



The Things We Carry
Contemporary Art in the South
MAY 28–OCTOBER 9, 2016

It is my honor and great privilege to present *The Things We Carry: Contemporary Art in the South* at the Gibbes Museum of Art. Carefully selected by Gibbes Curator of Exhibitions Pam Wall, the artists in this exhibition represent the best and brightest working today. They have established reputations that emphasize their skill and willingness to address difficult and provocative subject matter, and their work is simply amazing.

This exhibition would not be possible without the support and great enthusiasm of Society 1858, the Museum's auxiliary group of dynamic young professionals that administers and promotes the annual *1858 Prize for Contemporary Southern Art*. The \$10,000 Prize honors an artist whose work contributes to a new understanding of art in the South. The artists represented in *The Things We Carry* were selected from the past winners and finalists of the 1858 Prize and speak to the prestige of the Prize and to the quality of work coming out of the southern region. Coinciding with the Museum's reopening after a two-year, 13.5 million dollar renovation, the opening of Spoleto Festival's 40th anniversary year, and the first anniversary of the Emanuel AME Church tragedy, *The Things We Carry* is a pivotal exhibition for the Gibbes and for our community that examines who we are, and who we want to be. We hope you find inspiration in the incredible works on view.

Angela D. Mack
Executive Director

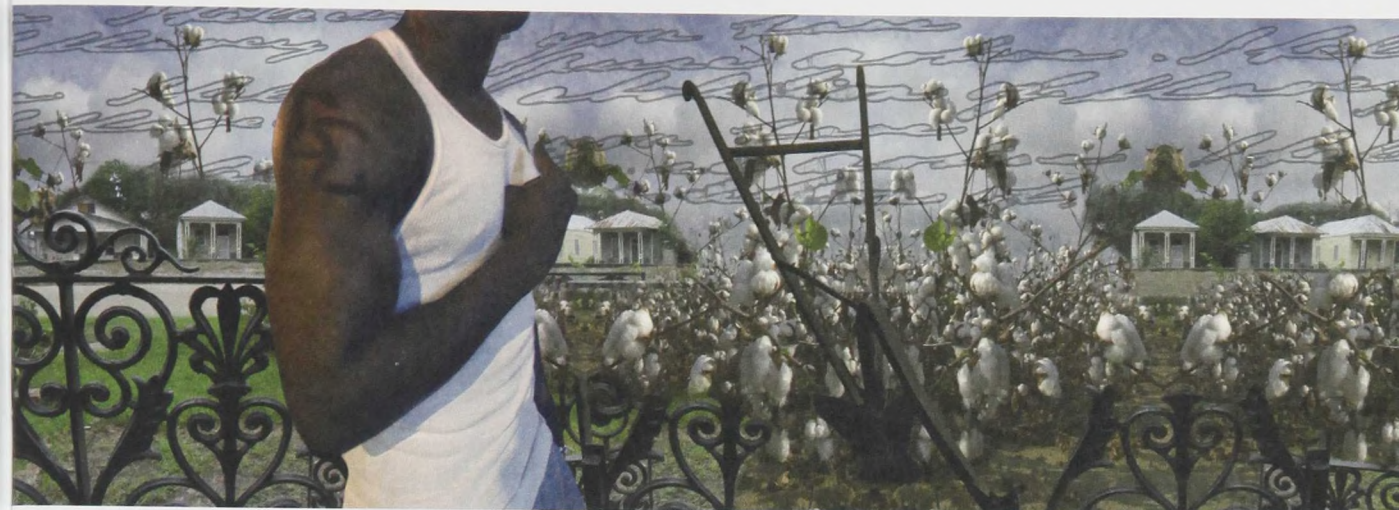


Fig. 1

THE GIBBES MUSEUM OF ART

began organizing *The Things We Carry: Contemporary Art in the South* in the days following the horrific shooting at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on June 17, 2015.

The city of Charleston was devastated, and the Museum grappled with how to respond. Plans were in place for a future contemporary exhibition, but the massacre gave our project a new focus and a new sense of urgency. We turned to art to help our city, and ourselves, heal. As we approached artists to participate in *The Things We Carry*, the response was overwhelming. Every artist we contacted agreed to participate.

The premise of the exhibition is to bring together contemporary artwork that addresses the troubled history of the American South and the many ways that history is represented today. The exhibition title was inspired by *The Things They Carried*, a moving collection of short stories published in 1990 by Tim O'Brien based on the author's experiences as a combat soldier in the Vietnam War. *The Things We Carry* captures the concept of the exhibition,

particularly the idea of how the past intertwines with the present. We all carry the past with us, but like the participating artists, we all confront this history in different ways.

The intersection of past and present is a central tenant of photographer **Stephen Marc's** artistic practice. Marc spent over a decade traveling throughout the United States and Canada photographing and researching sites connected with the Underground Railroad, the pre-Civil War organization that helped enslaved African Americans escape to freedom. He gathered documents, artifacts, and ephemera from his research and digitally combined the material with his contemporary photographs of Underground Railroad sites. The resulting series includes an image he refers to as "Double Tap Brand" (fig. 1). It was photographed in Starkville, Mississippi, the home of Mississippi State University, and features a member of the Phi Beta Sigma fraternity with a double sigma brand emblazoned on his arm. This contemporary image is combined with reminders of Mississippi's slaveholding past: a cotton field, an iron plow, and

abstracted text in the sky taken from a historical document in which a slave owner defended slavery. While the young man's brand is a symbol of fraternal pride, it also recalls how enslaved people were branded by their owners, both for identification and as a form of punishment. This complex narrative explores issues of power, ownership, and identity, challenging viewers to contemplate the legacy of slavery today.

Sonya Clark is a fiber and mixed-media artist based in Richmond, Virginia, whose artistic practice addresses African American identity. Many of her works include human hair, a material that contains DNA, symbolizing the tangible way we carry our personal history within the cells that comprise our bodies. Clark also creates work that incorporates the Confederate battle flag, a divisive symbol that was removed from the South Carolina Capitol grounds in the weeks following the Emanuel AME Church shootings. Earlier in 2015, Clark conceived a performance piece during which she took apart a Confederate flag, thread by thread, with the help of volunteers. Unraveling the flag was slow and often frustrating—an apt metaphor for the difficult task of dismantling racism in America today. Clark separated the threads by color and incorporated them into a work titled *Unraveled* (fig. 2). The piles of red, white, and blue thread invite the question: What do we create from here? Will the unraveled threads find new life as a positive symbol of hope and change? Clark's work pushes viewers to ask tough questions and consider how we transform the past and create our nation's future.

A colleague of Clark at Virginia Commonwealth University, **Andréa Keys Connell** investigates personal narrative through her life-sized figural

sculptures. The strong emotive quality of her work stems from her sensitivity to the use of materials and interest in the psychological state of her subject. For *The Things We Carry*, Connell created *2016 Monument*, a sculptural grouping of two figures: an adult male soldier and a young girl. The soldier is a monument situated on a platform that is collapsing. The young girl stands before the monument in the line of fire of the soldier's weapon. The piece questions how we memorialize the past, and in the words of the artist, "What happens when the monuments turn against us?"

Mike Smith's work explores the ethos of the mountain communities of the southern Appalachian region. For thirty-five years, Smith has lived in East Tennessee and wandered remote areas with his camera in hand. His large-format color photographs capture the unique beauty of the Appalachian region and the fiercely independent nature of those who call it home. Although the majority of his photographs do not include people, their presence is demonstrated by their impact on the land: a shed on the hillside, a fence separating fields, or a pile of refuse near a fallen tree. Smith's 1997 photograph *Telford, Tennessee* (fig. 3) depicts three crosses in a yard lit by a softly glowing sky and implies a spiritual connection with the land. Reliance upon nature is an important aspect of Appalachian culture, and Smith's photographs elegantly document this relationship with a keen eye for capturing both the poignant and the absurd.

Like Smith, the paintings of **Bo Bartlett** convey a strong sense of place. Bartlett was raised in Columbus, Georgia, and has recently moved back to Columbus and taken up residence in his childhood home. Located nearby is Fort Benning, the site of a controversial training center

