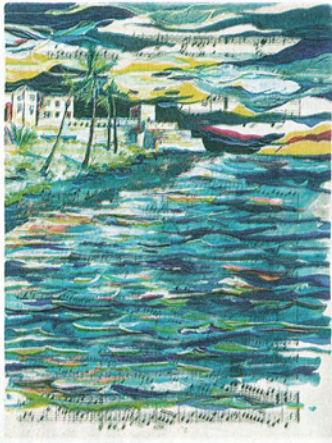


ART



HIGH MUSEUM OF ART, ATLANTA



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In the Picture: Atlanta, Africa And the Past

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

IN 1972, when Radcliffe Bailey was 4 years old, his parents were looking for a change of scene from New Jersey, where most of his extended family had settled. They were considering California, Ontario and Florida, where they were headed on a road trip, when they stopped by chance at a restaurant in Atlanta and met the Rev. Lucius M. Tobin. Mr. Tobin, a onetime teacher of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., at Morehouse College, gave the family members a tour that captivated them with its rich account of the city's history. Soon after, the minister's wife was returning with Mrs. Bailey to New Jersey to help her pack up the family home.

"That was our introduction to Atlanta," said Mr. Bailey, who has lived there ever since. Now 42, he has built a successful career as an artist largely out of his fascination with the city's history as the crossroads of the South, and with the past more generally — as is evident in "Radcliffe Bailey: Memory as Medicine," his largest museum show to date, which opened last week at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. His mixed-media paintings and installations incorporate objects steeped in history — including tintypes of distant family members, African figurines, disassembled piano keys and Georgia red clay — and suggest stories of the black Atlantic diaspora and migrations more universal and spiritual.

"Atlanta has this interesting past that makes you want to dig deeper and understand what was once there, even though it may be covered," he said in a recent interview at the Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea, where he shows in New York. "Sherman burnt down the city. They say when you want to get rid of something, you burn it, but you don't really get rid of it. I can look out my back door and see a lot," including antebellum gravestones and remnants of a Civil War road that cut through his property in a rural part of the city.

He has also been inspired throughout his career by Atlanta's culture of churchgoers. "For a lot of African-Americans here church has been a focal point," he said. "People sing these hymns with a certain tone to them, and that's just something that comes so far from the past. I'm always trying to make sense of those things."

In his monumental installation "Windward Coast," a star attraction of the show, Mr. Bailey has created a rolling ocean of wooden keys harvested from some 400 pianos. A lone head, painted glittery black,



ERIK S. LESSER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; INSET, K. TAUCHES/SOLOMON PROJECTS, ATLANTA

bobbs in this expanse, suggesting isolation and the trauma of the slave trade as well as recent natural disasters. Yet in this piece, as in all his work, Mr. Bailey fuses pain with transcendence. "I think about all the music that was probably played on those keys," he said. "An ocean is something that divides people. Music is something that connects people. Duke Ellington or Thelonious Monk — it's a different sound that takes you somewhere else. It's also about being at peace."

Michael Rooks, the High Museum's curator of modern and contemporary art, describes Mr. Bailey as "probably the most prominent living artist here in Atlanta." For the artist, seeing this show mounted at the High is particularly meaningful. It was the first museum he frequented as a child,

Work that reaches back to migrations, enfolding journeys both actual and spiritual.

visiting with his mother, a schoolteacher, who enrolled him in art classes there and took him to meet the painter Jacob Lawrence when he visited the museum. "We stood in line and got his signature in my book, and my mother told him 'My son's going to be an artist,'" Mr. Bailey recalled. He credits his early interest in visual storytelling to artists with a narrative bent like Mr. Lawrence and to his grandfather, a deacon at a church in Virginia, who built birdcages as a hobby in his mint-green workshop. Mr. Bailey loved to spend time in the workshop listening to him and has used that shade of green often in his work.

