

Radcliffe Bailey
Solomon Projects
Atlanta, GA

Stuart Keeler

In *Looking for Light, Travelling by Night*, Bailey presents concepts of transition and triumph with specific references to American history, slavery and the rights of human freedom. A review of this artist's address of such concepts as the Underground Railroad and the transatlantic slave trade ideally needs to be rooted in contemporary dialogue. Obviously, access to history is important, as well as the goal of pushing the conversation, no matter what economy, politic or era is currently fashionable. Bailey is the creator/trickster who leads this exchange with a tone that revels not in itself, but rather in what is not spoken. Bailey's presentation of material cues creates a series of flashbacks for the viewer by addressing our own narratives of history, which for some unlocks an experience potentially rooted in the silent forces of our own unravelling dialogue.

Covering the floor of the main gallery, *Windward Coast is* composed of thousands of wooden piano keys, assembled to portray the angst ridden surface of a turbulent ocean. The architectural command of the space is elegant and memorable. Floating among the wave-like repetitive forms is a single sculptural element - a plaster bust coated in sand and black glitter. The floating lines of the figurative language involve a sentimental abstraction with the multiplicity of piano keys simultaneously alluding to the movement of sound. Here, the keys are cut from all connections to familiarity with the instrument, allowing only the viewers' own personal sound track of the brain to recreate the missing white noise in exploring the human tragedy and solace amidst the constructed waves. To some, an obvious read of Bailey's new work could be viewed only through a projected experience of the African Diaspora - a daunting task, and tedious challenge to undertake to convey the magnitude and scale of this atrocity on the American landscape. In a sense Bailey does this, yet uses a fine line by inviting viewers to potentially exercise the phantoms that still invade this space of collective consciousness as source of mourning.

In 2007, Bailey was invited to be an artist in residence at the Toledo Museum of Art's Guest Artist Pavilion Project (G.A.P.P.). *Travel by Night*, a piece Bailey began while in residence, is an oversized fabricated rusted steel and glass lantern that depicts a ghost-like image of a Civil War "Buffalo" soldier within its sides. The dark, skeleton-like object is haunting, as is the apparition image on the glass which stares back. Somehow, we are reminded that ghost stories have an element of the real. Ghosts of the past do come back, and if we choose to listen, absorb and seek forgiveness, can we possibly create new experiences of an imagined future? This Atlanta based artist embraces this optimism by tracing his family roots to ancestors who fled north to Canada on the Underground Railroad, , however Bailey demonstrates with awareness that such personal associations can be viewed as trite or as a mockery within the presentation of these concepts. Expressed with intuitive confidence as a form of silent mastery, this work grapples with how to portray a nations' contemporary collective consciousness with the demons of history. Bailey does not lecture us with a broad swath narrative, rather as a true sculptor he experiments with scale and material finesse while allowing the physical space to register contemporary politics within the lens of historical precedents. Exhibited together, both sculptural works create a visual and conceptual narrative linking the stories of Africans who bravely jumped ship in order to escape captivity with visionary African Americans who later fled north in the night toward freedom. In this sense, the sculptural works serve as visual flashbacks of a history that is known, yet most importantly offers to function as a private séance for the viewer to perhaps contemplate icons that are so personal they in fact become universal.