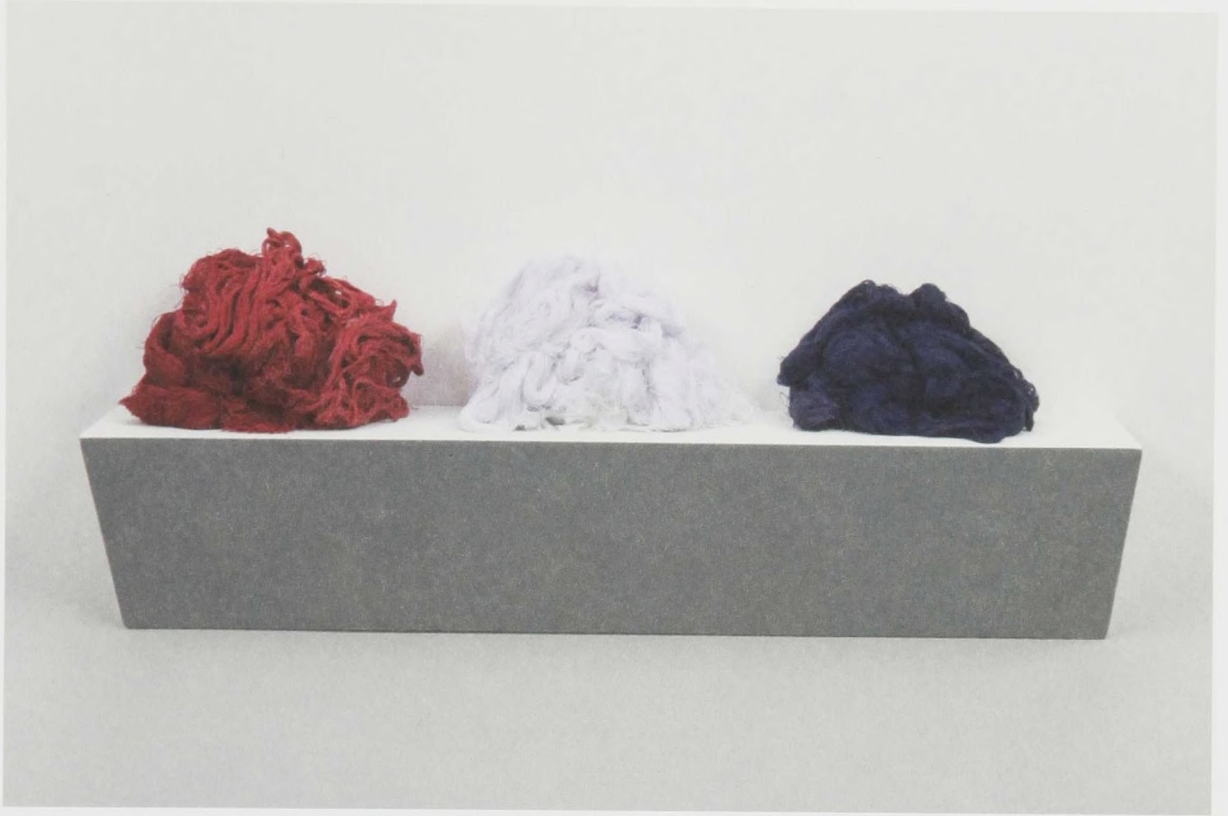


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 2 *Unraveled*, 2015, by Sonya Clark (American, b. 1967)
Unraveled cotton Confederate battle flag, 11 x 36 x 7 inches;
Courtesy of the artist, photo credit: Taylor Dabney

Fig. 3 *Telford, TN*, 1997, by Mike Smith (American, b. 1951);
chromogenic print, 28 x 36 inches; Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 4

for Latin American military leaders called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, better known by its former name, the School of the Americas. Each November since 1990, protestors rally at Fort Benning and call for the closure of the school. Bartlett's *School of the Americas* (fig. 4) portrays a "die-in" from the annual demonstration, during which people pretend they are dead in protest of lives lost at the hands of military leaders they believe were trained to torture and murder at the School of the Americas. At first glance, the beautifully-rendered painting appears to depict women sleeping on a lawn; however, closer inspection reveals blood and scrapes on their skin. The central figure is Bartlett's frequent model and muse, his wife and fellow artist, Betsy Eby.

The work of **Deborah Luster** also addresses violence in America today. Luster lives in New Orleans, Louisiana, and turned to photography as a means of coping with the murder of her mother. Her series *Tooth for an Eye: A Chorography of Violence in Orleans Parish* documents sites in New Orleans where murders have occurred. The desolate landscapes, including *Tooth for an Eye, Ledger 01-13* (fig. 5), form a chilling portrait of loss in the city with one of the highest crime rates in the country. Chorography is the systematic mapping of a region, a technique Luster uses to identify sites of violence in New Orleans. Along with the photographs, Luster carefully records the location, date of the murder, victim's name, and manner of death. *Ledger 01-13* reads, "Location.

Fig. 4 *School of the Americas*, 2010, by Bo Bartlett (American, b. 1955); oil on panel, 76 x 76 inches; Collection of Stacy and Jay Underwood



Fig. 5

Florida Avenue and Congress (Florida), Date(s). April 1, 2008 12:06 a.m. Name(s). Charlie Hulbert (18), Notes. Multiple gunshot wounds." Luster's photographs are displayed as framed prints, but also are bound in large leather ledgers. Physically flipping through the volumes lends a sense of scale to the crisis; image after image documenting victims of gun violence.

Sally Mann takes a different approach to the southern landscape, capturing the haunting history of the land with a subtle, yet deeply moving approach. In 1998, Mann traveled throughout the region photographing in Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi for her *Deep South* series. In her 2005 publication of the same name, Mann

writes, "To identify a person as a Southerner suggests not only that her history is inescapable and formative but that it is also impossibly present." This presence of history pervades Mann's work and is heightened by her use of nineteenth-century, wet-collodion photography techniques. Mann has a masterful command of the medium, which allows her to embrace imperfections in the process: drips of developer, hazy focus, and cracks in glass plates are used to great artistic effect. *Untitled (#15 Windsor)* (fig. 6) has a spectral glow, perhaps appropriate for the site of a former plantation in Mississippi.

