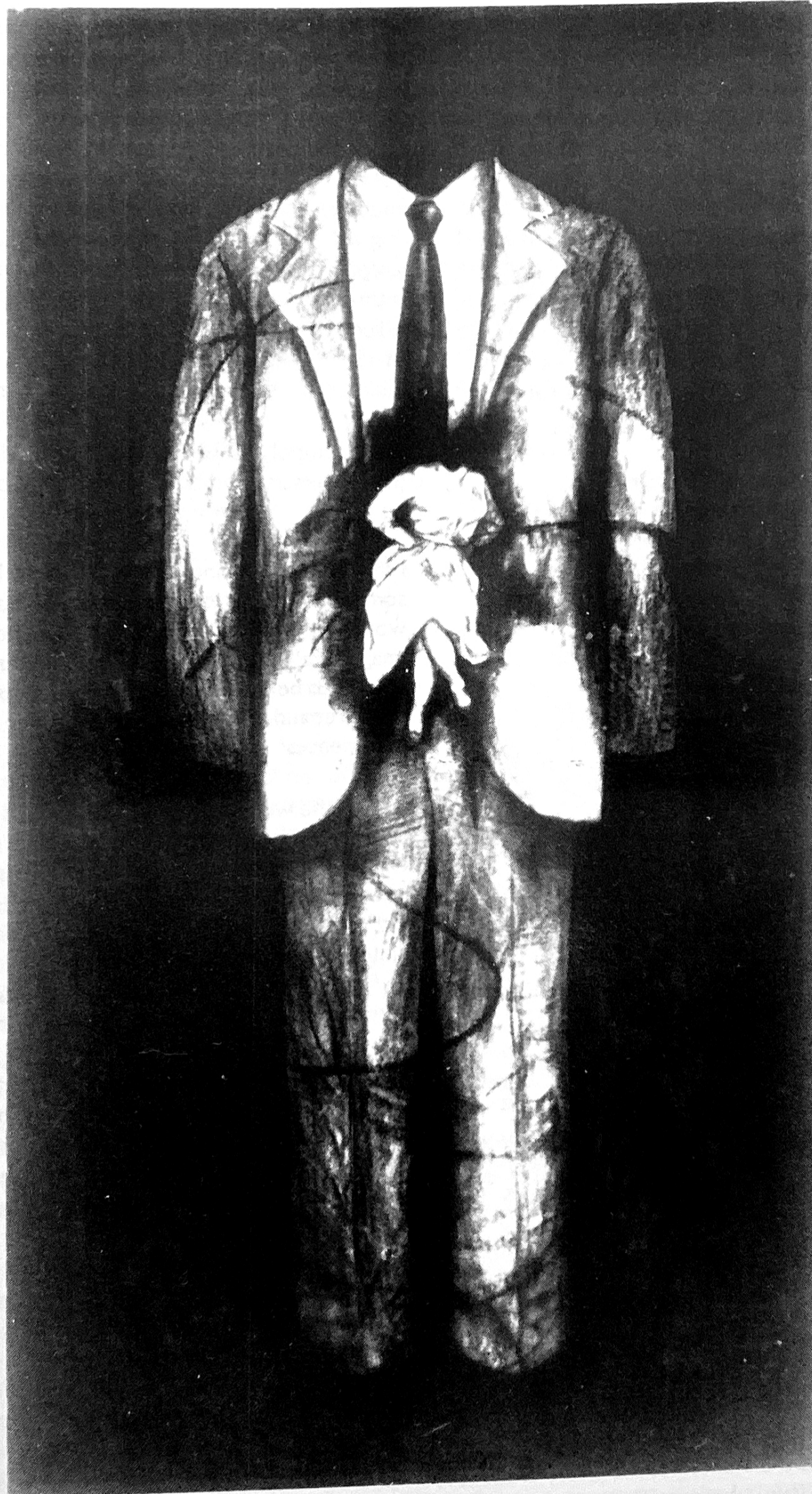


THE BRONX CELEBRATES:  
**WHITFIELD LOVELL**



*Untitled Suit, 1992, oil stick and charcoal on paper, 76 x 41"*

**Curated by Susan Hoeltzel**

**FEBRUARY 2 - MARCH 23, 1993  
LEHMAN COLLEGE ART GALLERY**



## THE BRONX CELEBRATES: WHITFIELD LOVELL

A hand with an open palm, a pair of dice, a large purple heart—speculation on love and the role of luck? An award for bravery in the gamble of romance? The large scale drawings of Whitfield Lovell speak allegorically through visual symbols, examining issues of identity, gender, love, death, and loss. Memory plays a significant role. Lovell tells stories based on the familiar, and explores the past for a better sense of the present and the future. The work is both narrative and metaphorical. It is about relationships, primarily—and a childhood rooted in the Bronx.

