

The Roots of the Spirit

Lonnie Holley, Mr. Imagination, Charlie Lucas, Kevin Sampson



Lonnie Holley, Mr. Imagination (Gregory Warmack), Charlie Lucas (Tin Man), and Kevin Sampson are renowned as Self-taught African American artists, but they refer to themselves simply as American artists. Their artworks express both their African and American culture, their everyday lives, their dreams, and their aspirations. By looking into the mirror of the black experience one has a better understanding of American culture, values and spirituality. Not only have the unique contributions of African Americans enriched American cultural life, but black artists have played a vital role in distinguishing our culture throughout the world. Indeed the black experience is so interwoven in our larger culture that it defines much of what the world perceives today as American.

Born in the mid 20th century, the artists grew up during the Civil Rights era and experienced racial discrimination. Lacking opportunities, education, and artist role models, these men became artists against great odds given their social and economic circumstances. Each one has acknowledged that divine intervention played an essential role in showing them their path. With the conviction of their African legacy, they began making art that honored their ancestors as an antidote to death and private grief. To witness Kevin Sampson's shrines to deceased friends and relatives; the ancestor thrones of Lonnie Holley and Mr. Imagination; and Charlie Lucas' metal sculptures that honor his grandparents by their material and method, is seeing through the eyes of the artists' ancestors. Art is their testament to memory, healing and ultimately spiritual renewal.

Viewing themselves as caretakers of the earth, Lonnie Holley, Mr. Imagination, Charlie Lucas and Kevin Sampson make paintings, wall reliefs and sculpture from harvesting the overflowing debris of contemporary civilization, preserving the rescued materials to teach future generations.

Out of the enormous variety of free materials ready to be recycled, the artists choose the ones that show an inner potential which they can instill with new purpose and meaning. The processes of painting, assemblage, construction and found object sculpture allow their restless minds many expressions ranging from seriousness to playfulness. Open to the spirit of imagination and with a desire to entertain, these artists build immersive, layered environments in their yards and inside their homes that need to be experienced to fully understand their oeuvre.

The materials and methods practiced by these four virtuoso Self-taught African American artists place them squarely within the wider context of the international contemporary art world. Their use of assemblage, found object sculpture and installation invite comparisons to contemporary art practices from the beginning of the 20th century when Picasso and Braque, inspired by African art, began to use found objects in their work. These ideas were further developed by many artists including Tinguely, Arman, Beuys, Rauschenberg, and continue to be expanded today by Willie Cole, David Hammons and many others. Regular use of recycled materials puts all four artists at the heart of the Eco Art movement, while Kevin Sampson and Lonnie Holley's art, loaded with political and social commentary, place them in a long line of U.S. socio-political artists. As boundaries break down between self-taught and formally educated artists, we celebrate the achievements of these four American artists, who emerged from the depths of personal despair to make valuable contributions to the American visual experience.

Lonnie Holley, Mr. Imagination, Charlie Lucas and Kevin Sampson were invited by the American Folk Art Museum to exhibit during the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. Their work can be found in many major American museum collections including: American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY; Birmingham Museum of Art, AL; American Visionary Museum, Baltimore, MD; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; High Museum, Atlanta, GA, and Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago, IL among others.

Curator: Martha V. Henry

Exhibition Organizer & Project Manager: Martha Henry, MHI Traveling Exhibitions

Assistant Exhibition Organizers: Brian Galdersi & Adam Zucker

For more information, please contact:

Martha Henry, Tel. (212) 308-2759 Cell: (917) 699-7894 email: mh@marthahenry.com

Mail: 400 East 57th Street, Suite 7L, New York, NY 10022

Web address: www.marthahenry.com

Above image: Mr. Imagination, Kevin Sampson, Charlie Lucas, and Lonnie Holley in Venice, Italy, May 2011. Photo by Martha V. Henry

Lonnie Holley



Born 1950 in Harpersville, AL

Lonnie Holley is the seventh of his mother's twenty-seven children. He spent much of his youth in foster homes and reform school. As a young man, he held a variety of jobs around the South, including a stint as a short-order cook at Disney World. In 1979, after relocating to the neighborhood of his birth in Birmingham, he became distraught over the death of two of his nieces in a house fire, and made his first works, small, carved tombstones. He moved into a house on land first cleared by his grandfather two generations ago. Holley was soon making grave memorials for area children and pets, from which developed more elaborate carvings made of a sandstone-like slag that is a by-product of local foundries' castings.

Holley also began making commemorative assemblages from other types of debris, which for conceptual reasons he placed in his yard amid the piles of fallow scrap that give birth to the artworks. This yard grew rapidly in the 1980s to comprise more than two acres and thousands of artworks in many media, including paintings, which address themes ranging from autobiography, family, and community, to a host of social and historical issues. Holley resided on the property with five of his children until the late 1990s. Due to the expansion of the nearby Birmingham airport, Holley was forced to dismantle the yard, much of which was lost. He relocated to Harpersville, AL, where he continues to produce paintings and sculpture, as well as site-specific works throughout his property.



