



SOMETHING TO TAKE MY PLACE
The Art of Lonnie Holley

EDITED BY

Mark Sloan

ESSAYS BY

Bernard L. Herman

Theodore Rosengarten

Mark Sloan

Leslie Umberger

HALSEY INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART
COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON, SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA



In Memory of the Blood

Leslie Umberger

Lonnie Bradley Holley became a gleaner around the age of five. His quarry was the debris of humanity, things left in the wake of the fortunate and the careless. Being a salvager, keeping his eyes to the ground for the unrecognized wealth that might lie before him, became one of Holley's most defining characteristics. This trait, born of both physical need and spiritual salvation, would lastingly guide and govern both Holley's life and his art.

Holley's youth was caught in the crossfire of a Jim Crow South and a Civil Rights-era America. He was born in 1950, in Birmingham, Alabama. Holley inherited the struggles and animosities that began centuries before he was born, and his boyhood was snared in an ideological battle that would permanently stain Alabama's historical identity. Today, Holley is among America's most highly regarded artists, featured in a host of exhibitions that include a twenty-five-year retrospective at the Birmingham Museum of Art in 2004, this major solo exhibition at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, and group shows around the world, most recently the 2014 Prospect New Orleans. He has works of art in premier museum collections, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Holley's sculptural forms and elaborated spaces are powerfully personal, nimble in form and strategy, heartfelt, and deeply rooted. In works that are simultaneously diaphanous and unyielding, he braids together personal experience, family stories, cultural survivals, the gravity of history, and the ephemeral sublime.

Holley's working method is largely extemporaneous, his multimedia pieces are tangible expressions of active thought rather than something rigidly planned and

executed. They are memory vessels, pacts of survival, and meditations on the dualities of the human sphere. His works are protective talismans that both collectively and singularly speak of governing fates—the accidents of place, time, materiality, and interactions that overarchingly mirror those of humanity. Since he began making art in 1979, his pieces have functioned as parts of a malleable mosaic; he is both environment builder and maker of discreet works of art, a shapeshifting carver, bricoleur, painter, storyteller, poet, and singer, whose most constant state is one of motion. Comprehensively, Holley's works of art comprise a charged chronicle of his entire life, each piece a potent mnemonic container of oral history that springs to life when looked at, touched, or talked about. Most specifically in this way, Holley's work is inseparable from the vernacular milieu that shaped it. Like many traditional practices and folkways, his work functions to keep people alive in his memory and map his own existence in relation to theirs. It is deeply autobiographical, but encompasses other planes—the conjoined stories of African Americans and all people born into legacies of struggle and oppression; personal history as American history. In the context of the greater art world, Holley's forms can be discussed in terms of their conceptual sophistication and abstract grace, their contemplation of urban wreckage and agrarian bounty, their call for harmony and morality, and a relentless juxtaposition of the world's horrors and wonders.

Holley gravitates toward degraded castoffs and their palpable narrative of challenge and endurance. His aesthetic is very deeply imprinted, not chosen as a fashion or in conscious opposition to the polish of mainstream gleam; it is the stuff from which he is made. To say that Holley had a hard childhood doesn't scratch the surface;

to estimate the ways in which it both branded and shaped him, truly impossible. What is possible is to say that while much of Holley’s inheritance has been that of pain and loss, he has consistently spun his challenges into an array of profound heirlooms and poetic jewels; to detach the roots from the fruits would undermine the power of his endeavor. Yet, the close proximity of his biography to his content does not confine or define him, and the aesthetic power of his work is undeniable. As artists of all kinds routinely make manifest, the cultural and visual environments of our lives become integral to who we are; those suffusing realities shape aesthetic sensibilities and engender affinities. In the mid-1950s, peaceful protests and acts of civil disobedience, comprising the nascent Civil Rights movement, began to provoke harsh backlash, perhaps most of all in Alabama and Mississippi. As a child adrift and unprotected, Holley would not participate in or benefit from the battles for rights and equality until his formative years had long since passed.

The world we find ourselves in is not always spiritually or sensually sufficient, and artists who build or artistically elaborate an environment are often addressing a need to remake it, reshape, at the very least, a corner of it. Aesthetic imprinting or affiliation does not pertain to race or ethnicity so specifically as it does to lived experience and cultural heritage. To the extent that many Southern, vernacular African American artists respond visually and emotionally to objects that have traveled a hard road or embody, materially or metaphorically, the place they come from, it is an affinity both poignant and logical. In this volume, Holley conveys his epic personal journey through National Book Award-winner and MacArthur Fellow Theodore Rosengarten and his story will be told in the forthcoming biographic film *The Lonnie Holley Story*, by George King.¹ Both explorations

provide comprehensive context for Holley’s worldview and the work that stems from it. Here, only some of the key facts are reiterated—those that bear revisiting regularly, for Holley himself will never have much distance from them, as his visual art, poetic dialogues, and improvisational music all attest.

Regarding the output of artists, self-taught artists in particular, the role and relative import of biography is often debated. And not unjustly, because, in the early days of such art even being discussed at all, the biographies of nonart-world artists were disproportionately foregrounded—exoticized in a mixed-motive attempt to justify, interpret, and market work that did not subscribe to established and understood (white/Western) models. What constitutes “early days,” for the purpose of this essay, are the 1980s and ‘90s, when the work of Southern, vernacular artists, particularly African Americans, saw a marked rise in popularity.

In a broader view, playing up the personal characters of untrained artists in the United States dates farther back, to the 1930s and ‘40s, when the stone carver William Edmondson became the first African American artist to receive a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and such so-called “primitives” as Edmondson, Grandma (Anna Mary Robertson) Moses, Horace Pippin, John Kane, and Morris Hirshfield all first received acclaim—albeit through a modernist lens. In different ways, untrained artists in the early, mid- and late twentieth centuries were distanced from the mainstream, and their noticeable variances (such as rural backgrounds, lack of education, or various degrees of mental or cultural difference) were used to arouse enthusiasm for creations that didn’t play by art-world rules. Yet, it is the latter of these periods, when nativist modes of production became visible in a way they had never

been before, in which the prevailing treatment of African American artists finally revealed the depth and profundity of the racial tensions that underlay the art. To celebrate the work of a “naïve” or “primitive” artist, through the filters of Western art, had been one thing, to honor a black artist as having an original and intentional aesthetic, and being on par with, or even superior to, any other artist, entirely another.

The 1800s in the 1970s

In his 1974 book *All God’s Dangers*, Theodore Rosengarten chronicles the memories of an Alabama sharecropper. The man, using the pseudonym Nate Shaw, gives a sobering account of a poor, black tenant-farmer’s life “under the twin yoke of race oppression and economic peonage.”² About him, Rosengarten writes: “Shaw demonstrates that a person is, at every moment, everything he always was; his current role can eclipse his past but not deny it.”³ Holley embodies this same sentiment; his affable nature and ease with an artistic celebrity and with any group of people never fully veil the life that came before the one he lives today.