Like Mann's photographs, the work of **Stacy Lynn Waddell** has an ethereal beauty resulting from her unique

working process of burning, branding, and singeing paper. Waddell plumbs the depths of American history, as in this work that addresses the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Created in 2010, *Manifest* (fig. 7) consists of 60 panels of paper branded with imagery ranging from flowers and figures to indecipherable text suggestive of oral histories passed through generations. The piece represents all that was transported across the Atlantic in the slave trade, not just cargo, but also the ideas and cultural heritage carried by passengers. The emphatic, repetitive marks of Waddell's branding iron imply the psychological scars of past trauma, both acute and accumulated over time. Yet there is distinct beauty in Waddell's work and elegance in the soft, sepia-toned forms.

North Carolina artist **Damian Stamer's** work is rooted in his experience growing up in rural Durham County. The barns and back roads of his youth populate his large-scale, abstracted paintings. He often works in series, painting a location multiple times. The imagery shifts and fades with each progression, much like memories change over a lifetime. Painted in 2014, *Little River 3* (see cover) is monumental in scale and features a heavily worked surface. Through the gestural brushstrokes, a rural landscape emerges. Stamer's use of color, texture, abstraction, and imagery creates a dynamic interplay between the formal and conceptual elements of the painting. The North Carolina landscape is present, but has been altered forever by time and memory.

William Christenberry is among the most noted visual chroniclers of the South. For over fifty years he has recorded the landscape and architecture of his native Alabama through photographs, paintings, drawings, and sculpture. In

1962 Christenberry made his first works related to the Ku Klux Klan, a powerful and recurring theme throughout his career. To express his abhorrence of the Klan, he created and displayed drawings, paintings, photographs, and costumed dolls in a private studio installation called *The Klan Room*. In 1979 Christenberry's studio was burglarized and *The Klan Room* was stolen. Following this disturbing incident, he had a vivid dream of an isolated building with no windows or doors and a steeply pitched roof, situated on the red earth of rural Alabama. This vision inspired Christenberry's series of dream buildings including the 2001 sculptural grouping *Dream Building Ensemble* (fig. 8). Ghost-like totems reference the white hoods of Klansmen and the haunting isolation of Christenberry's dream. Of his Klan-related work Christenberry has written, "Some people have told me that this subject is not the proper concern of an artist or art. On the contrary I hold the position that there are times when an artist must examine and reveal such strange and secret brutality."

Artist **Lonnie Holley** is no stranger to brutality. Born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1950, Holley's personal story is one of neglect, abuse, survival, and ultimately, sustenance through creative expression. His introduction to art came in 1979 when two of Holley's nieces died tragically in a house fire. Overcome by grief and unable to afford tombstones for their graves, Holley found discarded sandstone at a foundry and carved the tombstones himself. He found comfort in the act of creating, and began his career as an artist. Holley continued to carve sandstone sculptures and later branched out to mixed-media assemblages, painting, and music. In 2014 Holley visited Charleston and scavenged materials for future work.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Fig. 6 *Untitled (#15 Windsor)*, 1998, by Sally Mann (American, b. 1951); Gelatin silver print, 40 x 50 inches © Sally Mann; Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

Fig. 7 *Manifest* (detail), 2010, by Stacy Lynn Waddell (American, b. 1966); branded paper, 80 x 144 inches; Museum purchase

He collected discarded electrical wiring from the site of Emanuel AME Church and incorporated the materials into the assemblage *Changing Power*. Featuring a lamp without a bulb and a tangle of tubing and wires, the piece represents the disruption that often accompanies change. Although *Changing Power* was created before the church shooting, one cannot help but connect the sculpture, and its metaphorical moment of darkness, to the terrible tragedy.

The artists in *The Things We Carry* show us that the South is complicated and that the pain of racism and violence is real. But if there is one thing Charleston

and its citizens have taught us over the past year, it is that hope emerges from tragedy. The history of the South is undoubtedly troubled, but we are a people of grace, resilience, and courage. I saw this in the days following the Emanuel AME Church shooting, and I see it now in the work included in this exhibition. These artists do not shy away from the harsh realities of our past and present, but they also show us the beauty of our land and the spirit of our people. And it is on this common ground that we must move forward.

Pamela S. Wall
Curator of Exhibitions



Fig. 8

Fig. 8 *Dream Building Ensemble*, 2001, by William Christenberry (American, b. 1936); 11 dream buildings, wood, encaustic, red soil, dimensions variable; Courtesy of Hemphill Fine Arts

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