

Everything That Wasn't White: Lonnie Holley at the Elaine de Kooning House

In the Fall of 2020, the artist and musician Lonnie Holley was artist-in-residence at the Elaine de Kooning House in East Hampton, New York. Over the course of five intensely fueled weeks, he created over 100 paintings, on both quilts and canvas; works on paper; and sculpture made from found objects largely encountered on the property. The titles of the works reveal the contemplative nature of his process and suggest meditations on a collective history. Taken together they read like lines from an epic poem telling of struggle, defeat, yet resolute constancy and grace: *Fragile Like a Child*; *Working to Loosen our Chains*; *Battered*; *Blood from the Field Back Home*; and *I Can Always Fly*.

Holley (b. 1950) grew up in Jim Crow-era Birmingham, Alabama, the 7th of his mother's 27 children and witnessed a harrowing childhood in foster homes and forced labor. From earliest memory Holley recalls making art, ". . . but I didn't know I was an artist. I was just doing things." At eleven, he was confined for two years in the notorious Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children for violating a curfew imposed by Birmingham city commissioner, the infamous Eugene "Bull" Connor. The next decade was spent in a series of odd jobs, including migrant work and a stint as chef at Disney World. In 1979 a family tragedy brought him back home for the funeral of a young niece and nephew lost when their home burned to the ground. So troubled was he that the family had no money for a proper gravestone that Holley resolved to memorialize the children himself. He found a piece of sandstone, a plentiful and soft local rock that he was able to carve and created a loving tribute to the lost children; in the process he discovered his own voice and a new, creative path in life. He remained in Birmingham and began to fill the one-acre property where he lived with visionary sculpture constructed from found objects. In the mid-1980s the legendary curator and patron of "outsider" artists William Arnett included Holley in the exhibition *Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art of the South*, proving the vitality and rootedness of an Afro-Atlantic aesthetic and spiritual practices in the

region, and thereby challenged the contemporary art world to expand its boundaries. Holley has crossed seamlessly into the mainstream of visual arts and his work has been shown and collected by leading museums across the U.S.