Shaw predates Holley by some fifty years, and describes not just his own life but the memories passed to him orally by his forebears. *New York Times* book reviewer Dwight Garner notes that “*All God’s Dangers* also happens to be a dense catalogue of the ways that whites tricked and mistreated blacks in the first half of the twentieth century.”⁴ And, indeed, what may be most striking today is how the American collective memory acknowledges the horrors of slavery but largely suppresses those of the ensuing one hundred years, when aggressive oppression continued and even thrived among a contingent of America that was unwilling to concede defeat in the battle for racial

dominance. In *Slavery by Another Name*, Douglas A. Blackmon argues that de facto slavery did not end nearly as long ago as many Americans believe. Blackmon’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book charts an era between the Civil War and the Civil Rights movement, when more than a hundred thousand random African American citizens, including children, were arrested on false or invented charges. When they could not pay bail, they were subsequently sold or “leased” to labor camps designed around free labor and black suppression and run by major American corporations, small-scale entrepreneurs, farmers, and state and county governments. Klan terrorism was periodic, but these other practices were routine and widespread. Blackmon’s research centered, in particular, around steel mines in the Birmingham area. He writes:

It was a form of bondage distinctly different from that of the antebellum South. . . . But it was nonetheless slavery—a system in which armies of men, guilty of no crimes and entitled by law to freedom, were compelled to labor without compensation, were repeatedly bought and sold, and were forced to do the bidding of white masters through the application of extraordinary physical coercion.⁵

Antebellum and postwar eras are, of course, distinct, but the legacy handed by the former to the latter is indelible and lasting. What becomes particularly relevant here is that, as mainstream museums increasingly show and collect African American vernacular art, they often follow a trending curatorial model of detaching the art from the harsh realities that shaped it. This stems in part from conflating vernacular art with the work of professional African American artists who not unjustly wanted to be

regarded as Americans beyond their collective racial past, intellectuals of talent, skill, and worth. But those aims are not one and the same with the artists who never had the opportunity to move into educated middle- or upper-class realms. Curatorial partitioning between art and cultural history reveals, perhaps most of all, an overcorrection of the biography-emphasizing age of the exotic “outsider artist” and an institutional anxiety about delving into aesthetics that are borne of discomfiting circumstances and provoke heated prevailing controversies. This cool ideal of presenting an even playing field in the museum environment suggests that such a field is, by simultaneous declaration and miracle, suddenly even. But the most salient fact is this: The standards and ideals of the mainstream art world are irrelevant to this work; its power grew apart from them and will exist apart from them, with or without endorsement. The mainstream art world, after underestimating this work for decades, is now caught in an awkward game of catch-up.

In his sculpture, Holley has memorialized those who underestimated or disrespected him along with those he owes respect and gratitude. He speaks frequently about his family, childhood, and all the things that bloomed into his artistic practice; he honors the journey that brought him where he stands today, hard as it was. With six children preceding Lonnie, Dorothy Mae Holley Crawford (Dot) enlisted the nursing help of a woman, who stole her child away. When this woman brought the little boy back to Birmingham, malnourished and unmoored at the age of four, she traded him to the owner of a whiskey house.⁶ Holley speaks of his time at this place as pivotal, roughly two years between the ages of five and seven. Mrs. McElroy’s house was situated among the Alabama State Fairgrounds, a racetrack, and a drive-in movie theater. Big Mama, as

Holley called her, ran an establishment that was no place for kids; it was all adults, drinking. She was nice, he recalls, but her husband was not.

Holley was given the backyard to hang out in, not a real yard so much as a small dirt patch behind the house. The alternative was to go look for work at the drive-in, where the manager hired the small boy to pick up trash. To



Pulling on the Root
1994
27 ½ x 26 x 24
Photograph by Steve Pitkin /
Pitkin Studios

get there, Holley had to crawl through a drainage pipe that connected the properties. He recalls: “I crawled through those pipes, down in the muck that was in them. It was dark; I learned where to put my hands and feet, learned to understand touch, feel, sounds. It was survival through physical experience.”⁷

Holley learned that, along with the garbage people threw away, they also tossed things of value. Careless folks at the drive-in sometimes discarded change with their snack bar refuse and people dropped or left behind personal items, so he learned to look carefully at what he was collecting and keep anything of potential worth. Holley didn’t play, know fun, feel safe, or experience much in the way of familial love; he cut his teeth on the harsh reality of poverty and the poetry of trash. This visual environment allowed him to see many objects as inherently beautiful, though—forlorn and misunderstood or undervalued treasures with real gleam beneath the tarnish. He thought about how a certain item had passed from hand to hand to hand in its time of being. His prize possession was a little red wagon. The positive memories he has of that fleeting childhood was taking his wagon around, rescuing tossed-aside treasures. He reflects on the roots of his aesthetic sensibilities, and indeed a philosophy that has become his mantra: “That was ugly, ugly was what we had. So, I thought, make it as beautiful as possible.”⁸

In *Pulling on the Root* (1994), Holley commemorates the red wagon, which, after being hit by a car while pulling it, he never saw again. This was Birmingham in 1957, and Holley had protection neither at home nor in the larger world. Mrs. McElroy, bedridden and in ill health, had passed away. The woman’s husband blamed the child, whom he had left alone to care for her for days on end, and beat the already

bewildered boy. In a rush to be out of the house, Lonnie stepped into the street without looking. When the car hit him, it dragged Holley’s small frame under the front fender for blocks. The driver claimed not to have noticed the body he hit head-on.⁹ Holley’s legs and arms were all broken, skull fractured. He remained in a coma for several months and surprised all by living.

Holley got into a predictable spate of troubles for kids with nowhere but the streets to hang out. In 1961, he was sent to a juvenile detention center called Mt. Meigs, otherwise known as the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children. It was, ostensibly, a reform school where black youth were trained in farming, but, as former Montgomery County probation officer Denny Abbott attests, it was “a slave camp.” Abbott writes:

I want to make it clear that I’m not using ‘slave’ as a figure of speech, and I’m not exaggerating for dramatic effect. I’m talking about a place where children as young as twelve were held by brute force and put into hard labor in the fields. They were worked until they dropped, and when they dropped they were beaten with sticks. Often they were beaten for no reason at all, and sometimes they were forced to have sex with the men who beat them. The most horrifying fact about this place is that it was run by the State of Alabama.¹⁰

Holley’s years at Mt. Meigs are a story unto themselves. Suffice to say here that it was brutal; he was lucky to survive.¹¹

Holley’s paternal grandmother, Hixie Jones Canady (called Momo) took him away from Mt. Meigs when he was fourteen. Holley’s father, A. J. Bradley, had died and he

went to live with Momo and his Uncle Jesse. His mother, Dot, lived nearby, with a new partner and her father, Willie Holley. Lonnie was reunited with them and all the siblings and cousins he had never known—a wealth of family revealed in the span of a few months. Momo taught him how to comb local dumpsites for items they could sell at the flea market, and this lifestyle felt comfortable. All in the family knew how to scrape together, recycle, make do; they spun life out of straw. But Holley also recalls being restless and lost. The abuses he had suffered made relationships challenging; he says he felt the love, but didn't really even know what love was. His uncle told him to stay busy, but he was finding trouble. His grandmother and mother sent him to Florida to stay with a brother, and it was there that Holley felt independent for the first time. He worked as a cook at a Disney World motel in Orlando, and then picked tomatoes in Ohio for Campbell's Soup Company before going back to Florida. But somehow it didn't come together; he felt aware of his failures at being a boyfriend and, by then, a father himself too. In 1971, he returned to Birmingham.

