

# New concepts in printmaking 2, Willie Cole

[Wendy Weitman]

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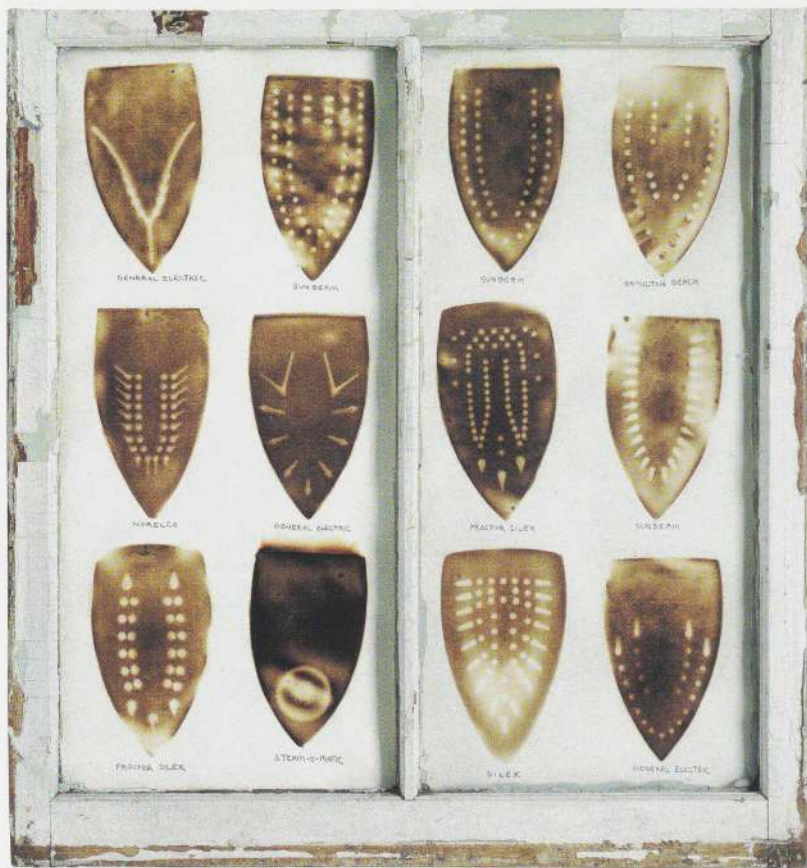
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# New Concepts in Printmaking 2 Willie Cole

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## New Concepts in Printmaking 2: Willie Cole

Willie Cole constructs his assemblage sculptures from found domestic objects and imbues them with spiritual, and often mythical, power through allusion and metaphor. Since the mid-1980s, he has been preoccupied with the steam iron as a domestic, symbolic, and artistic object. Cole first assembled used irons into iconic figurative forms reminiscent of African art. In exploring ways to infuse these unpretentious figures with the potency of their progenitors, Cole discovered the scorch.

Imprinting an object on a malleable flat surface is the simplest way to transfer an image and constitutes the essence of printmaking. Cole (b. 1955) has manipulated this medium in the course of his other artmaking and expanded its boundaries to accommodate his creative fusion of materials and meaning. In the late-1980s, using heat as a kind of ink and an iron as a stamping device, he began creating elaborate compositions out of repeated printed forms. He imprints hot irons in minimal rows, decorative patterns, and figurative shapes onto surfaces ranging from paper and canvas to mattress padding and plaster. The scorches from the surfaces of the irons take on mask-like appearances while concurrently evoking the African ritual of scarification. In other works he has expanded his scope to include impressions of the iron in plaster, as well as multiple etched-glass renderings. Cole has said that irons played a part in his own heritage, growing up in Newark, New Jersey, with a grandmother and great-grandmother who worked as housekeepers and frequently asked him to repair their irons. He had at least fifteen broken irons with him when he moved into his first studio in 1980.

