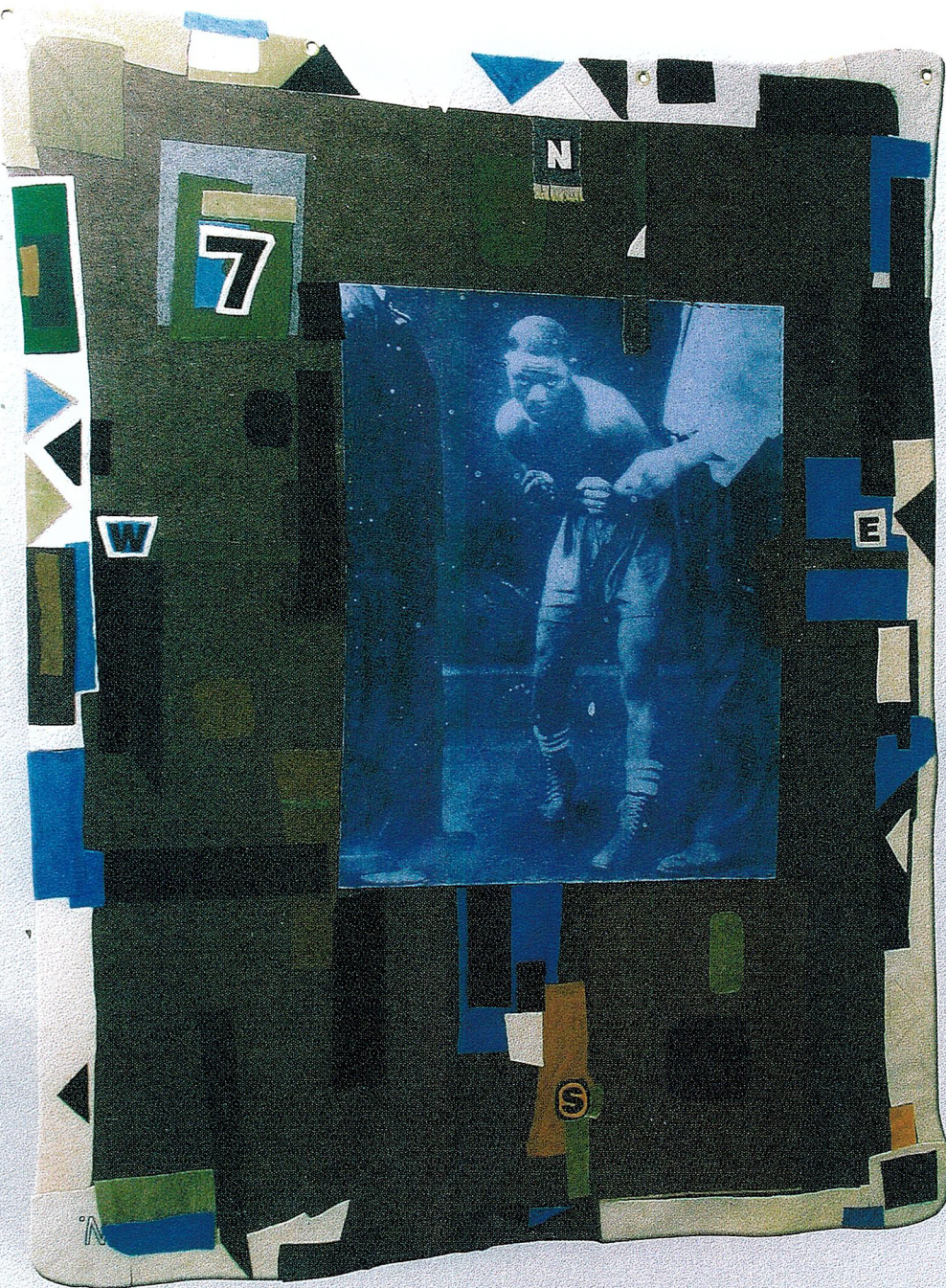


# BLACK RENAISSANCE

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Photo Courtesy of Julie Moos. All other images courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

