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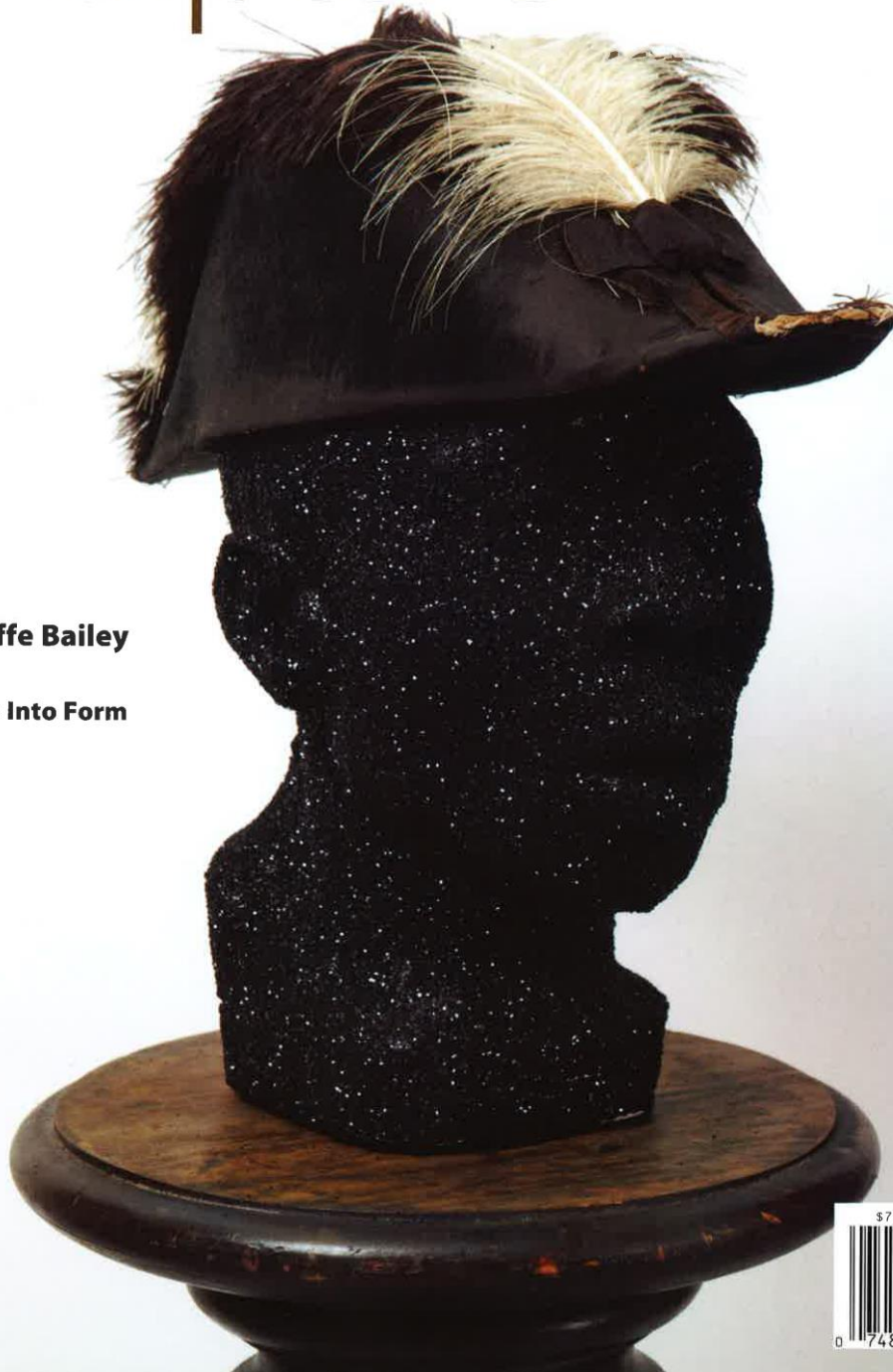
sculpture

June 2012
Vol. 31 No. 5

A publication of the
International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org