He saw the lives of his family differently than he had right after Mt. Meigs. The reality of their circumstances was a shock. He recalls, "My mama and them were living in the 1800s, with slop jars and outdoor bathrooms, and no running water, and pigs in the house, and chickens and things in the backyard, and ducks and things roosting in the house. So I had thought, 'What's *wrong*?' Here, in 1972, I found my mother living in an 1800-kennel setting in the 1970s. It was kind of hard for me to deal with."¹² Holley says his mother was a powerful woman who bore twenty-seven children, something he frames in relation to sharecropping families, where a never-ending chain of family members contribute to all manner of work and family

care, and not all who are born survive. Holley describes Dot as capable and proud; they didn't have much, but she showed them they could live through thrift and hard work. These values encompassed him from all sides. Willie Holley, who was a World War I veteran and skilled craftsman, had built the house they shared on Airport Hill. The adjacent land would one day anchor Holley's yard installation.

Holley wanted to teach his brothers and sisters the value of thrift, salvage, and the various means of survival he had learned over the years. He was also trying to teach them the value of education, but the era was shifting to one in which such social programs as welfare and food stamps were arguably helping and hurting. People were provided for, but the impetus to scrounge, save, and repurpose that Holley had been weaned on was becoming less meaningful—a situation he viewed as both depressing and alarming.

One Square Acre of Art

I first met Holley in 1997, just before his home and art environment, near the Birmingham airport, were razed through the airport's claim of eminent domain. Holley had already been displaced from the property, and was trying to rescue as many individual pieces as possible. My conversations with Holley, at the time, were centered around the loss of his art environment, the beginnings of a new one in Harpersville, Alabama—where he had relocated—and how he had come to art-making initially, a story that began with his reintegration into his natal family and negotiating the ensuing depression. The pivotal moment was the tragic loss of two of his sister's children in a house fire and his creation of grave markers when

Carrier of the Seeds
2006
22 ½ x 9 ½ x 11



the family could not afford the expense of commercially engraved stones. His sister's grief inspired a vision in which Holley saw the spiritual rewards of creating the very most with the very least, and imagined himself making a yard filled with art.¹³ Using castoff chunks of industrial sand, he carved the memorial pieces, and after that began to paint, sculpt, and transform his yard into an art-filled space around the clock. He thought about all the people who were dead but not forgotten—objects and their relationship to those who had made or used them. "I dig through what other people have thrown away," Holley said. "To get to the gold of it—to know that grandmother stood over that heat preparing that meal, so when I go home with that skillet, I've got grandmother. 'Grand': someone who has authority and is capable."¹⁴ He increasingly saw every single thing around him as a container of symbolism, meaning, gifts bearing lessons. In 1993, Holley described himself as "a giant spider for life," snaring all manner of detritus and working with a fervor. "The web is my environment."¹⁵

By the time Holley moved to Harpersville, he was a man accustomed to being stripped of everything in the process of beginning yet again. Recycling and the reclamation/salvation of trash treasures were integral to his practice and the way in which every single rescue of a discarded bottle, lost doll head, tangle of wire, tree branch, or fragment of consumer culture was, for Holley, an ongoing self-affirmation and incessant ritual of a person who, himself, had been "thrown away" too many times.

At that very transitional point in his life, Holley was an artist who had remade his world in the manner of art-environment builders and yard-show makers. He had created a protective home in the way of practitioners of conjure or root medicine—African folkways that strive for

balance in a chaotic world—that had survived and morphed since the first days of the Middle Passage. Keith Cartwright notes that the first generations of African Americans were born into “a peculiarly homicidal and broken time-space”; they reinvented the world day by day and were “among the first orphan initiates and self-conscious subjects of a globalizing modernity.” He observes that to be native to this shattered reality is “to retain awareness of the violent and shadow-haunted side of the sacred.”¹⁶ Ancestrally linked and similarly native to a broken “time-space,” Holley has said that “life and death is a twin; they have to be.”¹⁷

Holley had dug graves with his grandmother and observed the grave-marking practices of black Alabamans, which were often driven, at least in part, by financial means, and often utilized natural materials that degraded over time like fading memories. He had lived near an African American cemetery and seen how belongings of the deceased and found objects laden with metaphor and metonymy became protective talismans, shelters for displaced gods, portals of remembrance—and how the meaning of those visual practices rang as clear as a bell centuries down the road. Unburdened by self-doubt, he accepted the role fate had seemingly handed him, that of global modern artist, seer, and healer. Holley had discovered that he walked a road in lockstep with his forebears, and the revelation of redoubling histories had given him power.

The destruction of Holley’s acre of art was pivotal. It was not a benign dismantling, it was more like a war between the powers that be and a renegade spirit they felt needed quashing. The bulldozers would veer off course to destroy Holley’s site-specific assemblages. Atlanta arts patron and advocate William Arnett recounted, “Imagine



**Locking Back
the Power**
2003
14 ½ x 15 x 9

Phoenix versus Arsonist. As Holley kept rising, they kept burning. Every one of his destroyed artworks provided him with materials, ideas, and incentives for new ones.”¹⁸ Holley noted he worked like a yo-yo; the bulldozers tore things down, new works went up in their place. “I was trying to make art to protect the art,” he reflects. “I saw that in the city of Birmingham, where art could be tore down so easy and trampled upon, it was my responsibility to

fight for the rights of art. I have been to many places. I have understood that our kind of art, the art of black people, has been the first to come and is always the first to go. When our art is too strong, it get tore down. If it is weak, there is even people who will nurture it until it is strong and *then* tear it down.”¹⁹

By then, Holley was receiving recognition for his work, but still in a clearly marginalized way. In Harpersville, a contentious relationship developed with neighbors who thought his nascent site an eyesore. The property itself was fraught; seized in a drug raid, the house was nestled among an enclave of its former owner’s relatives. They were openly hostile to an outsider—increasingly more so after he began to alter the site radically. Blacks in the area were variously resentful of Holley’s reclamation and reinvention of that space, and many white visitors could not see past a veneer of squalor or the uneasy aesthetic of discord and mutability. Artist and professor Judith McWillie called Holley’s installation “a locus of ‘moving equilibrium’ where physical coordinates constantly shift,” noting that a moving equilibrium was an integral component of African divination systems. She continues, “Whereas Robert Rauschenberg’s combines seem dependent on gestures magnetized to a cryptic grid, Holley’s moves tend to break loose from the ground that would support them. The state-free status of his art, its liminality, identifies it as divinatory rather than manneristic. Closure is in the eye of the beholder—scattered, elusive, barely familiar, like listening to Gullah for the first time.”²⁰

