Lonnie Holley: All Rendered Truth
Camden Arts Centre

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Published in June 2024.

Unless otherwise stated, all citations are Lonnie Holley – either lyrics or fragments of conversations with the author

Driving through fields of crops and pig-farms in rural Suffolk, Lonnie Holley narrated the landscape for me, reading it through the lens of his singular experience. Fallow fields cloaked in diaphanous white membranes stretched across the land, undulating in the wind, "like the ocean" he said. We had just left a barn where Holley had produced a new body of work for his show at Camden Art Centre. He said the fields reminded him of "Mount Meigs" – The Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children where he was tormented and abused for several years of his youth[1] and forced to work the land. He explained that without modern machinery it was literally blood, sweat and tears that brought in the harvest. Perhaps the white sheets reminded him of the cotton they had to pick.

The legacies of slavery, and the ongoing oppression and exploitation of Black people, are explicitly memorialised in many of Holley's works. *Repossessed by the Rules* (2018) is a simple but powerful work that restricts an old-fashioned wooden ruler with padlocks, posing questions about justice – to whom it is afforded and the innocent who suffer unfairly in its name. Other works directly revisit his time at the industrial 'school'[2]. A small but powerful found-object work, *Chain Gang Mt. Meigs* (2019), binds a handful of dinner forks together with a padlock. *Lifting the Rail* (2005) recognises the human, racially enslaved labour that built the 'civilised' world. In *The Harvesters* (2020) a wooden rake entraps a model ship inside a fishing net, a recurring motif that invokes the horrors of the Middle Passage. Maybe this was in his mind when he saw the ocean in the fields, a metaphorical expanse of collective trauma.

There is a tenderness in Holley's works that acknowledges the pain and struggle of domestic labour as well. *Hung Out* (2021) is an old clothes-drying rack with rifle targets hanging from the bars. Holley spoke of the many innocent black people "hung out to dry" and the mothers who mourned them. *Working in the House* (2020) is a wall-mounted assemblage of white gloves suspended in a wooden frame – perhaps a eulogy to his grandmother's seemingly indefatigable labour (domestic and otherwise). He speaks of her hands, how she cooked dinner and made beds; dug graves and worked in the landfill. A supposed end point, Holley has shown there is life beyond it, and this has come to be the central rubric of his work, making a career from dumpster-diving in the industrial and urban wasteland to source the primary materials for his art, submitting them to acts of sublime recuperation.

In a mezzanine above the artist's Atlanta studio there's a treasure trove of his raw material – eagles, globes, ships, the statue of liberty, the iconography of a 'national' identity and the cultural castoffs that signify the failed promise of the American dream. It could have been the storehouse for an Ed and Nancy Kienholz installation, sharing some of their signature components: the American flag, mannequins, textiles and other domestic objects. But Holley's work distinguishes itself from the nightmarish vision they share with other artists like Cady Noland and Bruce Conner, whose work similarly drew from everyday iconography to delve into the fears, desires and melancholy of a post-war American psyche. Californian artist Bruce Conner and his affiliated group of artists and poets known as the Rat Bastard Protective Association, took inspiration from the model of the rag picking trade to make their work. While the Rat Bastard's milieu was Painterland – an apartment-building-cum-studio-complex on 2322 Fillmore Street, San Francisco – Holley's was the yard environments of the southern states where people were cultivating spaces that preserved their cultural identity – a community of artists that has, until recently, been understood only within the context of southern vernacular, self-taught, or folk art, and denigrated as a minor history in the great American tradition of assemblage[3]. But their work continues a much older African diasporic approach to making grounded in montage, collage and assemblage – repurposing scrap materials already imbued with multiple histories and stories, assembling them in semantic frameworks of collective memory.