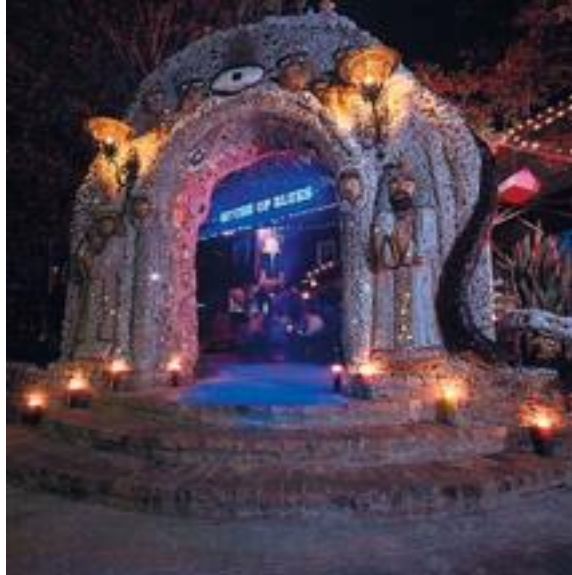
Above images: Lonnie Holley in his studio. Courtesy of www.jerryspiegel.com.
Installation views at the Birmingham Museum of Art, AL, 2005
Courtesy of Birmingham Museum of Art and Beth Maynor Young

Mr. Imagination



Born Gregory Warmack in 1948, Chicago, IL

As a child Warmack painted religious paintings and signs on cardboard and rocks. While in his teens and early twenties, he carved wood and stone and made jewelry from castoff objects that he sold on the street. In 1978, he was mugged, shot and left to die. During his recovery he had an out of body experience that led him to dedicate himself to a new regenerative art for the people. In the late 1970s he began working on “sandstone” sculptures of African and Egyptian imagery which he had seen during his astral travels. Around 1980 he began to call himself “Mr. Imagination” as well as to use all kinds of throwaway materials, especially bottle caps. In the mid 1980s, he had the first of ten exhibitions at Carl Hammer Gallery in Chicago, IL. He participated in the ground-breaking exhibition on outsider art at the Terra Museum. His beloved brother, William, died in 1997. After a series of successful exhibitions and commissions in the Lehigh Valley, Mr. Imagination left Chicago and took up residence in Bethlehem, PA. He had a retrospective at the Goggle Works Center for the Arts, Reading, PA and his first New York City solo show at Slate Gallery in 2007. A fire destroyed his studio-home and his life’s work in 2008. He relocated to Atlanta, GA in 2009 where he currently resides and works. In his process to heal from the loss of his home and art, he has begun to incorporate the surviving burned pieces into new sculptures.



Above images: Mr. Imagination in his studio. Courtesy of Ron Gordon, Chicago, IL
“Throne & Staffs”. Courtesy of Barbara Archer Gallery, Atlanta, GA.
“Button Tree”. Courtesy of American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY
“Arch”, Courtesy of House of Blues, Orlando, FL

Charlie Lucas



Born in 1951, Birmingham, AL

Charlie Lucas is a self-taught sculptor who welds fantastic larger-than-life animals, dinosaurs, giants, and people from scrap metal. A serious back injury in 1984 led him to question his purpose in life. He credits God for opening his mind, slowing him down and giving him a new talent. Although he had always made toys and other things from early childhood, he was discouraged by friends and family. Lucas honored his promise to God and persisted in making art regardless of others' opinions. His art environment at Pink Lily, outside Prattville, AL, is the culmination of several decades of dedicated work. He is presently working on a new art environment and opening an art studio to the public in Selma, AL. In addition to making sculpture, Lucas paints, and he is also a poet, songwriter and musician.



Above images: Charlie Lucas' Mailbox, Selma, AL, 2000
Environment at Pink Lily, AL, 2000
"Couple", welded metal and paint wall relief
"Dinah Mae", welded metal sculpture
Courtesy of Chip Cooper, Tuscaloosa, AL

Kevin Sampson



Born 1954, Elizabeth, NJ

Kevin Sampson tackles complex issues that concern him and his community in his sculpture, painted vessels encrusted with small items like bone, hair, and jewelry. Sampson's father, Stephen, was a Sunday school teacher and a Civil Rights leader in the 1960s and 1970s, so Kevin grew up with a strong social conscience and political awareness. The spiritual part of Sampson's art is ingrained in the history of his race. He taught himself to draw as a child, and when he joined the police force after high school, he became a sketch artist. In the early 1990s his wife was diagnosed with terminal cancer and his son was born prematurely and died. These tragedies led him to make art full time while supporting himself through teaching. He made his first sculpture, a memorial of a deceased cousin sitting on a ship headed for the next life. Sampson became consumed with the sculptures, commemorating many friends who had died of AIDS and drugs. He incorporated objects the deceased left behind, rescuing their memories and fueling his creations. Sampson continues sculpting vessels with themes from current political and social events. He lives and works in Newark, NJ.



Above images: Portrait of Kevin Sampson. Courtesy of Kevin Sampson, Newark, NJ
Untitled. Courtesy of American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY
“Civil War”. Courtesy of Kevin Sampson, Newark, NJ
“U.S.S. Palin”. Courtesy of Kevin Sampson, Newark, NJ.

