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## Bay Area's Wiegand Gallery Lands West Coast Debut of Four of the Country's Most Notable Outsider Artists



From left to right: *Two Brothers Lock Their Mind Together* - Charlie Lucas; *Doll's Throne*, 2004 - Mr. Imagination;  
*What Time Is It?* 2005 - Kevin Sampson; *Steel Worker*, 2008; Lonnie Holley

Recent *New York Times Magazine* subject Lonnie Holley—called the “insider’s

outsider”— heads up a list of renowned African American artists that includes Mr. Imagination, Charlie Lucas and Kevin Sampson in *The Roots of the Spirit*, a group exhibition curated by Martha Henry and Robert Poplack that sees the foursome’s work reunited for the first time since a controversial 2011 Venice Biennale showing; exhibition will include sculpture, paintings and drawings as well as a site specific installation from Holley to be built using materials found in the environs of Notre Dame de Namur University, which is the home of the gallery

*The Roots of the Spirit* runs September 19 through November 26, 2014 at Notre Dame de Namur University’s Wiegand Gallery; Opening reception Sunday, September 21, 2014, 2-4pm

**San Francisco, July 08, 2014** – The Wiegand Gallery, part of the Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, is proud to announce the West Coast debut of four of the country’s most notable Outsider artists in *The Roots of the Spirit: Lonnie Holley, Mr. Imagination, Charlie Lucas and Kevin Sampson*. Curated by Martha Henry and Robert Poplack, Director of the Wiegand Gallery, the exhibition sees the foursome’s work reunited for the first time since a controversial 2011 Venice Biennale showing that occurred despite having their invitation to represent the American Folk Art Museum within the framework of the international art world suddenly cancelled. *The Roots of the Spirit* will include works created while they were in Venice, as well as throughout their careers.

Lonnie Holley, the subject of a recent piece in *The New York Times Magazine* that tagged the artist as [“the insider’s outsider.”](#) and noted the expanding breadth of the artist’s work—which recently has included music and recording—will create a site specific work derived from materials found on the university grounds as part of the exhibition.

The genesis of *The Roots of the Spirit* goes back to 2011 when the four artists were invited to participate in the 54th Venice Biennale by the American Folk Art Museum in New York and Benetton in Treviso, Italy to create large site-specific installations at the Fondaco dei Tedeschi. The inclusion of the four self-taught Outsider artists during the 2011 Biennale promised to be revolutionary because it offered the opportunity to exhibit within a broad international context, all while finding themselves excluded domestically from the American art canon. Due to an unexpected loss of funding, the invitation was rescinded, which drew coverage in the art press, including *Artnet*, *Art Forum*, *Art in America*, *ArtClaire*, *Art Info* and others. But the artists—under the aegis of gallery director and curator Martha Henry who against all odds and without funding ultimately managed to secure a venue in an 11<sup>th</sup> century garden—decided they would still attend.

While Lonnie Holley, Mr. Imagination (Gregory Warmack), Charlie Lucas (Tin Man), and Kevin Sampson have all achieved renown as self-taught African American artists, they refer to themselves simply as American artists. Born in the mid 20th century, they came of age during the Civil Rights movement when deep and abiding racial

discrimination was the norm. Lacking opportunities, education, and artist role models, they managed to become artists despite great social and economic obstacles. “Their artworks express their African and American culture, their everyday lives, dreams, and aspirations,” says Martha Henry. “When we look into the mirror of the black experience we have a better understanding of American culture, values and spirituality. Black artists have played a vital role in distinguishing our culture throughout the world, indeed the black experience is so interwoven into our larger culture that it defines much of what the world perceives today as American.”

Notions of divine intervention and spiritual renewal are at the heart of much of the foursome’s work. It is art that honors ancestors as an antidote to death and private grief. 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.

Viewing themselves as caretakers of the earth in some profound way, the artists harvest the overflowing debris of contemporary civilization and transform it into art as a means of preserving the rescued materials to teach future generations. Out of the enormous variety of free materials ready to be recycled, the artists choose those that exhibit the potential for being re-instilled with purpose and meaning. “The processes of painting, assemblage, construction and found object sculpture reveal restless minds capable of expression that ranges from the serious to playful,” says Gallery Director Robert Poplack. “The work shows an openness to the spirit of imagination as well as a desire to entertain. Their immersive, layered environments—often located in their yards and inside their homes—need to be experienced to be fully appreciated.”

The materials and methods practiced by these four virtuosos 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 dating back 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 in the mid 20th century by many artists including Tinguely, Arman, Beuys, and Rauschenberg, and continue to be expanded today by Willie Cole, David Hammons and many other contemporary artists.

While the regular use of recycled materials puts all four at the heart of the Eco Art movement, 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,” says Henry, “I felt it important to celebrate the achievements of these four who emerged from the depths of personal despair to make valuable contributions to the American visual experience.”

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.

**What:** *The Roots of the Spirit: Lonnie Holley, Mr. Imagination, Charlie Lucas and Kevin Sampson*

**When:** Exhibition runs September 19 – November 26, 2014; Opening Reception: Sunday, September 21, 2-4pm

**Where:** Wiegand Gallery, Notre Dame de Namur University, 1500 Ralston Ave, Belmont, CA 94002

**Admission:** Free

High Res images available [here](#)

**A catalog will accompany the exhibition**



From left to right: Mister Imagination, Kevin Sampson, Charlie Lucas and Lonnie Holley

### **About Lonnie Holley**

Born in 1950 in Birmingham, Alabama, 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 continued to produce paintings and sculpture, as well as site-specific works throughout his property. In 2011, he moved to Atlanta where in addition to making art, he embarked on a musical career releasing two CDs on the Dust to Digital label and touring the U.S and Europe.