By then, Holley had caught the attention of a few collectors, academics, and curators. But his foremost advocate was Arnett, who brought his art to a broader public and remained his most ardent champion, particularly

after seeing his yard environment in the mid-1980s and grasping the depth of his vision. In 1981, Holley had been included in a group show, *More Than Land or Sky*, at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and, in 1987, *Voices in the Wilderness*, at the Birmingham Museum of Art.²¹ He gained entry to those museums, arguably, with greater ease than a white artist of no record could have done, but the contexts were heavily themed and regionalized, shaped according to a then-forming outsider or contemporary folk art model. These were explorative ways of broadening the scope of museum narratives that were inherently shaped on exclusion and privilege. Self-taught African American artists had slid through the gates from time to time and for various reasons, such as “accidental” sophistication, as was the case with William Edmondson and Bill Traylor, or for being overtly crude, as with such artists as William Hawkins and Mose Tolliver. Some trained African American artists viewed such inclusions not as an advance for their race but as a problematic issue, wherein the white establishment had found an effective vehicle for diversification that deftly posed black artists as primitive and guileless. They felt undermined by the celebration of their untrained brethren, even though the art was often brilliantly original and powerful. Market tactics played into this hand. Self-taught artists were compartmentalized as outsiders, a container that coded a lack of sophistication. The artists were not simply untrained, they were poor and uneducated, marginalized on a number of fronts, and these points were unfairly and erroneously used to explain a raw energy or tattered aesthetic.

Holley’s work was being collected, but his practice was intensely personal. He didn’t cater—then or at any other time—to any market or fashion; “I’m not one

of those art fair cats,” he says.²² Those who visited his sculptural environment were alternately enthralled or off-put; the visually percussive space was disorienting even to a set familiar with artistically elaborated spaces. The phenomenon of art environments was becoming more widely known—these being sites by artists who transformed a personal space into a physical extension of personal being. But the sites that garnered the most attention (positive and negative) tended to be those that were big, bright, noticeable, or scintillatingly eccentric, such as Sabato (Sam) Rodia’s spiraling towers, in Los Angeles’s Watts,²³ or Howard Finster’s Paradise Garden, in Summerville, Georgia. Rodia battled naysayers for the duration of his project, and was dead by the time his site became an attraction. Finster’s passionate evangelism and visual articulation were widely regarded as integral to the site itself. His art was valued for its inventiveness and originality, and visitors respected the tremendous dedication his project required—but many also saw the artist as a colorful character who was fun to visit, and the site was often experienced akin to an amusement park. One could step into that world for a few hours of amazement and return unscathed to everyday life.

Rodia (1879–1965) and Finster (1916–2001) both predate Holley significantly, but their environments were among those that, while radically different, helped shape an American sense of what constituted an art environment. Gregg Blasdel described the phenomenon in his 1968 *Art in America* article “The Grass Roots Artist.” And he was among the authors of the catalogue for the first major exhibition on the art of environment builders at the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis, in 1974: *Naïves and Visionaries*. That exhibition called attention to the “visionary environments” of artists Samuel Perry Dinsmoore, James

Hampton, Tressa (Grandma) Prisbrey, Sam Rodia (called Simon in their edition), Herman Rusch, Clarence Schmidt, Fred Smith, and Louis C. Wippich.

The work of James Hampton, the only African American artist in the group, was first seen at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in 1971.²⁴ The artist had devoted decades to making a large-scale installation inside a rented carriage house in Washington, D.C., a devotional array he called *The Throne of Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly*. The Smithsonian’s acquisition of the 180-component piece was remarkable at the time: a sizeable conglomeration of found and fragile elements embellished with texts in English and in an arcane script, made by an untrained, unknown, African American artist that in no discernible way fit into an established mainstream art narrative. But the piece demanded attention. It was identifiably religious in nature, overtly Christian, but there was clearly more to it—from the start, it was referred to as a work of “visionary art.” In 1983, Robert Farris Thompson, historian of African and African American art at Yale, proposed connectivity between African spiritual traditions and African American visual practices, linking Hampton’s entrancing piece to Kongo incarnations of “flash and poetic flight.”²⁵ Thompson meant not to undermine the Americanness of such work but to illuminate the idea of ancestral legacy in practices that had largely been viewed through a Western lens as haphazard, unimportant, and unsightly.

Hampton’s array, ordered and symmetrical, is superficially the opposite of Holley’s eclectic labyrinth, and yet the greater inquiry into art environments would ultimately shed light on the commonalities of practices that entailed self-reclamation, cultural rootedness, spiritual

Supported by the Power
2003
72 x 42 x 32



balance, and personal vision. Moreover, the distinctions between art environments made by European Americans and African Americans were emerging as indisputable and important, and with those distinctions came a clearer measure of all such places as valid containers of various, specific cultural histories and evolutions—not merely idiosyncratic oddities.²⁶

Holley’s installation was not about “visitor experience,” it was not fun or funny. The place functioned comprehensively as a gateway into another state of mind; it was a navigational apparatus in a larger world that Holley had experienced as unbalanced and unpredictable. His space was one that provoked existential ruminations on being part of a capitalist consumer culture—a continuum between the era of greed-driven slavery and today’s engulfing landfills and planetary abuses. The past, both that which Holley had experienced and one he could only imagine, had shaped him into a person of serious reflection. He had embarked upon a relentless quest to respect his ancestors, keep their story alive, and use his own existence and practice toward a positive outgrowth of endurance.

“We bring the story forward.”²⁷

Souls Grown Deep

In 1996, Holley had been among a group of artists chosen to highlight what was by then being called a strong and serious vein of Southern African American vernacular art in an exhibition called *Souls Grown Deep*, organized to showcase Southern art and culture during the 1996 Summer Olympics. The High Museum had set its sights on making Atlanta seem worldly rather than celebrating anything homegrown, and J. Carter Brown, then director emeritus at Washington, D.C.’s National Gallery of Art,



**Boneheaded Serpent
at the Cross**
1996
21 x 18 x 9

organized the exhibition *Rings: Five Passions in World Art*. Crowds swarmed, critics groaned. Roberta Smith of the *New York Times* wrote, “Blockbuster art exhibitions often excel at superficiality, but *Rings: Five Passions in World Art*, which opens on July 4 at the High Museum of Art, deserves a special award. The centerpiece of the cultural events surrounding the summer Olympic Games, the exhibition may set records for the most international art treasures traveling the greatest distances for the least curatorial purpose.”²⁸

When the High had settled on featuring “world class art” rather than the region’s native culture, Holley made an assemblage called *Not Olympic Rings* (1994). In it, he ruminated on then-recent encounters with local authorities—from the city officials and bureaucrats at Sloss Furnace, who dismantled a public sculpture commissioned by the Southern Arts Federation, to the powers that be at the High Museum and on the organizing committee for the Olympic events—all seemed hell-bent on trying to undercut his artistry. With an armature that evokes Holley’s own facial profile, the piece is strung with various circular objects: car parts, dials, industrial O-rings, and rusted and worn castoffs from the industrial, agricultural, and urban realm of African Americans in the South. Noting that the piece is especially autobiographical, Holley explains that the castoff rings stand in for him; they are not the glowing rings deemed appropriate for the world stage.

