

Lonnie Holley
All Rendered Truth
5 July/15 September 2024

The Nine Notes, 2024. Enamel and spray paint on antique church organ pipes, 260 x 169 x 30 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Edel Assanti Gallery.



Camden Art Centre is delighted to present the first institutional solo show in London by acclaimed American artist and musician, Lonnie Holley (b. 1950, Birmingham, Alabama). The exhibition will centre new works made during a production residency in the UK earlier this year, alongside previously unseen sculptures made at The Mahler and LeWitt Studios in Spoleto, Italy in 2023, and key pieces made over the last few decades. A new sound installation in the Reading Room will feature unreleased outtakes from recent recording sessions with the artist's longstanding collaborators and there will be a live concert at Camden Art Centre on 5 July.

Active across more than four decades, Holley is recognised as an important figure in the Black Art tradition from the southern states of America, as well as a significant artist in the mainstream of international twentieth century and contemporary art. He has a visionary capacity to intuit and reveal to others the significance, symbolism and meaning of the overlooked and discarded. He learned how to make art as a child in the 'creeks and ditches' around his home in Alabama where he would dig for worms and find buried objects. As if connected to the regenerative cycles of decomposing organic matter in the soil, and in an act of recuperation, he introduces a redemptive aspect to rejected objects, giving them dignity and new life.

Holley finds beauty in what is immediately at hand, compulsively improvising to convey his meaning 'by any means necessary'. Influenced from an early age by American culture—sneaking through back doors or sewer pipes to the drive-in cinema and Alabama State Fairground or working at Disneyland Orlando—Holley's primary material has been the iconography and cultural refuse of Americana, signifying the failed promise of the American dream. A recent production residency in Suffolk has enabled him to direct this methodology to objects and materials salvaged here in the UK, including brambles and Victorian glass apothecary bottles, bringing new narratives into play.

In a monumental new work, *Nine Notes*, Holley has repurposed components of a pipe organ to commemorate the nine people who died in a church massacre in 2015, in Charleston, South Carolina—an important site for the Black community through the journey of emancipation. Holley had visited the church a few months prior to the deadly event, when Dylan Roof, a white supremacist, murdered members of the congregation in a racially motivated attack. The pipe is a motif that runs throughout the show—a metaphor for the life-giving air that passes through a body, the anima or spirit—and in another new assemblage piece made in the UK, Holley deploys a piece of flattened copper pipe retrieved from a road intersection in West London, beaten down by traffic and compressed to a ribbon.

Two large new sculptures titled *Without Skin* amass groups of unupholstered chairs, wrapping them in decommissioned industrial 'attack hoses' used by the US Fire Service to quench fires. This poignant work invokes the memory of people who were deliberately trapped inside burning churches in acts of racial violence, as well as the hoses used in aggression to suppress the social uprisings of the civil rights movement, in some cases, literally flaying the victims.

The show will include a large group of sculptures outlining faces seen in profile, a kind of drawing in space made using twisted wire, a material Holley returns to again and again to signify connection, communication, and networking, as well as danger, containment, and incarceration. These portraits, alongside a new body of large-scale paintings, honour his ancestral lineage, including Yoruba and Native American heritage—the lives that have gone before and that are carried in the artist's DNA. The faces Holley paints are an homage to those whose identities are unknown, but whose contribution to the progress of humanity and the service of others deserves recognition.

Holley's work continues and extends the assemblage tradition of modern and contemporary American artists that might include Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Betye Saar and Ed and Nancy Kienholz. His totemic bricolage of salvaged materials combines an animistic collaboration with materials and objects in the African tradition—treating bones and hide ritualistically while acknowledging their spirit—with a highly narrative approach to everyday objects and the traces they carry, including tyres, tree roots, shoes and chairs.

With immense generosity and a willingness to share his experiences with others, Holley's work is infused with, and highly conditioned by, his own journey—including the poverty and hardships of his early childhood, his immersion in the civil rights movement, the legacies of slavery, and the systematic oppression and exploitation of Black people. Whilst being deeply rooted to a specific, traumatic place and past, Holley speaks with hope and humility to universal concerns, projecting an inspirational message about how to live a life well and to prepare a world for future generations. The work speaks powerfully about our shared humanity, but also what is beyond the human condition, expressed through his deep love of the natural world which extends to other organisms, life-forms, the planets and stars. As the artist often asserts, his work gives a 'thumbs up to mother universe'.

Notes to Editors

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Camden Art Centre

Camden Art Centre is a place for world-class contemporary art exhibitions and education. Situated in Hampstead, North London, Camden Art Centre is a place for art and artists; a place for the curious, the novice and the expert alike. It's a place to see, to make, to learn and to talk about contemporary art, whether in our building, attending off-site projects or via our digital forums. Founded by artists in 1965, the Centre continues to be a space for the most vital and diverse mix of practices and ideas and is dedicated to supporting artists at every stage of their careers.

Lonnie Holley

Lonnie Holley (b. 1950, Birmingham, Alabama) lives and works in Atlanta, Georgia. Recent solo exhibitions include *Lonnie Holley*, UT Downtown Gallery, Knoxville (2023); *If You Really Knew*, Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami, Miami (2023); *What Have They Done with America*, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles (2022); *The Growth of Communication*, Edel Assanti, London (2022); *Coming From the Earth*, Dallas Contemporary, Dallas (2022); *The Influence of Images*, Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland (2021); *Everything That Wasn't White*, Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill (2021); *Somewhere in a Dream I Got Lost: Works by Lonnie Holley*, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem (2019); and *The Weight of Everything* at James Fuentes, New York, NY (2017). Recent group exhibitions include *Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers: Black Artists from the American South*, Royal Academy of Arts, London (2023); *Deep Horizons*, Middlesbrough Institute of Art, Middlesbrough (2023); *Called to Create: Black Artists of the American South*, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. (2022); *The Art of Assemblage*, NSU Art Museum, Fort Lauderdale (2022); *American South*, The Morgan Library & Museum, New York (2021); *Forms of Life*, Morán Morán, Los Angeles, CA (2020); and *History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2018).