phrase which relates to the origin of the print.
  • Arrange the prints in rows to create patterns of varying sizes and orientations.
  • Use the prints to create an image, such as a face, a shoe.
  • Arrange the prints to create a symmetrical composition.
• Students then will make prints from their own sneakers or shoes and copy them onto label paper.
• Students will experiment and then create a two-dimensional composition.
• Students can share and discuss their visual compositions.
• Students can discuss the effectiveness of “sneaker” as an icon for themselves and/or our 21st century culture.

Support for the Gallery’s 2006-07 school programs is provided by Dominion, Bank of America, and the Mary W. Clark Trust.
Additional support is provided by Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Judson Jr., the estate of Estelle B. Goldman and an anonymous donor for the McPherson Director of Education.
Anxious Objects: Willie Cole’s Favorite Brands
Teacher In-service
January 24, 2007

Eddie Davis
Assistant Professor
School of Design, Rochester Institute of Technology

Objective:
Artist Willie Cole creates unique images incorporating found objects and pre-existing forms in dynamic and unexpected compositions. Following a similar method, we will create 3-dimensional, sculptural portraits, incorporating used/discard wooden toy parts.

Materials:
Glue
Containers for glue
Brushes for glue application
Wooden shapes
Paint

Teacher Preparation:
Create the template. The skull shape is taken from a common household warning label, and the form is cut from wood using a CNC laser (a process that Willie Cole also uses in his work).
Collect additional smaller shapes.

Activity:
All students will be given a template in the form of a skull—a logical starting place for a facial/head representation. Using smaller additional shapes, participants will be able to add material and detail to their individual forms, eventually creating a face or 3-dimensional portrait.

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