The Reveal: Lonnie Holley Is the Ultimate Outsider Artist

Now 67, the Alabama native makes sculpture that speaks to the lived reality of the Black experience in America, sometimes from beneath the fridge.

Jonathan Curiel, Wed Aug 9th, 2017 6:22pm

On the June day that “Revelations: Art from the African American South” opened at the de Young Museum, artist Lonnie Holley shared a stage with two actors who are among the most celebrated in their fields (Danny Glover and Delroy Lindo) and with art scholars who are equally esteemed. The introductory discussion was supposed to give the audience a more tangible connection to the paintings, sculpture, and other objects on display. It did, but it also confirmed something for those who had never heard of Holley: He keeps people spellbound with his oratory, humor, and insights into art-making.

Holley’s art does the same. He makes the kind of sculpture — and produces the kind of music — that changes people. It gets into their emotional and intellectual core and forces them to rethink art and history, as well as their own assumptions about how the world works.

This is not an exaggeration. This is a fact. Anyone who attended Holley’s panel discussion will testify that Holley has a gift of “vision” and “spirit” that is undeniably powerful, and that he links art — poetically and practically — to things like humanity’s ability to steer the earth’s environment back to health.
“We are the doctor, and the art is the medicine,” Holley said to rapturous applause that June day at the de Young.

Who is Lonnie Holley? He’s the artist who made a piece called A Box for Woman: The Pure White Spirit Trapped in Her Space, a work whose pink veneer and white cross overlap with a mouse trap, mouse skeleton, other animal bones, a syringe, leaves, and organic debris. Holley created it from parts he found in the kitchen of a virtually blind neighbor in Birmingham, Ala. The neighborhood was economically poor. The neighbor, an older woman, was also poor. This was 1989, when Holley was in his late 30s and had been making art for 10 years. He already had a reputation of being “an outsider artist” for his use of found materials. His first piece in 1979 was a pair of tombstones he made from sandstone after the deaths of a sister’s two children. A Box for Woman, now ensconced on the first floor of the de Young, is an apotheosis of Holley’s approach to art-making. Holley birthed A Box for Woman from a scene that would have repulsed and depressed many other people.

“That piece we’re honoring a woman that I had found all this material in her house,” Holley tells SF Weekly in his distinct vernacular during an almost-hour-long phone interview from Atlanta, where he now lives. “She had cataracts in her eyes, and she could hardly see. So something had been stealing her meat that she had prepared for herself to eat, and she didn’t know if someone had been sticking their hand in the window and getting food off the stove. It was at the time when we were getting to move her out of the house — because of the [Birmingham] airport expansion, they had bought her property. The airport inspector had been alarming people to either clean up or get rid of certain amount of things that they had on their property. We was in the house, and I moved the refrigerator and the freezer — and that’s where all of that material was found, underneath the freezer. I tried to explain to her, ‘This is your problem, and this is what had been eating up your meat.’

“The reason I did the paint box and did everything pink is the condition that a lot of women — especially African-American women — are living in, in America,” Holley adds. “It’s not so much that we should be ghostly afraid, or spiritually afraid. Sometimes, the thing that’s actually in our household that we don’t know about is in the manner of spiritual and ghostly. So me putting that into that box, and putting a white cross there — the white cross indicating the spirit that we cannot see. You got to remember that this woman was half-blind. What I do is try to take the terms of everything and mix it into the conversation about a piece of art. I’m an African-American artist, and I try to show nothing but the truth with the materials that I gather, about our involvement, our adventure as we adventured through the time periods.”

In the American South, Holley and generations of African-American artists before him have made art in a vacuum. Few major art museums were interested in their work, let alone collected it. Most of these artists were self-taught, and came of age at a time when racism, de facto segregation, and lynchings were commonplace. Without support from traditional institutions, these artists made art anyway, often out of discarded objects.

“I am the alarm clock,” Holley says, “of the wake-up of what materials there are for us to use.”

Instead of exhibiting in galleries, these artists displayed their work in streets, on lawns, and anywhere else they found promising. Through word-of-mouth and the occasional champion like art historian and patron William Arnett, the art world eventually came calling.

“I’m a part of something,” Holley says, “that’s greater than my individualness.”
Among the best-known works in “Revelations” are Gee’s Bend quilts, from Gee’s Bend, Ala., from a collection that first toured in 2002 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston before going around the country, including a stop at the de Young in 2006. “Revelations” showcases gripping art by Purvis Young, a Miami painter whose Talking to the System depicts three young African-Americans addressing two rows of oversized heads; Joe Light, a Tennessee artist whose enamel-and-wood work Jealousy is a graphic depiction of a woman interrupting a potential fist fight between men; and Thornton Dial, an Alabama artist whose Strange Fruit: Channel 42 uses spray-can tops, clothing, wood, and other objects to depict the hanging of a man from a television antenna.