## *Memory as Medicine: The Art of an Ancient Soul, Radcliffe Bailey*

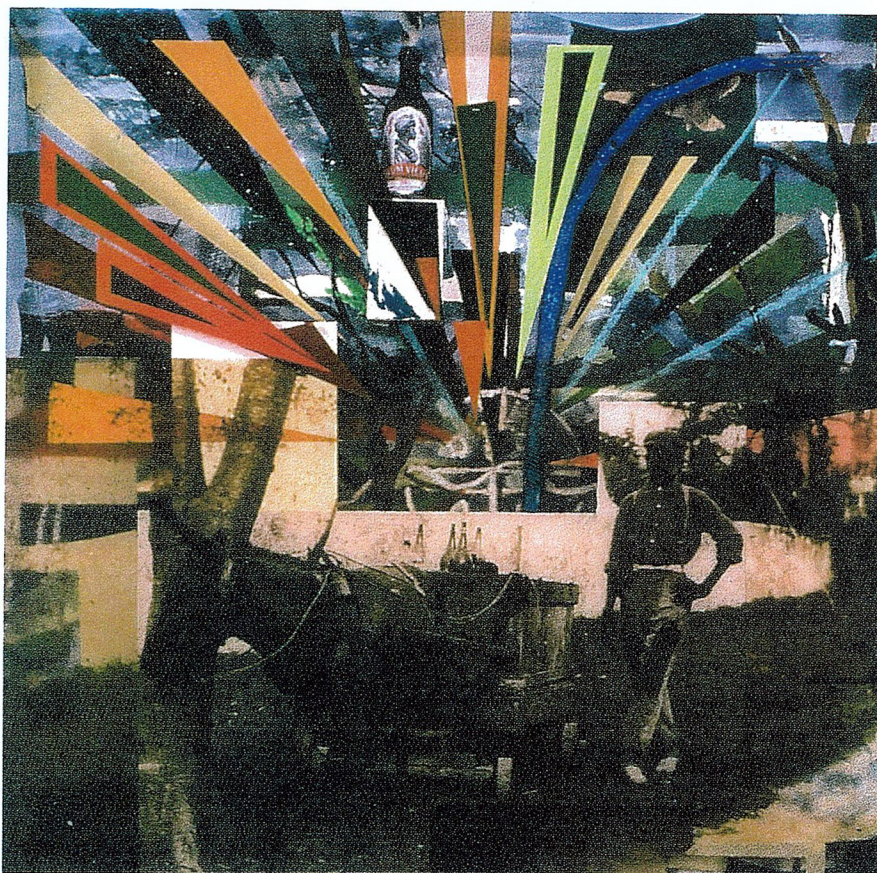
By CAROL THOMPSON

Rich in texture, sculptural detail, and a highly symbolic use of color, Radcliffe Bailey's art defies conventional categorization. It is a harmonious marriage of sculpture and painting, two- and three-dimensional forms. Large-scale photo blow-ups lifted from a treasure trove of black and white prints given to the artist by his grandmother, as well as historic photographs he collects, animate these works to place African Americans at the center of American and world history. Recurring motifs include African cosmograms, such as the Kongo *dikenga*, that traces the cycle of life—from birth, to prime of life, to elderhood, to the ancestral realm—as it charts the course of a soul circling through time and across generations. As a Nina Simone song describes a soul coming back and back and back for nearly nine thousand years, Bailey's art nurtures his "ancient soul" tracing the complex network of his "aesthetic DNA" to create an antidote to cultural and historical amnesia.

Bailey is a nationally recognized artist who lives in Atlanta. His works are collected by major museums across the country. Since 1991, when he graduated from the Atlanta College of Art, he has ceaselessly experimented with diverse forms to create monumentally scaled accumulative sculptures and paintings as well as prints, drawings, collages, floor and wall sculptures, and glass works.

In his catalog essay for the 2001 solo exhibition *The Magic City* at the Birmingham Art Museum, David Moos describes how Bailey's "artistic project seeks to restore a sense of honor to a brutalized historical identity." His art invokes ancestral spirits to bring them back into relevant being. As Bailey describes, his art explores the "Africanism that permeates our contemporary world but goes unnamed and not talked about or fully addressed culturally... [that] mysterious African force that propels black people wherever they are in the world." His art addresses an African sensibility and spirituality, both tangible and intangible.





*Untitled (West Indies)*, 2005  
60 x 60 inches

In 2003, Bailey titled his exhibition at Solomon Projects in Atlanta, *Memory as Medicine*. He continued to pursue this theme in his 2005 show at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York and has expanded on it ever since. The large-scale “cabinet sculptures” that formed the core of both shows take inspiration from Kongo *minkisi*.<sup>1</sup> With glazed surfaces containing a wide variety of culturally-charged images and materials, Bailey’s “cabinet sculptures” are conceived by the artist as medicine cabinets to contain his socially cathartic art. Their contents include a broad range of culturally charged objects, imagery, and raw materials, including indigo powder, tobacco leaves, and Georgia red earth. Deeply recessed in “shadow-boxes” covered with tinted glass, these works of art lyrically connect the dots of the too-often disconnected histories of peoples of Africa and the African Diaspora. Loaded with references to the history of the Black Atlantic experience, each “cabinet-sculpture” functions as a twenty-first century *nkisi*.

<sup>1</sup>  
The figurative sculptures with mirrored-medicine packets formerly created in Kongo communities of central Africa as “containers for the healing medicine of god.”

In 2004, Bailey introduced the topic of DNA as a vehicle for artistic expression to Atlanta’s National Black Arts Festival. This prompted the NBAF to make DNA the theme of their 2007 festival. *Door of No Return* grew out of Bailey’s collaboration with two other artists, choreographer Fatima Robinson and musician/singer Marc Anthony Thompson. NBAF commissioned the three artists to create new works for the 2007 festival in response to the question “Who are you?” After traveling to Senegal together, they created *In the Reteral*, co-presented at Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries and Solomon Projects.

*Storm at Sea*, a massive floor sculpture that Bailey first conceived in 2005, is included in *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, curated by Franklin Sirmans. *NeoHooDoo* was first presented at the Menil Collection, Houston, and will travel to P.S. 1 and Miami Art Museum in 2009. Within this ambitious work, a ghostly, dark ship covered with glittering black encaustic sits atop a massive accumulation of disengaged piano keys. A female figure surmounting the handle of a dance staff used to honor Shango—Yoruba deity of thunder and lightning and arbiter of divine justice—watches from afar.