

Current Cummer exhibit is a profound meditation in history, heritage, and freedom



Posted: Wednesday, June 17, 2015 12:00 pm

by KARA POUND

Inspired by the flight of African Americans from slavery during the Civil War, Whitfield Lovell's current exhibition *Deep River*, on display at the Cummer Museum of Arts & Gardens through Sept. 13, is a multimedia masterpiece combining sculpture, [video](#), drawing, sound, and [music](#).

“From a technological level, it is very unlike other exhibitions we’ve had here at the museum,” says the Cummer’s chief curator, Holly Keris. “So figuring out how to get multiple projectors and sound equipment working in a space that wasn’t really wired or configured to handle that type of equipment was a big challenge.”

Keris and the museum’s director, Hope McMath, have been big fans of Lovell’s work for years. Back in 2003, the Cummer actually had some of his pieces on loan from the Smithsonian Institution for an exhibition of African-American masters.

“The premise for the exhibition was born out of an experience that Whitfield had in Chattanooga when he was developing the exhibition for the Hunter Museum,” Keris says of how *Deep River* came about.

The Hunter Museum of [American Art](#) overlooks the Chattanooga River in Tennessee, similar to how the Cummer Museum is located on the St. Johns River.

“*I wanted to engage all of the senses, not just the visual. When you add things like aroma or sound – particularly music – it can be engaging and provide a richer understanding.*”

WHITFIELD LOVELL

“When Whitfield was spending time there, he went to a place called Grand Contraband Camp, which is just on the far side of the river,” Keris explains. “It’s a place where, during the Civil War, slaves would escape to in search of their freedom. A Union encampment was located on the site of Camp Contraband and so the slaves’ goal was to make it across the river and find freedom.”

Deep River, which Lovell started work on in 2012 and completed in 2013, incorporates 56 charcoal portraits presented on round wooden disks inspired by his personal collection of studio photographs, tintypes, cabinet cards, and postcards. These illustrated disks are displayed within an [environment](#) featuring found objects, projected images, and music.

“I became interested in installation art back in 1994,” says Lovell. “I wanted to engage all of the senses, not just the visual. When you add things like aroma or sound – particularly music – it can be engaging and provide a richer understanding.”

In essence, it’s Lovell’s intention to create an experience for the observers.

“My objective is to remove the viewer from the gallery setting and transcend time and space,” he explains. “I want the viewers to immerse themselves into the artwork and become participants.”

The exhibition, organized by Hunter Museum, was recently shown at Telfair Museums in Savannah, Georgia before making its way to Northeast [Florida](#).

“Whether you are in the ‘Deep River’ part of the exhibition or simply spending time with his other pieces in the gallery, Whitfield provides few answers,” says Keris. “He’s combining these magnificent portraits with reclaimed wood backing and these found objects and he’s telling a story, but he leaves it up to you to think about what the story is.”

Keris admits having a full-scale, multimedia exhibit such as *Deep River* proved to present certain challenges, but the result was “incredibly rewarding.” Cummer had Lovell on hand toward the end of the installation to provide guidance.

It was the 55-year-old, Bronx-born artist’s first visit to Florida.

“My time there was all about work,” Lovell says of his trip south. “The only thing I got to do other than installing the show was eat out a [couple](#) of times and go antiquing, which is work for me because it’s how I get material for my exhibitions.”

With the installation now complete, and Lovell now back at home in [New York](#) and all hurdles cleared successfully, it’s time for Keris and her team to enjoy the reactions of museum visitors.

“We’re hearing from a lot of people that they find *Deep River* to be a personal, spiritual, meditative, and profound experience,” Keris [reports](#).

“Whitfield Lovell’s interest in the concept of the search for freedom, the journey toward freedom, and the crossing of a boundary is for all people of all times who are still struggling with exactly the same thing,” she continues. “That’s really what makes it a universal truth and a universal experience rather than being isolated to a particular moment in time.”

<http://folioweekly.com/STREAM-OF-CONSCIOUSNESS,12819>