Dial passed away last year, Light in 2005, and Young in 2010. Most of the artists in “Revelations” are dead. And their late recognition as professional artists is bittersweet — an example of an artistic shift that mirrors the culture at large. More Black Americans than ever have advanced to positions of prominence in the arts and academia. More Black Americans than ever are middle- and upper-class. The nation elected its first Black president. But the education system is still skewed against many Black Americans. And even as someone like Holley has made huge advancements in his life — even as he was invited to the White House under President Bill Clinton in 1995, and even as institutions like the Smithsonian began collecting his work — he faced challenges that amounted to virtual discrimination.
In 1997, Holley lived on a property that, like his neighbor’s, was just minutes from the airport. That year, the Birmingham Airport Authority condemned the property, which was also Holley’s art studio and exhibit space, saying it needed the space for its $30 million expansion. The authority offered him just $14,000 to cover his costs, implying that the scores of artwork scattered in Holley’s yard amounted to junk. Holley sued the authority, asking for $250,000. He settled for $165,700 — and then, he had to move his life’s work to another Alabama property. The authority’s staff were akin to mainstream art collectors who thought Holley’s work was worthless. Vandals desecrated Holley’s work in his Birmingham yard, sometimes with feces.

“When I did get to be an artist, the hardest thing I had to deal with was the critic,” Holley tells SF Weekly. “They was criticizing me. People were coming into my life saying that what I was doing didn’t make no sense, didn’t have no message. It was junk to them. It was garbage. They didn’t see nothing but a refrigerator full of cans and things. They didn’t see the leftover product of a woman’s life.”

“I’m grateful,” he adds, “to have lived this long, in order to have achieved [what I did]. Art has proven to be the best function of education that I have seen in my life.”

Holley, who now lives in a one-bedroom apartment, frequently travels around the country for art exhibits and gigs. His songs are otherworldly and trance-like, a unique mix of roots music, blues, quasi-gospel, quasi-folk, and spoken word, with lyrics and a voice that are uniquely Holley’s. On a track like “From the Other Side of the Pulpit,” where band members use guitar, keyboard, and other instruments along with such non-instruments as metal pipes, Holley intones and growls, “Been want to go somewhere / Been want to tell somebody. / Been a loooong time. I want to tell it and I ain’t lyin.’ / … See what I got to talk about. / … How I see the world. / … The car is runnin’ out of gas. The tires are going kind of bald / May pop at any time, they may pop off. / … I want to climb mountains. I really do want to climb.”

As visitors enter one of the de Young exhibit’s main galleries, Holley’s music is playing overhead — seven songs, including “From the Other Side of the Pulpit,” that turn the gallery into an echo chamber of inspired, complicated feelings. It’s that gallery that contains Holley’s work, including A Box for Woman. It’s that gallery where you see art-goers squinting and closing their eyes and reacting to the art, both externally and internally. The entire exhibit is, indeed, a revelation — not just because this is art from the past, but because it exists in the present.

Holley is still alive. He’s still making great art. (“The art and the music,” Holley says, “are coming from the same brain formations. … It’s like Siamese twins.”) So are other Black artists in the American South. And the Atlanta nonprofit that William Arnett inspired, the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, is actively promoting the work of these artists. The de Young’s exhibit is the culmination of its recent purchase of 62 works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, whose trustees include Jane Fonda. Matt Arnett, whose father is William Arnett, is one of Holley’s managers.

“Lonnie was certainly ready to bring his message in music and art to the world 30 years ago, and my dad was trying to get museums to bring this art to the public 30 years ago, and the de Young exhibit we could have done in the 1990s,” Arnett tells SF Weekly. “Lonnie was no less relevant in the 1990s than he is now. It’s wonderful for all of us who’ve been following this art — and it’s wonderful for Lonnie — to finally be recognized and celebrated, but his art was this good 30 years ago. … Lonnie has been ahead of the curve of contemporary art for decades. In the ’80s, the world wasn’t ready for Lonnie, so he got dismissed in all kinds of ways.”

Holley himself is more matter-of-fact and philosophical about the circuitous route he’s taken from the margins of the art world — and society — almost to its center. He’s the son of a woman who gave birth to 27 children. They had no money, and she gave Holley away to a woman who asked if she could have him. A few years later, that lady gave Holley to another woman, trading him for a bottle of whiskey, Holley says. That new woman’s partner abused Holley: beating him up, forcing him to do laborious chores, and leading him to run away. He got into trouble, and was sent to a kind of juvenile hall — to what was then called the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children, where he endured
more beatings, one of which broke his legs. Holley learned farming. He was not formally educated, and became a father for the first time at age 15.

Holley, whose grandmother and mother wanted him to be a preacher, doesn’t say his life is “better” because of all the hardships and challenges he’s faced — just that his life is kind of emblematic of many things about Black life in the southern U.S. He could have been an anonymous casualty. Instead, major media — including The New York Times — have profiled him in the past five years, and he’s invited to perform and talk around the country. At age 67, Holley is more celebrated than he’s ever been. And younger people — artists or not, art-goers or not — look to him for inspiration. He uses art to teach young kids, telling them that creation and art-making is a satisfying way to channel their energies.

“Malcolm said, ‘By any means necessary.’ That’s what Malcolm X said,” Holley said at the de Young panel discussion. “But my thing is to get them away from the weapons, and see that all of this stuff is your dreams. By any means. Every plank on this slope — instead of seeing a kid deny himself or herself an opportunity, I want to show them the patterns within each plank. I want to show them the groove — the pine knot — and what a knot means. A knot is to be or knot to be. You understand what I’m saying?”

The audience laughed and applauded Holley. Then Holley said this: “Somebody said, ‘You think you can do good on Broadway?’ I am Broadway.”

There was more applause for Holley. No one disputed him. No one disagreed.

“Revelations: Art from the African American South,” through April 1, 2018, at the de Young Museum, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Dr. $6-$15; 415-750-3600 or deyoung.famsf.org.