The art for *Souls Grown Deep* had been recognized and preserved by Arnett, and the exhibition was a collaborative effort among him, the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG) Cultural Olympiad, the Carlos Museum of Emory University, and the City of Atlanta Bureau of Cultural Affairs. Holley created a charged environmental

space, described by *Newsweek* critic Malcolm Jones, Jr., as “a front yard re-created right down to the dirt floor, but a yard transformed, with broken tombstones, sprinkler heads, bedsprings, paintings, baby-doll parts—and all of it rejiggered by artist Lonnie Holley into a phantasmagorical vision as surreptitiously coherent as a dream.”²⁹

Of the exhibition comprehensively, Jones said, “The show that ought to be showcased in the High Museum, the show that best exemplifies the South’s unique contribution to art, has been relegated to a lesser space in City Hall East, a venue that’s harder to find but worth the trouble. *Souls Grown Deep*, an enormous collection of vernacular art—what used to be called primitive art—by Southern African-Americans is the show to see in Atlanta.”³⁰ The exhibition itself was an early instance in Holley succeeding against the odds. With an aesthetic utterly foreign, and seemingly threatening, to some of the organizers, the project (retrospectively viewed by many as seminal) was variously thwarted. They were moved to an out-of-the-way space, support staff was withdrawn, and the art was shrilly dressed-down in front of the artists as if they had not the wherewithal to understand what was being said. Like other experiences entailing endurance and persistence, Holley committed the event to memory with the sculpture *Boneheaded Serpent at the Cross (It Wasn’t Luck)* (1996), which ruminated on the misplaced righteousness of dominant cultures. In particular, a white woman in the employ of the Carlos Museum

seemed intent on getting the *Souls Grown Deep* show driven into the ground. Her worldview was so dramatically different from Holley’s that she could not see his charged space as art at all, and her limited artistic vision precluded even tolerance. Holley remarked, “Our work on the Olympics was because of years of effort from many minds. But the persons between the art and its place in history didn’t appreciate or want to see the beauty in the art. So, like a serpent, they poisoned the respect for the art. Intentionally.”³¹

An Artist of Enduring Legacy

The *Souls Grown Deep* project became more than the exhibition. Major volumes ensued that documented African American vernacular art and yard work integrally and comprehensively.³² In the first volume, Holley wrote, “This is very important: this book is going to allow us to see the shackles, and know that blood was spilled, but not get angry about it. We will understand the value of these bloods, not only the blood of black Americans but every other human body that has made contributions through the blood.”³³

In *Slave Ship* (1984), Holley encapsulates a seminal history. As he is so deftly able to, he speaks volumes with relatively few elements. The ship itself is composed of wreckage, lives in ruins—both of those on the ship and family left behind on African shores. But its northbound bowsprit indicates an unstoppable motion and an unchangeable destiny. The splintered wooden palette serving as the hull evokes the cruel plank beds the enslaved were chained onto, prone and stacked like the trade goods they were regarded as.

In Holley’s sculpture, a bent and ravaged piece of sheet metal serving as the sail conjures J. M. W. Turner’s painting *Slave Ship* (1840), in which the cargo ship navigates harsh waters, its red masts fusing into a red-sky evening that signals an oncoming storm. The sea is roiling red with the blood of the dead and dying being thrown to the fishes, the entire scene a fury of rage and outrage. Holley’s sail is tinged pink and red at the front, but the sunset hues move into a snarl of black graffiti, visceral spatters, and blackness. Barbed wire, cruelly tangled,



Slave Ship
1984
43 x 103 x 48

brings snares and traps to mind; its brittle rustiness, along with a nailed-on, pounded, element-ravaged piece of rusty sheet metal, serves to reference both the salty sea air of the Middle Passage and rural Alabama, where steel, iron, and railroading were major industries. The main mast, the structure to which all else clings, is an iron pipe, such as those sometimes seen in African American cemeteries, a vertical pipeline between realms: the suffocating hold and the open air, the dead and the living, earth and the heavens.

With *Slave Ship*, Holley proposes that we have to acknowledge the past in order to move forward and heal. This piece, in many ways, is emblematic of Holley himself, never confrontational or gratuitous but always able to send a clear and penetrating message that relates, as Cartwright phrased it, “the shadow-haunted side of the sacred.” Sacred encompasses a great deal for Holley, but those who went before him, family, both immediate and extended, is a revered theme that overarches his entire body of work.

In *Grandmama’s Bottomless Bucket* (1999), Holley honors the matriarch, not just his own but all the women he knew who fulfilled a central role for their families. “The bottomless buckets can’t hold anything but memories,” Holley explains. “So many of these old buckets were used and wore out but kept around because they carried the special memories of the spirits that had used them . . . Those sacred memories stick with me.”³⁴ The idea of the bottomless bucket also harks back to Holley’s memories of the hard times and the many mouths to feed. He speaks often of his grandmother’s ability to produce the things they needed—growing food, finding items to sell. The bucket held nothing certain, yet somehow always contained what they needed. Holley has explained: “Our family was very, very rich, but we didn’t have no money.”³⁵

An extension of the idea of family, blood itself is another reoccurring metaphor in Holley’s work. *Mama’s and Papa’s Blood* (2007) is a tribute that extends beyond his own parents, encompassing his grandparents and their parents and grandparents from time immemorial. The wire armature is bent to resemble a person kneeling in prayer, the blood-soaked (painted) garment denotes both kinship and suffering. “Him and her went out and struggled. The same blood that had given you life, struggled and was spilled on your behalf. Father went off to war. Mother worked her hands to the bone for you. The blood came together for you. It honors life. Humanity and the making of humanity.”³⁶



Mama and Papa's Blood
2007
detail

In Memory of the Blood (detail)
2007
detail



Holley sees blood as life, both literally and symbolically. Conceptually representative of familial flesh and blood, it also evokes a physically brutal chronicle that unites African Americans beyond the realm of African heritage. Two sculptures, *Blood on the Rock Pile* (2003) and *In Memory of the Blood* (2007), specifically take up the idea of blood in its more brutal evocations to recall Holley’s years at Mt. Meigs.

Blood on the Rock Pile memorializes one of Holley’s harshest memories, a severe beating during his incarceration that left him unable to walk for several months and his head severely reinjured. Unable to work the fields or even to stand afterward, Holley was left to recover on an outdoor pile of rocks along a main path. As he remembers it, he spent more than a year laying on this pile of stones, his spilled blood left to stain the whitewashed rocks and warn several hundred other kids as they looked on. In the sculpture, wires tightly bind the concrete and stone fragments that abstractly suggest a small person’s broken and constricted body. White paint poured from above suggests the blanketing white domination

at the camp as well—a “whitewashed” story of what really happened in these places—a story that is only revealing the depth of its horrors today. Drizzles of red paint connote an inhumane scene, the color of blood as fresh and bright as the artist’s memory of torture.

In Memory of the Blood is a more confrontational piece than *Rock Pile*. Holley’s natural language is one of abstraction, but in the past decade his confidence in offering unmistakable messages has risen. Such art historians as Farris-Thompson and Grey Gundaker have long argued that African Americans brought with them from Africa visual strategies that bypassed spoken or written language, and that these practices continued, morphed, and evolved as white slave masters attempted to thwart communication and destroy related groups toward a more complete defeat and domination. Today, the study of continuums and evolutions in visual practice (better understood in music) is increasingly widespread, and attempts to parse superlinguistic representations, or the life of signs in society, are viewed with skepticism.³⁷ Arguments that African Americans in the transatlantic South both retained old world heritage and created a new and unique culture dovetails with Cartwright’s assertion that the first generations were “among the first orphan initiates and self-conscious subjects of a globalizing modernity.” They were not exploring modernism as a lofty concept, they were shaping it in real time, in real actions, and in real objects and images. Their art and music were not intellectual strivings but survival tactics on numerous fronts.