Radcliffe Bailey

Process Into Form



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Connecting Rhythms

A Conversation with

Radcliffe Bailey



BY REBECCA DIMLING COCHRAN

A sculptor of emotional intensity and formal experimentation, Radcliffe Bailey has been a leading artistic voice in the exploration of African American racial identity for more than 20 years. His largest exhibition to date, "Memory as Medicine," which is on view at the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio from June 6 through September 12, brings together 25 new and early works, ranging from intimate drawings to large-scale, mixed-media installations that reach into the depths of memory, struggle, and sacrifice. Drawing on family histories and experiences, as well as iconographic and aesthetic practices rooted in classical African sculpture, Bailey's work charts a deeply personal journey of understanding that moves outward from his own cultural heritage and identity to explore how communities (and individuals) create cultures for themselves.

Above: *Storm at Sea*, 2007. Piano keys, African sculpture, model boat, paper, acrylic, glitter, and gold leaf, 212 x 213 in. Opposite: *Cerebral Caverns*, 2011. Wood, glass, and 30 plaster heads, 97 x 100 x 60 in.

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Rebecca Dimling Cochran: *When “Memory as Medicine” opened at Atlanta’s High Museum of Art last year, curator Carol Thompson made some fascinating juxtapositions connecting your work to objects from the museum’s African art collection. When did you first encounter African art, and how did it find a way into your work?*

Radcliffe Bailey: As a kid, I saw African art in museums, but it wasn’t a profound thing that hit me. I was much more interested in trying to understand the practices or, if anything, in finding relationships with African American culture. So, the first thing I looked at was self-taught art, because I felt that it naturally had these connections. Just as people passed on stories or oral histories, they passed on the different practices that occur in the South. I remember going to visit my grandparents and seeing a tire painted white and metal objects placed as decorations around the yard. I’d notice that people would sweep their yards in a particular way. I was fascinated with those things—for instance, looking at why my grandfather had this certain hinge on his shed, which reminded me of a Dogon shed. I was interested in all of these



Installation view from *In the Returnal*, Solomon Projects, Atlanta, with (left) *Stride*, 2007, mixed media, velvet, glitter, steel, and wood vitrine, 87 x 19 x 19 in.

connections, trying to make sense of my own practices and those of the people around me.

RDC: *When did you first travel to Africa?*

RB: It was in 2006. The idea began in 2003 in conversation with the National Black Arts Festival, whose organizers asked if I would like to do a project with them. I remember watching a documentary on the BBC about black British youth trying to understand their ancestry, and I thought to myself, “Wow, I’ve always wanted to know, and I had this question about my make-up in the work itself. If I knew those particular things, how would my work be different? Would I still have that desire and that quest? Where would my work go?” I was really looking for that next place for my work. When I did go, I went to Senegal and Dakar, specifically to Goree Island, which is like a slave castle right off the coast of Dakar.

RDC: *If I remember correctly, you discovered that your maternal ancestors were from Sierra Leone and Guinea. But you didn’t visit those places?*

RB: No. For many reasons, it was difficult; but I did find where they may have departed from, and I went there. It was more like an understanding from the last point of touch.

RDC: *Did you resolve some of the questions that you had? How did the experience of visiting Africa affect your work?*

RB: I say that I don’t read a lot, but I research, and I felt like I knew a lot of the history before I arrived. What I got out of the experience was the beauty of the countryside and an understanding of current political struggles. The youth there were very influenced by the youth here. They were hip-hoppers, and that felt like a connection. I was thinking about those connections back and forth, the rhythms that cross the seas. And that comes back to the practices.

RDC: *Since your return, you’ve been using materials similar to those that you used before, but in different ways. For example, before your trip, you mixed red clay soil into your painted surfaces, but now you’re using it to coat walls. It is as you said—these things have always been there, but perhaps the practices are changing.*

RB: When I was in Senegal, I went to Pink Lake (Lake Retba). It’s a natural wonder, like the Dead Sea; people mine the salt, but there is a drought and the lake is disappearing. I noticed how the world is changing everywhere, and how practices have changed. There’s talk sometimes about how people who



Pullman, 2010. Heart, glitter, glass, and wood, 17 x 8.5 x 8.5 in.

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Sweet Georgia Brown, 2012. Mixed media, 60 x 60 in.

live out in the countryside do not practice like they once did, and how those things are disappearing. But, at the same time, those practices just transform into something that is not as tangible as it once was.