Walter Benjamin drew an analogy between Baudelaire's Rag Picker or 'Chiffonnier' who collects and catalogues "Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot[4]", and the poet, who derives "their heroic subject from this very refuse" [5], gathering a "rhyme-booty"[6] from the urban milieu. Imagining Holley heaving up objects of value, I'm reminded of T.S. Eliot's 'heap of broken images' [7]in *The Waste Land* (1922), the horror and aftermath of the world war. While Noland, Conner and the Kienholzes deliberately retain the dark, charred, abject grime of the wasteland – revealing a shadowland of the American psyche – Holley transforms that darkness into edifying beauty, redeeming what has been discarded as if to comfort the dejected in society: to show that every person is valuable; every living thing has meaning.

1. Josie Duffy Rice, Unreformed: The Story of the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children, iHeartPodcasts: 2023
2. Including Mount Meigs and Better Get That Crop In Soon – two tracks on his latest LP, Oh Me Oh My, 2023
3. For artists like Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, Joe Minter and the Gee's Bend quiltmakers, the tireless advocacy of William Arnett and the Souls Grown Deep Foundation have elevated the status of their work and brought them into wider recognition. Their informal art education – learning directly from the materials and the artistic community that was taking shape - their work is uninhibited by convention, expressing a part of the American social landscape and identity with unconstrained candour.
5. Charles Baudelaire quoted in Walter Benjamin 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire' p. 48 in Walter Benjamin, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938 – 1940, Harvard University Press: 2006
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6. Ibid.
7. First published in The Criterion: 1922

Holley subjects his vocabulary of words and objects to the alchemy of a poet, unveiling reality, bringing felt qualities into awareness. "I find things that are the plainest they can be, that anyone can understand." This is the kernel of Holley's practice: a profound meaning conveyed in the humblest of means, "by any means necessary"[8]. Like Yuji Agematsu walking the streets of New York, collecting chewing gum, hair and other detritus, then arranging them like miniature lichen landscapes or aquatic coral worlds, placed in sequence on shelves or cabinets spanning a finite date range, Holley is also a wanderer, and his bricolage reads as a diaristic record of his ongoing passage through life. Observing, examining, "all the way down to the nitty gritty: the dirty part of the dirt", creating a pearl from grain of sand.

His narrative sculptures operate as parables that fire the imagination and bring about moments of recognition or remembrance of truths - distillations of meaning that open out to multiple interpretations, ranging from the domestic and personal to history works – stories that circulate at the level of social consciousness. While in the UK, Holley's gaze turned to British history, how it is accreted in the patina of found objects and inscribed across the landscape. "London Bridge is falling down" he said when I asked how this context was impacting the work. An untitled sculpture made in Suffolk combines the root and thorny branches of a blackberry bush found nearby with other materials – chicken wire, rope, cloth and barbed wire. Talking about it he said "I wandered to the blackberry vine. The rabbit ran into the blackberry vine like the slave would go to hide." This is one of many traumatic memories. When trying to escape from the infamous Mount Meigs, he ran for hours upon hours and fell into a deep hole where he finally surrendered to sleep. When he woke, he found he was in a graveyard and dragged himself out by a tree root, for Holley, a source of salvation and an important signifier in Black Southern Art. The struggle for growth begins with the root – in darkness, in the dirt, in what's hidden. "As a plant takes hold in a crevice – the roots are gonna be first".

Holley refers to that sunken grave as the "Dream Hole": a place of fear. To this day, he avoids sleeping more than necessary, he says he's "better awake". Haunted by memory, his dreams provide no respite, returning him to the trauma of the past. In response, he offers his practice not to the unseen realms, but in service of the waking world. In his presence it feels like that space of immanent possibility, of dream and imagination, the underside of the visible, is dragged into the quotidian, heaving up what is beneath, infusing reality with a contemplative quality, a waking reverie: "I'm catching the dream".