In the mid-1980's Lovell's work changed from an exploration of the formal issues of modernism to the autobiographical.

Because of a series of dramatic events, my outlook on life and my goals as an artist changed. Many of my personal issues began to surface in my art—I was dealing with formal issues prior to that time. Suddenly, I found myself less interested in various approaches to color, picture plane, structure, etc. because I was leaning toward an art form which was more integrated with my life experience. I had traveled quite a bit and spent days and days wandering the great museums of Europe, Africa, and Mexico. I had silent dialogues with the masters who managed to communicate their visions across the barriers of time and culture in so many different ways. When I encountered Edvard Munch and much later, Frida Kahlo at the Grey Art Gallery in 1984, it was a real turning point for me. I would say they became mentors in that they gave me the licence to work autobiographically and explore personal and psychological visions

With unflinching self-examination, the Mexican painter, Frida Kahlo, drew the content of her painting from her life. Claimed by the Surrealists as one of their own, she vividly translated emotional and physical pain into visual metaphors of the experience. Lovell's works are both a psychological exploration of the subject as well as an investigation of his own response to the subject.

In the mid-1980's, Lovell began to construct works which were literally grounded in his family's past, using old family photos. He also began to collect found images from newspapers. To these images he added the poetic allusion of visual symbols, metaphors, and the intuited content of dream imagery. Lovell usually works from photographs even now, using them as a visual reference and starting point. Many are reclaimed memories found in his family's photos or borrowed from the collection of his father, who is a photographer and depicted in the work, *AI* (1990). These photographs serve as a way to "fix" the past and reinforce the memory. Adding the devices of metaphor and symbol, allows the childhood event to be relived in the present and transformed

by the adult. The gestural "scribbles" which mark the surface in most of Lovell's drawings began as a device to suggest scratched negatives and the "dream-like quality of old photographs." The muted hues of the drawings, sometimes suggesting sepia tones, reinforce the connection to old photographs.

The images in Lovell's drawings seem to be sculpted in light—carved out of the darkness and placed on a ground of textural marks. Lovell works on large sheets of paper with oil stick and charcoal. Successive layers are built in alternating strata. The oil stick is thinned with turpentine. Lovell sometimes adds a gesso layer on top of the rabbit's skin glue sizing when there is a heavy background of oil stick and charcoal. The technique developed after Lovell worked with printmaking and the layering process which is a part of that medium. A subdued, monochromatic pallet developed in the mid-1980's—in contrast to the saturated color of Lovell's earlier work—to produce a more somber feeling.

Lovell's symbols—a bird, a house, a hand, a heart—are intuited, personal symbols which have a broadly understood meaning.

I think it is important for the viewer to bring some of his or her own associations to the work. I try not to be so blatant that these images are limited to one issue or statement. I want it to be open enough so that people can interpret and relate the images to their own experiences

Many of the works in the exhibition deal with loss. The work *Pop/Pistol* (1990) tells the story of Lovell's grandfather's death. The large drawing includes a man's portrait, a gun and the text of a newspaper account of the incident. Unoccupied clothing—an empty dress or suit—is a metaphor for spiritual, emotional or physical absence. *House/Dress* (1990), the first work in this series, represents his sister's dress—there is a house shown as an emblem on her chest. In *Boston Road* (1991), a 1960's shirtwaist dress contains a street map of the South Bronx. The Boston Road, a historic highway connecting Boston and New York, was a main artery around the corner from 174th Street where the artist and his sister grew up. The clothing in this series of drawings is often life-size. These works are, in a sense, memorials—concretizing loss and remembering the dead.

*Head with Flowers* (1992) is a continuation of Lovell's *Muerte Florida* series, which refers to the Mexican burial tradition of covering the bodies of those who die at a young age with flowers. The series also refers to Lovell's sister's death. In this work a head rests on its side, as if asleep atop a blanket of tropical flowers. A purple light glows in the darkness surrounding the figure.

*Earlene* (1988) is a portrait of the artist's late aunt. In the drawing a likeness of an African-American woman is surrounded by images which suggest narratives about her life and personality. The vignette in the center—a little girl eating chocolates with her mother—is an allegory which alludes to the fiction of normalcy we all construct to protect ourselves against the harsher reality in which we live.