RDC: *It sounds similar to what happened when African slaves were brought to the Caribbean and the United States; their beliefs can still be recognized in Santería and in Creole and Gullah culture. Many of your self-portraits include a top hat, the symbol of Eshu, the Divine Trickster of West African cultures and of Santería, who is both kind and cruel. I see this duality woven through much of your work. Do you strive for this quality?*

RB: I don't do it on purpose, but I see it in my work. I think when I'm making work, but there is a lot of improvisation, a lot of play. It changes day by day by day.

RDC: *You've said that the trickster figure is important to you because it reflects the many sides of an artist.*

RB: In history, you hear a lot about artists and their "behaviors," their ways of life beyond the paintbrush. Living behind your paintbrush or your hands or your tools is a whole different thing—a logical thing that happens from the brain to the heart to the hand to the surface, and it goes back and forth, moving around. I'm interested in how people heal people. That's the source of the show's title, "Memory as Medicine." I'm playing with that, but I don't want to shamanize myself, I don't see that. I see it more personally, with my personal world, how it keeps me sane. The trickster comes up in references through so many different cultures. I'm interested in those links. I try not to be very specific about one particular practice or one group of people, because I believe that I'm made up of a lot of different people and a lot of different practices. I try to find the one common rhythm that runs through them and to put them together—that's been my method.

RDC: *This also goes back to the objects that you use. I find it interesting that you return again and again to particular objects, such as railroad tracks, lanterns, piano keys, top hats, sailboats, trumpets, and baseball bats. Certain things seem to resonate with you. What is it about these objects?*

RB: I think that I am trying to find symbols for myself and trying to create deities for myself. When I'm dealing with painting, I'm focusing on the color, the photograph. The photographs become the deities. Sometimes they recur, but the paint changes. When I'm dealing with sculpture, objects come up—the baseball, the trumpet, and the piano keys—those are my

Windward Coast, 2009. Piano keys, plaster bust, and glitter, detail of installation.

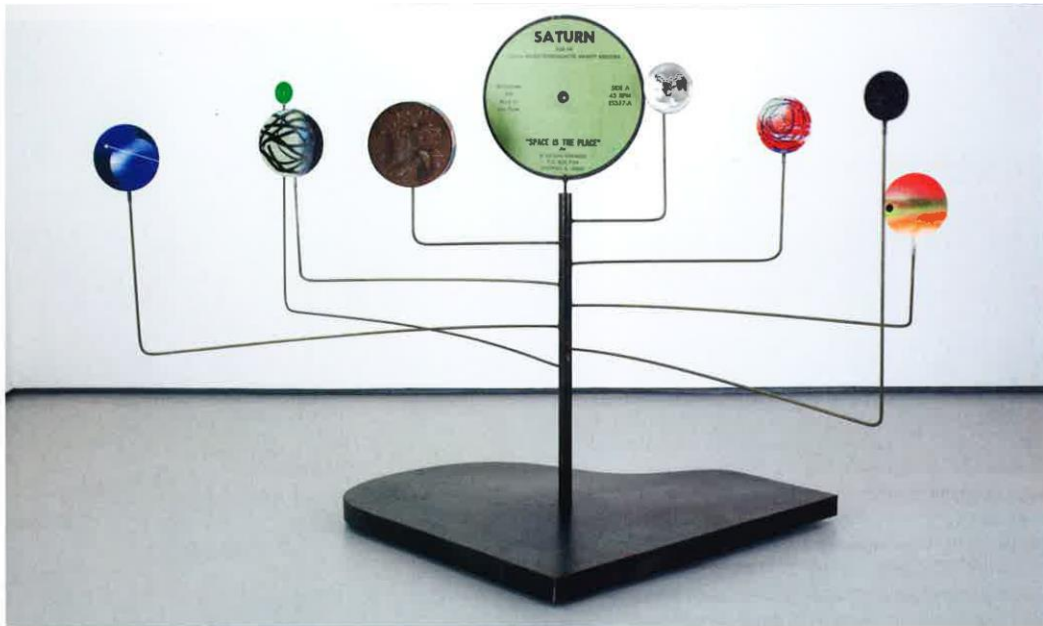


tools. Then there are moments when they collide and have their own concert. Sometimes I think that I have a band, my band, and sometimes I have an orchestra with a lot of different people playing. Sometimes I'm playing with just two people, and sometimes I'm playing solo. When it's solo, it's very minimal. I think about it like that constantly.

