

FEBRUARY 2018

## LONNIE HOLLEY



Born Into Colors, 2017  
Color Woodblock. Paper Size: 48" x 32"; Edition of 25



Black In The Midst of Red, White and Blue, 2017  
Color Woodblock. Paper Size: 39 7/8" x 29 3/4"; Edition of 20



Lonnie Holley's biography—African American; Alabamian; trailblazing visual artist and musician—seems to bring out the contradictions within all attempts to pigeonhole him and his work. On the one hand, as a self-taught artist he slots into that slim minority of “untrained” painters and sculptors who find any foothold in the American art world. As a musician and singer, however, his self-taught chops render him absolutely normative: virtually the entirety of his culture's musical canon (blues, jazz, gospel, rap, etc.), and therefore, the musics of the American mainstream, was invented by vernacular performers. What gives? How can what seems an impediment to acceptance in one field of creative endeavor be a credential in another?

What Lonnie Holley has taught himself, as a visual artist, turns out to be just as historically rich and multiform as the “education” of those seminal blues singers who built their idiom from a host of sounds they found in “black” and “white” culture alike. One of Holley's earliest and most enduring influences has been the art of Ancient Egypt. He picked up its conventions for depicting faces in profile, with front-facing eyes, and transformed them further, finding metaphors for family, genealogy, and human networks of all kinds. Figures that face each other but also look out at the viewer establish a complex relationship between an artwork's subject and its audience, implicating us in the human ecologies of the painting. In these prints, overtly Egyptian iconography is eliminated, leaving only Holley's predilection for nested and overlapping human



It Starts With The Blood and Ends With The Water, 2017  
Color Woodblock with Glitter. Paper Size: 39 3/4" x 29 3/4"; Edition of 20



From The Lines Of The Brain, 2017  
Color Woodblock. Paper Size: 39 7/8" x 29 3/4"; Edition of 20



My Three Mothers (Mama, Mother Earth, and Mother Universe), 2017  
Color Woodblock. Paper Size: 29" x 28"; Edition of 20

presences, chambered nautilus of ancestry, community, and the promises of a future within the past.

In terms of process, the artist has also looked back to his art-making roots: the prints were made from jigsawed plywood forms pieced together into a single wood “plate.” (Holley's original outdoor art environment, constructed in the 1980s and '90s in Birmingham, was ringed by cutout wooden forms much like these.) With these understatedly autobiographical prints, he has reimagined a staple of yard art—the plywood cutout—as the basis for a distinctly fine-art medium—the print—while referencing an ancient civilization that existed (like American music) at the boundary of Europe and Africa.

-Paul Arnett