Artists have often been attracted to the direct visual effects created by imprinting.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, because the process bypasses the usual contact between the artist's hand and the work of art, it creates an aesthetic distance that has also appealed to artists at various times in recent art. In the 1950s, many artists explored ways of incorporating objects from their daily environment into their art and eschewed the spontaneous artistic gesture. This aesthetic tendency led to numerous creative approaches to transferring, imprinting, and recording

everyday life. Robert Rauschenberg had a friend drive a car onto outstretched paper to create his twenty-foot *Tire Print* of 1951. The Nouveau Réaliste artist Arman printed found rubber stamps in allover compositions and later flung paint-dipped household objects onto paper and canvas to create imprints.<sup>2</sup> Several others, including Jasper Johns and Yves Klein, used the oiled or painted human body to make impressions.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary artists have continued to work in this way. Donald Judd's early woodcuts are inked imprints from assembled wooden structures, and nearly all of Nancy Spero's work is created with repeated rubber stampings on paper.

Cole's iron scorches have added a symbolic and spiritual voice to this tradition of artist imprints.<sup>4</sup> He enjoys the predetermined format of the scorches. Cole also likes the physical act of the process and the surprise of how it appears when he lifts off the iron.<sup>5</sup> But his choice of the branding iron as an artistic instrument also derives from his knowledge of African art and world religions, and his aim has been to release through his work the power found in his African sources.

*I think that when one culture is dominated by another culture, the energy or powers, or gods of the previous culture hide in vehicles in the new cultures. . . . I think the spirit of Shango (Yoruba god of thunder and lightning) is a force hidden in the iron because of the fire, and the power of Ogun—his element is iron—is also hidden in these metal objects.<sup>6</sup>*

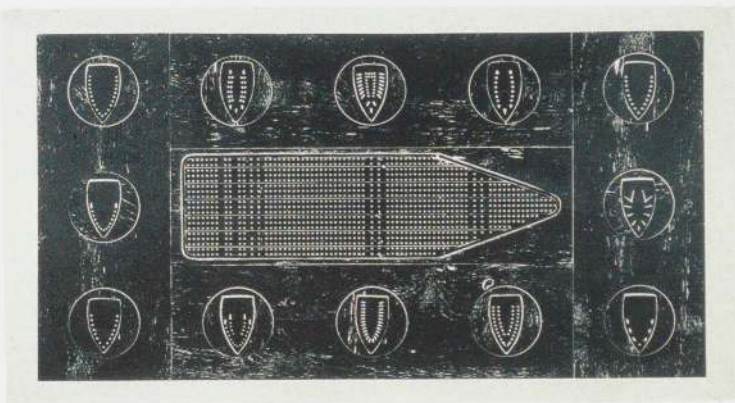
The first scorches date from 1988–89, the year Cole spent as artist-in-residence at The Studio Museum in Harlem. Early works such as *Proctor Silex (Presence & Evidence)* and *Presto (Presence & Evidence)* incorporate the iron in both sculptural and printed components—an actual iron's presence and evidence. Evoking the sense of a found object's prior life is an important aspect of Cole's work, and he instills a feeling of metaphorical history into each piece. In the former work, Cole encases the scorches behind a glass fire screen, embalming the prints as if they were specimens in an anthropological display. In the latter, a figurative assemblage sits on a wooden ironing board that extends out



from an expanse of scorched canvas, suggesting a diminutive chieftain against a backdrop of his warriors.

Violence remained an undercurrent in Cole's work as he slowly abandoned these hybrid pieces in favor of pure scorching. "I like the fear element, that I could get burned doing that. I definitely have a fear of being burned."<sup>7</sup> Cole often compounds the sense of danger that accompanies the scorching process with the allusive format of his works. The *Domestic Shields* of 1992 present ironing boards covered in scorched patterns that resemble West African motifs. The boards themselves are also suggestive of African shields, and Cole installs them

*Domestic I.D.*, IV of 1992 (cover), he labels each face with its commercial brand name to encourage this interpretation, thus ironically suggesting the tribes of Silex, General Electric, or Sunbeam. This format is reminiscent of the Surrealist and Conceptual device of mislabeling compositional elements for ironic effect. The window frame in this work, with its obvious signs of wear, reinforces both the domestic, intimate reading of the individual scorches and its symbolic history. The buckling paper reminds us of the violence of the searing heat used to imprint the mythical faces, adding an ominous and poignant overtone.