I often use juxtapositions of very idyllic images with those real life situations. Some of my reference materials are old calendars, advertisements, and European printed scraps. They depict the ideal of the way life ought to be, or should or would be were it not for the true story. The irony is that many people buy into these fantasies and often retain part of the illusion in their everyday lives as a tool for survival. When you can create your own sense of the fairytale, you can avoid the real implications of the drama you are living . . . .

Now I realize that while growing up I had a sort of fantasy about the suburban home with a lawn and picket fence. We actually lived on Crotona Park North in a huge apartment with a terrace. There was a beautiful, exquisite view of the park. So we could go out onto that terrace and look out and for as far as you could see there were grass, hills, and trees. By the time I finished in high school almost the entire neighborhood had fallen down around us. But we lived in that apartment; and we sat on that terrace and we enjoyed the view of the park.

The hand as a symbol for power, control, and action is a recurring image in Lovell's work. *Left-hand right hand* (1988), one of the first works using this symbol, shows realistic renderings of Lovell's father in one palm and his mother in the other—acknowledging their role in his identity and actions. In *Marks* (1988) Lovell contemplates the power of the artist to communicate through the authority of his hand. This work refers to the cave paintings of prehistory and a time when the actual print of the artist's hand was often a part of the image. In this work the drawings in the background, behind the hands, suggest the stick-like figures of early childhood and a large totemic creature. *Bird* (1988) also includes an image of the hand. In this drawing the hands release a bird, Lovell's symbol for freedom and the spirit. This bird is not flying but hovers in midair immobilized by the options.

The hand also figures into the work, *Playing Dead* (1992), which deals with the irony of death as a child's game. In this work the hand acts to shelter and protect as the game is played in the cradling support of a large, partially closed hand. It is based on an old photo of three young girls playing a game about something far beyond their understanding or comprehension—a game about death.

Lovell's work is often inspired by the complexities of human relationships. The work, *Big Heart* (1991) was sparked by a verbal description. The visual image occurred to Lovell, in response to hearing of a visualization technique in which one meditates on someone and "shrinks them so they may be placed into the heart." In the drawing Lovell's parents are shown as a loving couple filling the entire chamber of the heart. Through the layered surface, on the sleeve of his father's shirt are the partially visible words, "with love."

Lovell's work also contains humor. *Untitled Suit* (1992) is a recent work which refers to the issues of gender and identity. The work also deals with the sometimes striking contrast of

outer facade and inner persona. Unoccupied clothing are once again used as a symbol but this time in a more generalized way. Lovell describes this work as a portrayal of the counterbalancing female element in every male (or the male element in every female). In the drawing the outer self is subdued, in the form of a conservative suit,—arms at the sides, rigidly facing forward. The inner self is exuberant, free-spirited, and kicking up her heels.

As Lovell's work evolves, the themes become broader and more universal. Visual symbols and metaphors continue to be employed as tools with which to observe and comment on human nature. Storytelling takes a new form, based less on family history and more on human interactions. Lovell's newer work is still firmly based in the personal, the specific, and the familiar—but these elements are reconfigured in pursuit of revelation—in an effort to make sense of life.

Susan Hoeltzel

Acting Director

The above is based on interviews conducted with the artist in December 1992 and January 1993.

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# WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

1. *AI*, 1990  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
71 x 50"
2. *Big Heart*, 1991  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
47 1/2 x 43 1/4"
3. *Bird*, 1988  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
25 x 38"
4. *Boston Road*, 1991  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
70 x 50"
5. *Earlene*, 1988  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
38 x 64"
6. *Head with Flowers*, 1992  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
85 1/2 x 50"
7. *House/Dress*, 1990  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
60 x 50"
8. *I Did Good to Leave*, 1990  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
71 1/2 x 50"
9. *Left Hand, Right Hand*, 1988  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
25 x 38"
10. *Marks*, 1988  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
25 x 38"
11. *Playing Dead*, 1992  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
68 1/4 x 45"
12. *Pop/Pistol*, 1990  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
63 x 50"
13. *Purple Heart*, 1992  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
36 1/4 x 39 1/4"
14. *Tree*, 1989  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
69 x 50"
15. *Untitled Suit*, 1992  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
76 x 41"
16. *Yed*, 1992  
Oil stick and charcoal on paper,  
43 x 45"



*Left Hand, Right Hand*, 1988