

# WILLIE COLE



The imprints of six steam irons mark this work on paper. Beneath each silhouette, in large capital letters, is the name of an iron manufacturer—Casco, General Mills, Monarch, Silex, Presto, with one "unknown." What do we make of this image, framed in an old window?

For the past twenty years Willie Cole has selected and transformed particular items discarded from our vast consumer culture, such as irons, shoes, and lawn jockeys, into objects that resonate with metaphorical meaning—particularly cross-referencing African cultural history and the African Diaspora. The iron silhouettes in *Domestic ID* call up the slave era in America, when African women served as forced domestics, and the period after emancipation, when they took in laundry as one of the few lines of work open to them. The irons' singed imprints also evoke the rituals of scarification, practiced within certain African and other cultures, and branding, which expunged identity to mark humans as slave property—perhaps reinforced by the iron marked "unknown." Other references inhabit this powerful image—such as the similarity of the iron's shape to boats that plied the slave trade across Europe, Africa, and the Americas, and the near-whiff of heat and steam that seems to evoke the hot, backbreaking work of plantation life.

Mounting his image in a window, Cole literally reframes history in a way that summons the ready-made art of surrealist and Dada artists such as May Ray and Marcel Duchamp. Such wry yet serious correspondences of history, art, and racial politics anchor Cole's reputation in the art world. Educated at Boston University School of Fine Arts, and the School of Visual Arts (where he received a BFA) and the Art Students League, both in New York, Cole lives in northern New Jersey and has exhibited his work throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe.