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Galleries: 'Willie Cole: Deep Impressions' emphasizes artist's ties to Newark, N.J.

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by **Edith Newhall**, For The Inquirer

If you admire the fertile imagination of Willie Cole, do not miss the excellent and easygoing survey of his work, "Willie Cole: Deep Impressions," at the Rowan University Art Gallery, organized by independent curator and former Montclair Art Museum director Patterson Sims. (Sims was also the curator of Cole's first comprehensive survey show, "Anxious Objects: Willie Cole's Favorite Brands," which originated at Montclair Art Museum in 2005 under his directorship.)



This succinct, well-rounded gathering of the artist's drawings, prints, and sculptures from the last 35 years emphasizes Cole's lifelong ties and current close proximity to Newark, N.J. It begins with his 1977 self-portrait, one of many pastel portraits he drew every year on his birthday in his teens and 20s, made from his reflection in his bathroom mirror in his Newark apartment building.

Another early pastel drawing, *Yard Dog*, from 1985, of a barking pit bull tied to a pole (one of many images of fierce dogs he produced in the 1980s), was inspired by the aggressive canines in his neighborhood. Cole's graphic-design prowess, which supported him in the late 1970s and early '80s, is revealed in an exhibition poster he designed for the Works Gallery, which he started and ran out of his Newark loft from 1982 to 1987.

Cole's real artistic blossoming, however, occurs in the late 1980s, when he begins to make iron scorches on paper, using hot steam irons to make single-iron images and patterns, and making assemblages of hair dryers (which he found in a deserted warehouse) and used high-heel shoes.

The show contains several scorch pieces, as well as his largest print, a woodcut showing images of irons and an ironing board in a composition arranged after the 18th-century broadside illustration of the overcrowded Brookes slave ship. *Wind Mask East II*, a hair-dryer assemblage c. 1990, has the features of an East Asian mask. (Cole, who took classes at the Newark Museum as a child, got to know its collections well.)

Over the last decade, Cole has experimented with new presentations of his signature found objects. The bottoms of irons are transformed into a tribesman's finest garb in the photographs of Cole that make up *Silex Male*, *Ritual* and *Sunbeam Male: Ceremonial*, both from 2004. And high heels are arranged in grid patterns reminiscent of Chinese characters written in columns in his colorful "Rapture" lithographs from 2008. He also has begun a graphic novel, as evidenced by his marker drawing, *Dead Dog Blues* (2009), and turned bicycles into African mask dance sculptures, such as *Pacific tji wara* (2002).

Fortunately, he knows when to preserve and tweak a good thing, too.

MBF, his slightly kinky 2011 assemblage of black patent leather men's shoes that looks like a seated dog (hence the acronym for man's best friend), is the licorice antidote to Jeff Koons' innocent giant, *Puppy*.

People power

The exhaustive and sprawling "People's Biennial" - recently arrived at Haverford College, organized by artist Harrell Fletcher and curator Jens Hoffmann, and representing under-known and unknown artists from Scottsdale, Ariz.; Portland, Ore.; Rapid City, S.D.; Winston-Salem, N.C., and Haverford - is fun, but, as might be divined from its title, positions itself defiantly beyond the perimeters of mainstream contemporary art. Fletcher, a graduate of the California College of the Arts and a professor at Portland State University, and Hoffmann, director of the California College of the Arts' Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts and a former director of London's ICA, cast a wide net for their show, putting announcements on the radio and in newspapers and sending e-mail blasts.

The works they chose represent a diverse group of media, many of them united by an intellectual or physical representation of open-endedness; some of these rough-cut diamonds make a lasting impression.

Ellen Lesperance's gouache-and-graphite drawings of patterns for knitted sweaters intended to memorialize particular resistance movements, such as the all-women, antinuclear Peace Camp at the United States' Greenham Common air base in Berkshire, England, would stand alone even without their resulting knitted-wool counterparts. Likewise, Gary A. Freitas' painted constructions exploring the patterns common to art and chaos theory are exquisitely imagined and made. Robert Smith-Shabazz's carved-wood painted portraits memorializing deceased loved ones strike a particularly sincere note in this show.

One project that seems most closely aligned with contemporary art, Maiza Hixson's videos of interviews with men and women responding to images of male and female nudes in an exhibition she organized in 2006, is, tellingly, one of the exhibition's most coherent works.

Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, Whitehead Campus Center, Haverford College, 370 Lancaster Ave., 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays (Wednesdays to 8 p.m.), 12 to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. 610-896-1287 or www.haverford.edu/peoplesbiennial (<http://www.haverford.edu/peoplesbiennial>). Through March 2.

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