As a teenager Mr. Bailey, who grew up in Hank Aaron's neighborhood in Atlanta, pursued his early love of baseball and played semi-pro for a year. He ultimately decided he was too small for his position as catcher and followed his mother's vision for him by enrolling at the Atlanta College of Art. (Baseball bats remain a recurring motif in his work.) He majored in sculpture and early on was interested in large outdoor pieces, working as an assistant to the sculptor Mel Edwards on an installation. "I always come to painting as a sculptor," Mr. Bailey said. "Everything is based on ma-



ERIK S. LESSER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Above, left, Radcliffe Bailey at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta. Above center, the artist with his installation "Windward Coast" and (inset) a detail from it. Top, from left to right, "Notes From Elmina III," "Notes From Elmina I," "Winged" and "Notes From Elmina II." Bottom left, an untitled work and, below it, "Tricky." Bottom right, "Uprooted."

terials."

He has found many of those materials through a love of antiquing that he developed under his mother's influence; for years he has collected weathered objects wherever he goes. But it was his grandmother's gift of some 400 tintypes from family albums shortly before he graduated from art school in 1991 that led to a turning point in his work. He found that placing a photograph at the center of a wall piece provided an anchor for constellations of interconnected imagery fanning out around it, as well as a way in for viewers, particularly African-Americans who "don't necessarily go to museums," he said, and "don't see themselves in those objects."

Carol Thompson, curator of African art at the High, who organized the show with Mr. Rooks, proposed this exhibition after seeing Mr. Bailey's 40-foot-long public commission at the Atlanta airport titled "Saints." It's a collage of oversize black-and-white photographs of dead relatives, bright blocks of color, words, numbers and the African dikenga, a circular chart that shows the cycle of life from birth to the ancestral realm. Ms. Thompson said she was struck by how he gave this ancient pictographic symbol a present-day currency. Mr. Rooks, meanwhile, sees in Mr. Bailey's work the influence of artists including Anselm Kiefer (in terms of scale and focus on identity and myth) and Peter Halley (in the way he uses a geometric architectural system to connect different zones of his paintings). "Radcliffe has this terrific visual acuity where he travels around the world and picks up ideas from artists of many different backgrounds and genera-

tions, throws them into his hopper and comes out with something completely original," Mr. Rooks said.

Mr. Bailey works on multiple pieces at once, leaving objects out everywhere around his house and studio until he figures out how he wants to proceed. "It's very much like hip-hop, patching and putting things together quiltlike, using old things to make new things," said Mr. Bailey, who designed his studio without windows so that his attention would stay focused inward.

Ms. Thompson noted Mr. Bailey's involvement with a wide circle of musicians, and the frequent references to music in his work. "The way he moves in his studio, he's involved in a dance in how an artwork comes to life," she said. "That may be a hidden aspect to his studio practice — that it's very performative."

Earlier in his career Mr. Bailey tended to throw everything into his paintings, "like a kid with all these questions," he said. "As I look at my recent work, it's really pared down. Now I want haikus."

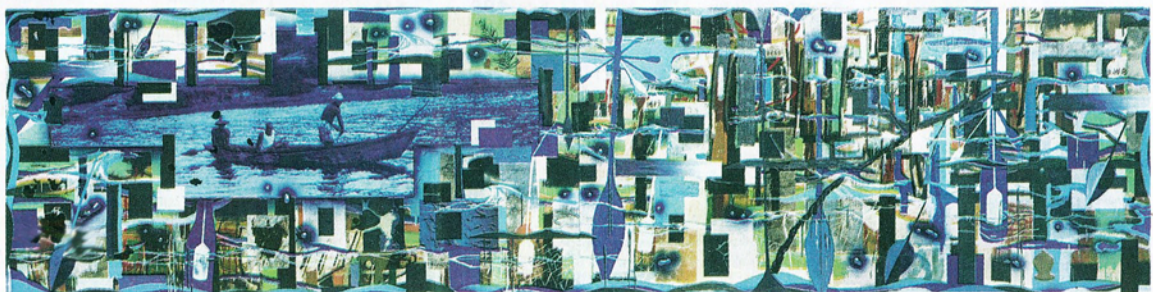
Another reward of having a hometown exhibition (this one will travel next year to the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College and the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio) is that his parents and the community that has nurtured him since elementary school can be a part of it. "I've always been interested in my work in relationship to my friendships and my family," he said. "I've always wanted to make work that would speak to them — not over them, not around them, but straightforward to them."



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