*Stowage*. 1997. Woodcut. 49 7/8 x 95 1/8" (125.9 x 241.5 cm). Publisher: Alexander and Bonin Publishing, Inc., New York. Printer: Derrière L'Étoile Studios, New York. Edition: 16. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Jacqueline Brody Fund and The Friends of Education Fund

vertically in a militant warrior posture. Many of these works were made outdoors over an open fire. In describing this process Cole said, "Sometimes if I feel real aggressive I go outside and I start a big fire in a can. I take the iron completely apart, and I just take the bottom pad with the pattern on it, put it on a long pole, like a branding iron, and heat them in that."<sup>8</sup>

In the early 1990s, Cole also began appreciating not just the aggressiveness, but the individual beauty of the iron surfaces, and discovered that every brand of iron had a different face. He began using a variety of irons in a single work to allude to different tribal associations. In

In a monumental work titled *Sunflower* (1994) Cole united the decorative potential of his scorching with a powerful and evocative form. The sunburst configuration was inspired by elaborate mandalas used in Indian meditation and was further suggested to Cole by a spectacular astronomical phenomenon that blanketed the news in July 1994.<sup>9</sup> Typical of his working process, he imprinted *Sunflower* on a canvas backed with mattress padding and wood. This homage to van Gogh suggests a dynamic, pulsating shield, all the more potent because of the method of its creation. The act of scorching takes on a ritualistic dimension in this enormous scale and emblematic shape.

*Sunflower* also exemplifies Cole's use of the stamping process for extensive repetition of an existing form and the creation of intricate, overlapping patterns.

Recently, Cole has employed the iron within the printmaking medium of woodcut. And he is as innovative with this traditional medium as he is with the scorch. The four-by-eight-foot print titled *Stowage* (1997) is derived from a diagram of a slave ship he found in a childhood schoolbook. To create this work, he cut holes in the oversized wood planks that comprise the printing block and inserted twelve different irons. Each face suggests a different tribe along the African coast that might have traveled in this massive slave vessel. The central plank was cut to accommodate an ironing board that represents the ship itself. This unconventional printing matrix fuses the customary grainy wood surface with the perforated metal faces of the irons and the ironing board. The resulting monumental print integrates medium, form, and piercing social comment and is a further example of his inventive use of printmaking to fit his own vision.

Cole uses the branding process to draw out what he calls the spirit in the object. The smell, the texture, and the searing physical act all contribute aspects of meaning to his unique approach to imprinting an image. The scorch also embodies personal experiences from Cole's African-American background and reflects the creativity with which he asserts that heritage. In his two-dimensional work, Cole has embraced the iron scorch as the most direct, succinct, and meaningful visual analog to his layered iconography and has expanded our understanding of the symbolic power of the printed mark.

Wendy Weitman  
Associate Curator

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#### Notes

1 For more on the medium of imprints see Georges Didi-Huberman and Didier Semin, *L'Empreinte* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997).

2 Arman began the *Cachets*, or rubber stamps, in 1954 and the *Allures d'objets* and *Colères* series, in which paint-covered objects create the markings on canvas, in 1958.

3 See Jasper Johns's *Study for Skin* of 1962 and Yves Klein's *Anthropométries* of 1960.

4 His earliest works on paper were pastels that coincided with his beginnings as a painter in the 1970s. As his interest shifted to sculpture he abandoned these Post-Impressionist-style drawings.

5 Conversation between Cole and the author, April 23, 1998.

6 Interview with Cole by Elizabeth A. Brown. Published in Brown, *Social Studies: 4+4 Young Americans* (Oberlin, Ohio: Allen Memorial Art Museum, 1990), p. 19.

7 Ibid.

8 Quoted in transcript of Cole lecture at *Thinking Print: Books to Billboards 1980-1995* Symposium, The Museum of Modern Art, June 26, 1994, p. 21.

9 Conversation between Cole and the author, April 23, 1998. Most likely, the artist was referring to the comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 which collided with Jupiter and received extensive news coverage.

Cover: *Domestic I.D., IV*. 1992. Iron scorch and pencil on paper mounted in recycled painted wood window frame, 35 x 32 x 1 3/8" (88.9 x 81.3 x 3.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchased with funds given by Agnes Gund

Fold-out: Special project by Willie Cole. *The Soles of His Feet*. 1998. Iron scorch on paper, 14 3/4 x 12 3/4" (36.2 x 32.4 cm). Shown actual size

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