RDC: *It seems to me that you associate many of these objects with personal experiences—like the fact that your grandfather made birdhouses and used*



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Above: *Other Worlds Worlds*, 2011.
Mixed media, 75 x 120 x 115 in.
Below: *Tricky*, 2008. Mixed media,
58.5 x 53.25 x 8.25 in.

a particular shade of green or that your father worked on the railroad or that you played baseball. They become personal symbols.

RB: When I was in art school, I was trying very hard to make work that reflected my everyday life and made it relevant. I had a studio at school but wanted to make work at home. I was living with my parents, and I would go down into the basement and look around. There was all my history. As I was looking at these things, I started to make work. That was the most difficult phase, but in some

ways, the most comfortable. Most kids would say, "I don't want to work in my parents' basement," but, for me, it was like problem-solving.

RDC: *Jazz has also had an important influence on your work, and you've often spoken about your admiration for Sun Ra, Miles Davis, and Thelonious Monk. While there are obvious references in your use of musical instruments and titles, I see the connection best in your process, in how you borrow from the music's improvisational structure. Can you talk about how you weave different visual images and historical references into a single work?*

RB: I collect objects; I live around them; I play with them. The other day, I was playing catch with my son, and I thought, "I need to get into the studio." When I got there, I played with my upright bass, trying to figure out the sound. Then a day later, I'm sitting at the kitchen table doing a little gouache painting. Eventually I'm in the studio painting on canvas. There's no particular direction, no particular thought—I just need to start moving. A lot of it is just the physical action of moving around, which was an important dimension of being a sculpture major. When you're bending steel, it is very physical. I have to have that kind of action. I have to wake up in the middle of the night; I have to not be in a normal state.

RDC: *You included the sounds of John Coltrane coming out of a seashell in the current version of Windward Coast, and in your 2005 Rhodes College exhibition, you incorporated a song by Charlie Parker. Does your occasional use of sound also stem from your love of jazz?*

RB: I think so. One of the first times that I used sound was in a group of bird-houses that I created. In a show at the Atlanta College of Art, I used sounds from the ocean, trains, and insects. It comes up every once in a while, but it's not a strong focus.

RDC: *In the "Memory as Medicine" catalogue, I was fascinated by Ed Spriggs's description of your work as "narrative tableaux." Usually, I associate that idea*



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Above: *Chapter 7*, 2007. Paper, acrylic, glitter, model ship, and gold leaf. 18 x 36 x 5 in. Below: *Untitled*, 2010. Mixed media, 95 x 70 in.

with something that treats a single time and place, but your works often bring together three different narratives: Africa, the African American experience, and your personal history. How do you weave these stories together?

RB: They feel so much like one and the same. You can talk about one moment, but you have to talk about all the moments it takes to get there. I tell your story, and it has many layers, it's fragmented. Then I pick fragments from here and here and here and mix them up and there's the gumbo.

RDC: As with jazz, it's layering. Everyone's playing their own tune, and if they're good, they weave together into a beautiful piece of music. That's how I see your work—not as linear narrative, but “narrative tableaux” is not that far off. Of course, you need to have a subject in the work, and many times, you use photography to introduce that element. I think of the women and children in *Roots That Never Die* (1998) or the adult male in *Travel by Night* (2007). Interestingly, the subjects in the photographs never interact with what you create around them; instead, they stare impassively at the viewer. Would it be fair to say that these figures are stand-ins for people who experienced the historical events evoked in the work? Or could they represent you?

RB: No, they make the conversation. They're specific for people in terms of seeing themselves. Many people don't see images of themselves in museums, so museums can be intimidating. I place images of people from my old family albums in the work as decoys.

RDC: So, the people serve as entry points?

RB: Sometimes the human presence in a work may be a trace of my foot or hand—not because I accidentally brushed it, but on purpose. Let me put my scale, my hand, and my footprint in the work.

Rebecca Dimling Cochran is a writer and curator.



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