



LONNIE HOLLEY

04.01.14

Lonnie Holley breathes art with every breath. When we sat down to talk at the press, he fiddled with pieces of metal, and when we were done, there was a beautiful little wire sculpture. Although he talks about being discouraged early on, he seems fearless now. Tragedies of all kinds have fallen on him, and he still makes art. He cries easily when remembering family members who have passed. A few moments later, he is ready to sing without prompting. Assuming the identity of being an artist and attaining some measure of recognition have taken a while, but he is not bitter. As his music and his art are being celebrated, he seems unchanged. The same deep spirit that moves him to make prints and go on concert tours today moved him to start carving stone many years ago. Tomorrow he will surprise us with more beauty made whole from all kinds of scraps and fragments.

—Kenneth Caldwell

Paulson Bott Press: How did you come to make prints at Paulson Bott Press?

Lonnie Holley: It was because of my friend here, Matt Arnett. I've done so much over my life, but I never had experienced this part of the art.

Q: And how did you meet Matt?

LH: My works went to the Smithsonian in 1980 in an exhibit called More Than Land or Sky: Art from Appalachia. And right after that exhibit, I met Bill—William Arnett, Matt's father. And Matt's father really let me stretch out my mentality. I was doing art outside the system. Bill allowed me to



SO ABOUT THE SOLAR, 2013

Softground and aquatint; 19.5" x 16"; Edition of 30



**THE THINGS OF LIFE
(TO SEE OR NOT TO SEE), 2013**

Aquatint; 19.5" x 39"; Edition of 30

work my ideas at my own pace. When he looked at the piece of work, he said, "Lonnie, what does this mean to you?" I told him what each piece—what each little thing in there meant, along with my kind of not recycling attitude, but rethinking—that in the recycling, that it ought to be re-understood and reconditioned, but that old sources themselves are like an identity.

Q: How did you first meet Pam and Renee?

LH: Pam and her daughter came to Atlanta. And I imagine they knew who I was. I don't know, really, what made Pam grow an interest in having me come here. But what I did feel when I met her—that she was sincere about it, hey, we want you to come up there and want to see what it'd be like for you. Because this was a new experience for me, totally new. It's beautiful, though. And what I'm seeing is almost like here's a chance to go to another level of thought. I'm just thinking over my material, sorting and gathering. I was squeezing and cutting all this different vegetation, then pressing it into wax. It was beautiful, prints and stuff, and I never did think of doing it before.

Q: Matt, you've been trying to get Lonnie out here for a long time, haven't you?

Matt Arnett: Ever since Mary Lee Bendolph came to Paulson Bott Press. I think Pam and I have been talking about it for seven or eight



years. Lonnie got an offer to do six dates of a West Coast tour with a big indie band called Deerhunter. And so it worked out that there were enough days off on the tour that Lonnie could come to Paulson. On the drive to Arcata, we stopped and drove through a little bit of the Avenue of the Giants and through the Chandelier Tree.

Q: So Lonnie, did you bring all this stuff? There's just tons of stuff here.

LH: No. Mostly everything that's here—either it was already at Paulson Bott Press and they just had it laying around. And I think Pam brought some things from home.

Matt Arnett: Plus, a three-block walk with Lonnie through any urban environment takes 20 minutes, because he's always stopping. And on the drive out to Arcata, we were stopping, and Lonnie was finding the redwood bark and all kinds of stuff.

Q: At what point did you call yourself an artist?

LH: I didn't know what art was when I first started doing my sandstone sculpture. All I knew was that I had found this piece of material. And I started cutting it one day, because my sister had lost two of her kids in a house fire. And I wanted to make something to help her stop crying. And I made these two baby tombstones. And we put them down in the ground with my sister's two children. So my first works was actually buried. They're in the coffin. I wanted to create something bigger. But we went to the Mortuary Society,



and they said that the material was too fragile to use in a concept of putting them in the cemetery or people buying them as a memorial piece. So I just stopped. It kind of killed my spirit, and I stopped. Then I started doing all these things, because I was living with my mother. They were like castaway found objects. The first that I realized that I was an artist didn't come to maybe almost four months later, after I had made sculpture. No, maybe two months later. Because our house caught on fire.

Q: Your house?

LH: Yeah. My house, not my sister's house.



Lonnie Holley at the Paulson Bott Studio



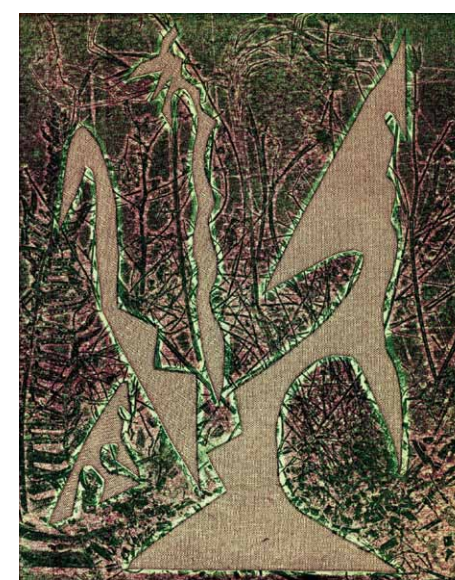
**OBSTACLES BEFORE THE GOAL,
2013**

Softground, aquatint, and drypoint;
40.5" x 34"; Edition of 30

This time me and my auntie were staying in the house behind my mama. And the house caught on fire. And then the fire department came. They put the fire out. And I had all these pieces of sandstone that I had cut just laying around. And so the fire chief said, "Be careful. Don't tear up that artist's work." He said, "Who is this artist? This is professional work. This is not an amateur." And I was still running around trying to help, because I didn't want nobody to get burnt by the fire. And he said, "Who did that?" And I said, "I did that." He said, "What is it?" I said, "That's President John Fitzgerald Kennedy." And I said, "You can't hardly see it because of all the tar from the burning of the roof. And then he asked, "Well, what's that piece?" And I said, "That's a dragon." And then I told him, "And that's a surfer." And then I just walked away, because I didn't know the word artist. And he kept asking Mama who did that. And she said, "My son, right there, did that. My son." "You did this?" I said, "Yes, sir." So the fire captain or chief got on the phone and called Channel 6 in Birmingham. Channel 6 came out. They wanted to know what was behind the pieces. And I started telling them I had about 120-some pieces of sculpture. They did a thing on Channel 6.

Q: What are we looking at here?

LH: It's called Obstacles before the Goal. It was just a soccer ball into some chicken wire. But Obstacles before the Goal was that I was black in a white society. And I had something that was so different. And for me to reach my goal or reach any goal—it was harder, because I didn't have an education. I was considered to be outside or the outsider. I was considered to be somebody with a dream that you can call this passion. They called us the outsiders. They called us orphans in a storm. We had been given so many different names of identity until it was kind of confusing for a lot of the artists to even want to wear the title "artist." Who would want to wear all of these different labels? And you were trying to do something for America as great as anything that could ever happen to America. ✎



**COMING OUT OF THE
REDWOODS, 2013**

Softground and aquatint; 19.5" x 16";
Edition of 30



PIECES, 2013

Softground and aquatint; 19.5" x 16";
Edition of 30



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DESIGN: MICHAEL OSBORNE DESIGN

OUR JOURNEY, 2013

Softground, aquatint, and drypoint; 40.5" x 34";
Edition of 30