### **About Mr. Imagination**

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 that 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 groundbreaking exhibition on Outsider art at the Terra Museum. 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. In his process to heal from the loss of his home and art, he began to incorporate the surviving burned pieces into new sculptures. Born Gregory Warmack in 1948, Chicago, IL, Mister Imagination died in Atlanta, GA in 2012.

### **About Charlie Lucas**

Born in 1951 in Birmingham, Alabama, 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, friends and family discouraged

him. 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.

### **About Kevin Sampson**

Born in 1954 in Elizabeth, New Jersey, 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 and painting murals with themes from current political and social events. He lives and works in Newark, NJ.

### **About Martha Henry, Curator**

Martha V. Henry has been working as a curator, gallery director, and art advisor for almost thirty years with a special emphasis on African American, Outsider, and Folk Art. She is recognized throughout the United States as a leading authority on African American art. Ms. Henry is committed to nurturing American visual arts through advising and developing institutional and private collections, as well as educating the public through curating exhibitions in galleries, universities, museums, corporations and public parks.

For the past twenty-four years, she has been the President of Martha Henry, Inc., Fine Art, where she acts as art advisor, appraiser, and curator to private collectors, foundations and museums. Ms. Henry also co-founded and co-directed Urban Art Projects, a non-profit art organization in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, dedicated to providing the organizational framework for public art exhibitions, both nationally and internationally. She co-produced *Perform Williamsburg 2009*, a one day festival of performance art and video in East River State Park, and the *Williamsburg Waterfront Sculpture Exhibition 2010*, a one-month outdoor sculpture exhibition with invited artist, Swoon and eight juried artists. As an independent curator for the New England Center for Contemporary Art, Ms. Henry has curated exhibitions on contemporary and folk art at a variety of institutions including: Schick Art Gallery, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY; Virginia Beach Center for the Arts, Virginia Beach, VA; Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, DE; Fullerton Art Museum, Fullerton, CA; Snite Museum, Notre Dame University, South Bend, IN; INTUIT: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art Chicago,



IL; New England Center for Contemporary Art, Brooklyn, CT; and Wiegand Art Gallery, Notre Dame de Namur University, Belmont, CA.

Ms. Henry's writing has been published in numerous exhibition catalogues, including *Art from the Inside: Paño Drawings by Chicano Prisoners*; *Jay Milder: Adam and Eve on the IRT and Other Biblical Tales*; *Jay Milder: Urban Visionary, Retrospective*; and *Robert Murray, Recent Works*. She is a member of the American Association of Museums.

### **About Robert Poplack, Director of Wiegand Gallery and Curator**

Robert Poplack is Professor of Fine Art, and is the Director of the Wiegand Gallery at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont CA. He teaches fine art courses and curates exhibitions for the University. He was a guest curator for the D.U.M.B.O. (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) Arts Center in New York in 2002. Mr. Poplack writes essays for fine arts catalogues and for the Wiegand Gallery's art publications. He has been a Juror for numerous exhibitions including the Galesburg Civic Art Center in Galesburg IL and the Carmel Arts Festival summer landscape competition. He is a practicing painter who has exhibited his work nationally.

### **About Wiegand Gallery**

The Wiegand Gallery's mission is to focus attention on the contributions and accomplishments of outstanding artists who are under-recognized and whose body of work calls for greater recognition. The Gallery also curates exhibitions that reveal unusual or rarely seen work of renowned artists to show the public a different side of their creative endeavors. In addition, our program introduces internationally known artists who live outside of California to the Bay Area. The Wiegand Gallery is actively involved in producing exhibitions that broaden our understanding of social, political, and multicultural questions as part of Notre Dame de Namur University's commitment to social justice. The Gallery produces catalogs to enhance the educational aspects of the exhibition program with essays by important critics, theorist, poets and writers.

The Wiegand Gallery is part of the Madison Art Center, a magnificent stone building that was originally built as carriage house on the site of the country estate of 19th century financier William Chapman Ralston. Built in 1874, the carriage house walls are four feet thick and made of native stone quarried in the area. The upper story, where the Gallery and small theater are located, was harness room, grain section and hay loft. This exhibit space, with its porthole windows and skylights, is an unusually warm, inviting environment in which to experience art. It was named for the E.L. Wiegand Foundation, which provided funding towards the renovation. The Gallery is operated on a non-profit basis and is dependent on grants and donations. More information: <http://www.ndnu.edu/arts-events/wiegand-gallery/>; Gallery contact [jgehrke@ndnu.edu](mailto:jgehrke@ndnu.edu); (650) 508-3595.

### **About Notre Dame de Namur University**

Notre Dame de Namur University is a Catholic, not-for-profit, coeducational institution serving 2,000 traditional aged and adult students from diverse backgrounds. Established in 1851, by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, NDNU maintains a strong commitment

to academic excellence, social justice and community engagement. The university is fully accredited and offers 38 undergraduate, graduate and credential programs. The historic, 50-acre campus is located on the San Francisco Peninsula in Silicon Valley. For more information, visit [www.ndnu.edu](http://www.ndnu.edu).

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