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ART + ARCHITECTURE

CULTURAL COUNCIL ARTS AWARDS: LIGHT THE NIGHT | 25TH JACKSONVILLE JAZZ FESTIVAL

Whitfield Lovell (b. 1959); *Deep River*, 2013;
56 wood discs, found objects, soil, video
projections and sound; size variable; Courtesy
of the artist and DC Moore Gallery, New York.



WHITFIELD LOVELL

deep river



By Holly Keris Photos by James Madden

The Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens is thrilled to present the work of MacArthur Fellowship winner and internationally-recognized artist Whitfield Lovell. On display through September 13, *Whitfield Lovell: Deep River* is a multi-media installation that explores ideas of memory, identity, and freedom. Sculpture, video, drawing, sound, and music join together to create a unique experience that takes visitors on a symbolic journey in search of liberty.

Best known for his installations and thought-provoking Conté crayon portraits of anonymous African Americans from a deep swath of American history, encompassing the Emancipation Proclamation through the Civil Rights Movement, Lovell's work is regularly described as "haunting." Inspired by vintage photographs, Lovell often pairs his portraits, crafted on salvaged wooden objects such as walls, fences, or barrels, with everyday found objects, involving the viewer in an elaborate yet open-ended narrative.

Inspired specifically by the legacy of African Americans who fled from slavery during the Civil War, *Deep River* conveys Lovell's interest in "Camp Contraband," a Union encampment on the north shore of the Tennessee River in Chattanooga that became a safe haven for many former slaves. For Lovell, the river symbolizes the final boundary to freedom. Visitors become engulfed within the river itself, surrounded by projected images of flowing water and the sounds of the environment, making them participants in this journey.



Whitfield Lovell (b. 1959); *Deep River*, 2013; 56 wood discs, found objects, soil, video projections and sound; size variable; and *Flight*, 2013; Wood cabinet, suitcases, music stand, chest, sheet music, chains, rope. Courtesy of the artist and DC Moore Gallery, New York.

A collection of fifty-six charcoal portraits, each presented on round wood disks throughout the installation, further reinforces the visitor's inclu-

sion in the passage to freedom. Inspired by his personal collection of studio photographs, tintypes, cabinet cards, and postcards of unknown African Americans, Lovell creates individual portraits of those who may have journeyed on this quest for freedom. "A lot of artists depict the anguish of slavery," says Nandini Makrandi, Chief Curator of the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga, which organized the exhibition. "[They focus on] the downtrodden African American, whether free or slave, but Lovell doesn't focus on that. If you look at the individuals and you look at their faces, they are mostly calm and assured and confident."

Like planets orbiting the sun, these portraits spread out from the middle of the gallery, moving from oppression to emancipation. Each portrait is unique, representing not only travelers from the Civil War era, but from across many periods. "This is a device used by Lovell to broaden the scope of how we think about freedom," Makrandi explains, "and reminds us that the

search for freedom is an ongoing one."

The haunting voice of celebrated soprano Alicia Hall Moran, singing the traditional spiritual "Deep River," interrupts the soothing sounds of water, presenting "aspects of the struggles and triumphs of historical events in unexpected ways," says Makrandi. "His [Lovell's] work is universal in its discussion and exploration of passage, memory, and the quest for freedom."

Born in the Bronx, New York, Lovell decided to become an artist following a trip to Spain. "I knew I would go into some form of art," says Lovell, "but I wasn't sure which...But while standing in front of a Velázquez painting [at Museo del Prado in Madrid], I had an amazing spiritual experience. The painter had communicated with me through centuries and cultures, and I suddenly understood the role of the artist. I ran from room to room. Goya, El Greco, Rubens, and Picasso all began to speak out to me. Whatever they were doing in those rooms was what I wanted to do with my life."

Lovell studied in various programs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the

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Whitney Museum of American Art. He attended the Maryland Institute College of Art and Parsons School of Design before receiving a BFA from Cooper Union in 1981. Lovell taught at the School of Visual Arts in New York from 1987 to 2001 and has been a visiting artist at several institutions. His work has appeared in numerous solo and group exhibitions at national venues such as the Seattle Art Museum, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Be the first to experience this unique installation at the Community Opening for *Deep River*, on May 20, and learn more about the artist's vision at Conversations & Cocktails, at the museum on May 21. Connect to Jacksonville's past and future through meaningful programs that use *Deep River* as a launch pad for important conversations. For more information about related events and programs, visit cummermuseum.org or call

Whitfield Lovell: Deep River organized by the Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee.



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