Arnett, too, has spoken at length about visual forms that transcend language, not as an artistic formula but through urgency and necessity. “The art, in order to survive, had to be disguised. It couldn’t be pictorial—[African



Another Definition of Suffering
2006
55 ½ x 29 x 9

American artists] couldn't paint a big picture of a black man hanging and white people standing around laughing about it."³⁸ Symbolism was key. "He's totally abstract, and he's been that way forever," Holley's adult son Kubra told a *New York Times* journalist in 2014. And, indeed, many of Holley's works are cryptic when taken alone, enormously illuminated by his titles or autobiographical overlay, but always reluctant to reveal all their secrets. More recently, however, Holley seems more inclined to say some things plainly, as is the case with *In Memory of the Blood*.

Like many of Holley's sculptures, *In Memory of the Blood* plots a narrative through symbolic parts, oral tradition made manifest with materials and objects. The wooden crutches that compose the central vertical element are unambiguous in their message. These are not lightly worn walking aids, they are the battle-bloodied stand-in legs of the barely living. Saturated with blood, they are bound tightly to the rock—an ironic site, both prison and shelter for a broken body, symbolizing the pile of rocks on which Holley was left to either die or heal. Found scraps of gray polyester and bits of gauze conjure dirty bandages; sanitation and any nurturing for the wounded have no place in this scene. The brutality is both hard to look at and impossible to turn away from.

Looking closely at the bundled parts, a piece of blood-soaked tree root, embedded in the tangle of rock, wood, blood, and bandage, becomes increasingly evident. This is the symbolic root that Holley holds onto, his connection to his family, his people, and his place in a legacy. Overtly, Holley employs a metonymic duality with tree roots and ancestral roots, a linguistic and visual intertwining that, although powerful and important unto itself, also urges a larger truth: Every element of his artistic vein is deeply

symbolic, rife with meanings and layers that will reward the viewer in equal return of any investment. Holley's use of roots—here and throughout his body of work—more subtly draws on the idea of root medicine, an old-world practice involving natural materials, poultices, and bundles to heal and protect. Encompassing the bloodied root in this savage bundle proposes that a belief in higher powers and the internal knowledge of belonging to something ancient and persisting may be what gets you through.

Holley's acts of commemoration can be both quiet and vociferous, often simultaneously. *Another Definition of Suffering* (2006) takes the path of poetry over confrontation. Of it, Holley says, "It's like a cross. It is made of make-do materials. It marks the site of a loved one's death place." Meaning to speak broadly about African American commemoration practices rather than a specific instance, he continues: "It wasn't always a cross. Sometimes it was just a stick. Or a rock. Something to remind the person of the location or the spot."³⁹ Made from aged fencing wood,

metal and nylon strapping, baling wire, and tree branches, the piece speaks softly of grieving and remembrance, while throwing out subliminal references to the countless African Americans who went without proper burial or, worse, whose bodies were never left for kin to claim and cherish. It denotes both the make-do necessity of bare-bones materials, the ability to make something from nothing, and the mixed blessing of humbleness and invisibility—things overlooked by those who might destroy them, but also fated to rust and flake away, splinter and soften in the wind and weather. These memorials, ultimately, won't endure and persevere in the way of those in granite and bronze—those conferred upon by the dominant culture as important and true.

Holley does think in depth about how you shape and safekeep unmemorialized memories, rewrite a history that was hijacked and presented only from the viewpoint of the power structure. *Cutting Up Old Film (Don't Edit the Wrong Thing Out)* (1984), *Memory Paper* (2003), and *Hiding the Records* (2006) are among many pieces in which he explores the idea of lost, erased, and distorted histories. *Cutting Up Old Film* is a particularly powerful piece, simple but potent. An old film reel nestles all of its original footage; a vintage paper leader reads "DO NOT REWIND AFTER SHOWING." Apropos of a white chronicle of American history, once a story is told by the victors other versions rarely hold the same sway. A pair of scissors suspended from the center of the reel provokes the question of editing: Who decides what parts of the story get told and what falls away on the cutting-room floor? Those scissors may also allude to the desire to hold a device of control in one's own hand—a pinnacle goal that one might actually tell her or his own story. Here, however, the potentially powerful tool is thwarted, confined to a position of disuse. Ineffectual and childlike, they rust

and dull as the story fades; never rewound, never retold.

Holley often employs paper to broadly refer to records, learning, and histories. He speaks often about the ways in which African Americans were blocked from anything that would have allowed them to advance—receiving an education and equal rights above all else. When a people can't write their own history or read the words of others, they are utterly and effectively disempowered, a point of outrage for those who fought for civil rights. *Memory Paper* shows a stack of decaying paper slumped on a wooden shipping pallet, weighted down by a piece of rusted metal, both imprinting the stack and holding it down. "The paper is going back to pulp," Holley notes. "I was thinking about the newspaper print of the Civil Rights era and beyond, and how much paper it would have taken to tell the whole story. The molten iron symbolizes the weight of the period. The pallet is what carry the load."⁴⁰

Completing this particular thematic flight, *Hiding the Records* offers up a rope-bound binder bursting with documents. An iron base provides a strong and resilient foundation, which Holley equates with the African American workers who helped build America while whites took all the credit and profits—true in the days of slavery, through the hundred years that Blackmon chronicles between emancipation and civil rights, and from the era of civil rights through today. The records of what happened and how tightly they are bound up are layered histories that Holley wants cracked open and brought to light. "Thousands of humans could have worked for a factory or furnace, and when it came time to showcase the humans that had put forth the effort to help a city grow, you didn't see but a few faces." Holley decries: "Most of the laborers and workers are forgotten."⁴¹

Holley knows too well how much of the story never got told, and one of his aims is to keep some of the lesser-known heroes in the fore. *Steppin' For You: The Walker (Honoring John Lewis)* (2004) and *Changing My Walk* (2004) pay tribute to figures Holley means to keep philosophically alive, both for those who remember their seminal roles and for younger people who might never otherwise come to know the histories of those they honor.