Speaking of extreme historical events that cycle through history as "apocalyptic upheavals", philosopher Michael Marder relates them to the "domain of the elemental realm – the unpredictability of the movement of the earth, a shadowy underside of existence emerging into the daylight of the present"[9]. Growing up in Alabama at the height of the civil rights movement, Holley has the visceral, embodied knowledge of upheaval in its truest sense – as synonymous with revolution. Works from his series *Without Skin* (2023-ongoing) have a formal simplicity, constructed from two interlocking components – unupholstered chairs and industrial scale fire hoses – that read as dynamic, semi-abstract gestures in colour and form that hold, yet seem to collapse into, space like John Chamberlain's crushed-car assemblages. The fire, or 'attack' hose, has a double meaning: a conduit for life-giving or life-saving water – as well as a weapon of brutality and racial violence used to suppress the social uprisings of the civil rights movement in the US, in some cases, literally flaying the victims, this mutilation posing another powerful question: how would life be different "if I didn't have Black skin"?

In another monumental new work, *Nine Notes* (2024), Holley has repurposed components of a church organ. Here, it's the pipe that takes on a two-fold significance: a metaphor for the air that passes through a body – the anima or spirit – and a commemoration of the nine members of a congregation in Charleston, South Carolina who were murdered in 2015 by a white supremacist in a racially motivated attack.[10]

In a new group of sculptures, Holley gives expression to his Native American heritage, aligning with the traditional forms of totems, dream catchers and temporary, symbolic arrangements of found objects and materials on the ground. Speaking again of his early life – sneaking through back doors or sewer pipes to the drive-in cinema or the attractions and spectacle of the Alabama State Fairground – Holley reflects on a "black and white era when there was a poverty of colour", when people would "pay for the colour and joy of technicolour". He sees artists as having a responsibility in how they use colour, how it is fed to the viewer, and refers to his paintings as "colour-feed" experiments, constructed with multiple layers of spray-paint laid down over a gestural underpainting, that create an all-over effect, at times – particularly in wide-format horizontal canvases – reminiscent of Pollock's rhythmic compositions. The repetition of facial outlines in profile gives shape to the river of time, the forms and features that flow through his veins as DNA, yielding to the ancestors whose lives have gone before, who "work their mojo" through him without having met in person. Repetitions of physical characteristics, markers of ancestral lines and familial relations – honouring both Yoruba and Native American heritage – and more expansively, an homage to the unsung heroes whose contribution to the progress of humanity and the service of others deserves recognition. Arrangements of stars and stripes are woven through some of the compositions like a spectre that asks how many destinies are bound together under the symbol of that flag?

A drop of water falling from the sky.
Grandmother praising the light, in the sky.
Grandfather, the trunk, the truth.
The first wonder of the world.
Blackness illuminated.
We are always returning.
The essence
The Roots.
We Are The Wonder. [11]

8. In his 1964 public address at the founding rally of the Organisation of Afro-American Unity, Malcolm X repeated this motto nine times
9. Michael Marder, Upheaval and Implosion: Toward a Philosophy of History of the Present, RCEA Rimini Centre for Economics webinar, 2022
10. Holley had visited this church – an important sit for the Black community through the journey of emancipation just months prior to the massacre
11. Lonnie Holley with Moor Mother, I Am A Part Of The Wonder - the opening track on Oh Me Oh My, 2023

Holley's cosmology is spelt out in recurring symbols – the tree root, the crucifix, chains, circles, ellipses, orbits – a syncretic spirituality rooted in the earth, steeped in his upbringing with Christianity as the cultural baseline. But if there are allusions to religion, the ideals are channelled as virtues rather than applied as dogma – a kind of cosmic humanity that lives in right relation to the great wheel of creation, a direct knowledge of self and its reciprocity with the entire universe. "I am a part of the wonder". A man in the universe. The universe in a man. Soothsayer, teller of stories and truths, however hard to hear. From the nitty gritty, to the outlands of the imagination. A maker of images, of animated visions. Images in words and matter. Blood on white stone. Sunk in a grave and pulled out by the root. Holley's is a practice that imparts wisdom, optimism, knowledge and hope. "Hear me well" he said. I hope I did.