And the histories of both John Robert Lewis (b. 1940) and Andrew Jackson Young (b. 1932), the honoree of *Changing My Walk*, are larger than life. Young has been a pastor, activist, congressman, diplomat, and the mayor of Atlanta. A legendary Georgian in his own right, he was friend and colleague to Martin Luther King, Jr., and was with him in Memphis, Tennessee, when King was assassinated. He worked as a strategist and negotiator in the civil rights campaigns that resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Young has been widely recognized as an advocate for peace, something Holley recognizes in *Changing My Walk*, with a black shoe and a white shoe paired side by side atop a chair. “The chair holds two shoes,” Holley explains. “A small, white shoe and a large, black shoe. The black shoe looks well-worn, but the white shoe looks preserved. I put both shoes on the same level to show the equality we were searching for. Black, white, male, female, laborer, thinker; the shoe wearer will one day be equal in the eyes of humanity.”⁴²

Steppin' For You: The Walker (Honoring John Lewis) features heavily worn shoes to symbolize the dogged determination of John Lewis. Lewis, who, today, still represents Georgia's Fifth District in Congress, was a giant in the Civil Rights movement, the only living member of “The Big Six,” who led the March on Washington for Jobs

and Freedom, in 1963. The son of sharecroppers, Lewis became interested in equal rights issues as a boy when his family took a trip to Buffalo, New York, and he saw, for the first time, black and white men working together and unsegregated drinking fountains. It seemed to him then that equality might, one day, actually become real. He became dedicated to nonviolent acts of protest, participating in the Nashville lunch-counter sit-ins and becoming one of the original thirteen Freedom Riders. He helped organize the voter registration efforts across the South that led to the Selma to Montgomery marches, and he was among those beaten by Alabama state troopers on March 7, 1965, the day that became known as Bloody Sunday.⁴³

Steppin' for You: The Walker resembles a totem; humanlike in stature, it stands tall. The shoes nailed to either side of the figure are not just well worn, they are thoroughly beaten up. The old tin roofing tiles sheathing the central wooden railroad tie comprise the thick skin one needed to face the angry mobs that awaited the Freedom Riders. The upper tile, the face of the abstracted figure, is blood red—dried, but not shying away—referencing

**Steppin' for You: The Walker
(Honoring John Lewis)**
2004
32 7/8 x 24 x 16



the multiple times the nonviolent Freedom Riders were mercilessly beaten yet remained resolute. “It was thirteen of us on the original ride—seven whites and six blacks,” Lewis told a CNN interviewer in 2001. “The bus was burned in Anniston, Alabama. We were beaten in Birmingham, and later met by an angry mob in Montgomery, where I was hit in the head with a wooden crate. It was very violent. I thought I was going to die.”⁴⁴

Paul Arnett, an art historian who cowrote and edited the *Souls Grown Deep* books with his father, observes:

It is almost axiomatic that to be born black into a certain social class in the Deep South means confronting hardship—what [the artist] Thornton Dial calls “the fences of the United States” and what Andrew Young refers to as “life behind the wall.” It is often difficult to read the biographies of many of these artists without succumbing to feelings of searing empathy. Such responses are neither right nor wrong, but they can distract from the more complicated, holistic calls for action and appreciation located in this

work. Song may hold pain, but pain is not song.⁴⁵

Today, as America confronts its identity as a country founded on the ideals of freedom, democracy, and peace but built on servitude, inequity, and violence, it must take a sober look at the “walls” that indeed still stratify this society. In music, such original American forms as blues and jazz are accepted as vital components of African American and American culture. They brought key elements from Africa and the diaspora yet became unique and distinct in this country. African American visual forms, as old as their musical parallels but often more overtly challenging, have been far more commonly ignored, denied, or celebrated only when perceived as innocuous. Young himself observes, “It is the silent, stationary, visual arts that have been perhaps the most politically and existentially dangerous form of personal expression for African Americans living in an unbalanced society.”

Hard conversations are embodied in Holley's indomitable piece *Table of Discussion* (2005). Using the legs and rails of a dinner table as its base, the sculpture invites approach. Holley describes the assemblage as one that takes a thematic page from Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, an iconic historical work about the sharing of food as a sacred communal and familial tradition, but also about such gatherings as places of inherent danger—less specifically about betrayal than about hard conversations and not seeing eye to eye.

Laid out is a split and aged tree-trunk section reminiscent of a telephone pole, subtly underscoring ideas of conversation and communication already

connoted by the table itself. Atop is a snarl of barbed wire, rusted, tangled, and fierce like a fight frozen in space. It is hard to avoid associating the barbed wire with Christ's crown of thorns, an overt symbol of suffering but, perhaps, more precisely something meant to inflict pain and challenge authority. Hopelessly snared and torn amid the vortex of wire is a cloth that, at first, appears to be tinged with blood, but upon closer inspection is the faded plaid of a worker's shirt woven with scarlet and blue. The barbed wire arcs and loops with a frenetic energy; strands of it are dark and rusted, others are brighter steel, and they subtly read as black and white. Characteristic of Holley's style, the sculpture can lead one's mind in several directions, but the central theme seems clear: Americans—from city streets to the art world—are not succeeding at conversations about race.

Speaking about African American vernacular art, Young discusses this country's belated recognition of an artistic vein that lays bare deep conflicts: historical, racial, environmental, and ethical. "It forces us to see things we would rather ignore," he writes. "These prophets of ordinary stuff speak with a power we would all like to avoid. Society generally ignores its prophets, and does so at its own peril."⁴⁶

Holley traveled a long road before finding art as a practice of salvation, but today, at age sixty-five, the life of an artist is the one he has walked the longest. Since the modern era, America has proudly championed art and music as vital components in a political democracy. Nevertheless, artists of color who critique obfuscating histories, racialized violence, cultural dishonesty, and neoliberal commercial agendas rarely make it onto the mainstream stage. Yet, Holley is enjoying what members of the Crunk Feminist Collective call, "a percussive

moment." Both disruptive and generative, it "signals the kind of productive dissonance that occurs as we work at the edges of disciplines, on the margins of social life, and in the vexed spaces between academic and nonacademic communities." They continue: "Our world is bound up with a proclivity for the percussive, as we divorce ourselves from 'correct' or hegemonic ways of being in favor of following the rhythm of our own heartbeats."⁴⁷

Holley is an icon of following the rhythm of his own heartbeat. His originality positions him as a leader—someone to watch and follow, be inspired by, and ultimately emulate in an age that far too often values stylishly articulated but shallow, commercialized identity frameworks. "Money and celebrity have cast a shadow over the art world which is prohibiting ideas and debate from coming to the fore," wrote former Tate Gallery director and BBC arts editor Will Gompertz, critiquing an art-world system in which dealers, collectors, curators, and museums collude to maintain the value and status of artists who don't hold up to critical scrutiny. He hopes that the system is reaching a breaking point, and looks to artists. "At the moment, it feels like a Paris salon of the nineteenth century, where bureaucrats and conservatives combined to stifle the field of work. It was the Impressionists who forced a new system, led by the artists themselves. It created modern art and a whole new way of looking at things.... We need artists to work outside the establishment and start looking at the world in a different way—to start challenging preconceptions instead of reinforcing them."⁴⁸

**Table of
Discussion**
2005
detail

Holley might find some irony in an insider's call for artists to work outside a system that has blocked access to so-called "outsiders" for so long, but Gompertz and other prescient members of the modern and contemporary art set are increasingly coming to a place that advocates of the vernacular and self-taught have been for decades. In this work, we find a human story rather than an art-world story. Holley's practice is an extension of his being; it is not merely a daily meditation on gratitude or the complexities of life but a moment-to-moment survival mechanism, a pact he makes and remakes with himself to find strength and beauty in a world that wrapped its gifts in challenge.

Holley's sculptural works are personal and encompassing. They explore specific moments, even as

they intertwine and expand—many stories and one story, collectively as "surreptitiously coherent as a dream."⁴⁹

His art is poetic but subversive, historically specific and utterly abstract, talismanic and rooted, intentional and intuitive. Since 2010, Holley has lived and worked in Atlanta. His art and music now take him around the world, and his recognition as an important American artist continues to grow. At home, a more intimately scaled version of his "Square Acre of Art" envelops the interior of his personal space, a place that feels like a protective cocoon in which the debris of humanity seeks and is granted spiritual renewal. His world is at once amulet and bedrock, studio and memory palace. And in Holley's own words, "That's just beautiful."⁵⁰ ○



Notes

- 1 George King, *The Lonnie Holley Story*, is due for release in 2015.
- 2 Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974; reprinted by arrangement with Vintage Books, Random House, 2000), xvii. Nate Shaw's real name has since been revealed to be Ned Cobb.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Dwight Garner, "Lost in Literary History: A Tale of Courage in the South," *The New York Times Book Review; Critic's Notebook*, April 18, 2014. Accessed February 1, 2015, at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/19/books/all-gods-dangers-a-forgotten-autobiography.html?_r=0
- 5 Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday Publishing Group, 2008), 4.
- 6 General information in this section about Holley's early life comes from the author's interviews with the artist in October 2014, Atlanta, unless otherwise noted. Holley also records this personal narrative in great depth in "Lonnie Holley: The Best That Almost Happened," in Paul Arnett and William Arnett, eds., *Souls Grown Deep*, vol. 2: *Once That River Starts to Flow* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2001), 538–83, and in "Blackbirds" (Theodore Rosengarten's essay in this book).
- 7 Lonnie Holley, interview with the author, October 30, 2014, Atlanta.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 The presumption of a masculine driver is the author's; no facts about this accident have been uncovered.
- 10 Denny Abbott, *They Had No Voice: My Fight for Alabama's Forgotten Children* (Montgomery, Ala.: New South Books, 2013), xiii. Abbott was a probation officer for the Montgomery County Family Court, whose duties included transporting juvenile offenders from the detention center in Montgomery to Mt. Meigs.
- 11 See Lonnie Holley as told to Theodore Rosengarten, "Blackbirds," page 181 of this publication.
- 12 Lonnie Holley, in Arnett and Arnett, *Souls Grown Deep*, 556.
- 13 Lonnie Holley, interview with the author, October 30, 2014, Atlanta. Holley recounts this story time and again; see also Melinda Shallcross, "The Poetry of Lonnie Holley," *Folk Art Messenger*, vol. 6, no. 3 (spring 1993), 1, and Judith McWillie, "Lonnie Holley's Moves," *Artforum* 30 (April 1992), 80.
- 14 McWillie, 81. McWillie, aided by William Arnett, interviewed Holley extensively in 1991; these interviews are included in the Judith McWillie Papers 1984–2011, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- 15 John Beardsley, "The Forest of Spirits, the Ark of Dreams," *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists*, from an interview with Lonnie Holley, 1993 (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 181.
- 16 Keith Cartwright, *Sacral Groves, Limbo Gateways: Travels in Deep Southern Time, Circum-Caribbean Space, Afro-Creole Authority* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 6.
- 17 Holley, in McWillie, 83.
- 18 William Arnett, "Out-Outgribing the Mome-Raths," in Arnett and Arnett, vol. 2, 575.
- 19 Holley in *ibid.*
- 20 McWillie, 81. As an unrelated aside, in 2014 Holley was granted an artist's residency at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, where he used some of Rauschenberg's own castoffs to make sculptures that bring the conversation of vernacular impulse and vision full circle.
- 21 The first formal publications to include Holley and his art were Barbara Shissler Nosanow, *More Than Land or Sky: Art from Appalachia* (published for the National Museum of American Art by the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981) and Robert Farris Thompson, John Mason, and Judith McWillie, *Another Face of the Diamond: Pathways through the Black Atlantic South*, exhibition catalogue (New York: INTAR Latin American Art Gallery, 1988). William Arnett was the primary lender to the INTAR exhibition, and had a strong hand in its conceptual formation.
- 22 Holley, interview with the author, October 30, 2014, Atlanta.
- 23 Rodia's site still occupies a triangular lot that was visible on the rail line connecting Los Angeles and Long Beach. The tall spires, concrete over armature inlaid with bright shards of pottery and glass, were colorful and eye-catching, oddities for many passersby by but certainly dazzling.
- Rodia's cultural rootedness and structural innovations took a backseat to his perceived eccentricity in his lifetime, during which he was ridiculed and harassed for a project that fell too far outside the status quo for many.
- 24 Then called the National Collection of Fine Arts, Harry Lowe organized the museum's first installation of *The Throne* (acquired by the museum in 1970) in *Hidden Aspects of the National Collection of Fine Arts* (1971). Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, who would go on to conduct the primary research on *The Throne* as a curator at the museum, was at that time a graduate intern.
- 25 Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (Toronto: Random House, 1983), 146.
- 26 See Leslie Umberger, *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists* (Singapore: Princeton Architectural Press and the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2007).
- 27 Lonnie Holley, "An Artist Goes Back to the Ocean," in Paul Arnett and William Arnett, eds., *Souls Grown Deep*, vol. 1, *The Tree Gave the Dove a Leaf* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, in association with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the New York Public Library, 2000), 6.
- 28 Roberta Smith, "Esthetic Olympics: 5 Shades for 5 Rings," *The New York Times*, July 4, 1996, C9.
- 29 Malcolm Jones, Jr., "The Arts Games," *Newsweek* (July 29, 1996), 64–65.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Holley, in Arnett and Arnett, vol. 2, 567.
- 32 In 2010, the exhibition *Souls Grown Deep* evolved into a foundation dedicated to documenting, researching, preserving, and exhibiting the work of self-taught African American artists of the American South.
- 33 Holley, in Arnett and Arnett, vol. 1, 6.
- 34 Holley, notes on the works of art; typescript provided by Matt Arnett, January 23, 2015.
- 35 Laura Hutson, "Born of struggle and a Dickensian childhood, Lonnie Holley's work is not Nashville's typical public art," *Nashville Scene* online: <http://www.nashvillescene.com/nashville/born-of-struggle-and-a-dickensian-childhood-lonnie-holleys-work-is-not-nashvilles-typical-public-art/Content?oid=4358390>. Accessed February 3, 2015.
- 36 Holley, Arnett typescript, January 23, 2015.
- 37 See Gunther Kress, "Cultural Considerations in Linguistic Description," *Language & Culture, British Studies in Applied Linguistics*, no. 7, in association with Multilingual Matters, Ltd. (Exeter, UK: Short Run Press, 1993), 1–2, and Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, with Albert Reidlinger, translated from French by Wade Baskin (Open Court Classics, 1998; originally published New York: McGraw Hill, 1915).
- 38 William Arnett, quoted in Mark Binellijan, "Lonnie Holley, the Insider's Outsider," *The New York Times Magazine*, January 23, 2014. Accessed online February 3, 2015, at: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/26/magazine/lonnie-holley-the-insiders-outsider.html?_r=0
- 39 Holley, Arnett typescript, January 23, 2015.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/bloody-sunday-selma-alabama-march-7-1965>. Accessed by the author February 10, 2015.
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