

*Whitfield  
Lovell:*  
**PASSAGES**

**June 17, 2023–September 10, 2023**

**VMFA**

VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

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## [Introduction]

Over the course of his career, Whitfield Lovell has created a body of work that highlights the humanity of the Black subject and explores ideas around collective memory and events in American history. The faces depicted in every artwork in this exhibition were culled from Lovell's collection of vintage photographs, which span the period from the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) through the civil rights movement (1954–1968). Lovell imbues new life into these anonymous individuals whose identities are now lost to time. He often incorporates found objects into his drawings, such as playing cards, jewelry, rope, flags, and globes to add another layer of significance to their visages.

Also central to Lovell's art is music, which inspired the titles of works throughout his oeuvre and are also present as an audio element in the two multisensory



installations that anchor the exhibition:  
*Deep River* (2013) and *Visitation: The  
Richmond Project* (2001).

Lovell was born in the Bronx and continues to live and work in New York. Exploring the major series in the artist's career from the late 1980s to the present, *Whitfield Lovell: Passages* traces pivotal historic places and the beauty of everyday life.



## GALLERY 1

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### DEEP RIVER

In this monumental installation, a harmony of sounds and rich, earthy aromas precede the viewer's awareness of the work's powerful visual elements, perceived only after adjusting to the space's dim light. The multisensory work is Lovell's first video installation, and it allows one to travel through time and space and ultimately to transcend historical specificity. *Deep River* was inspired by the experience of countless enslaved African Americans who braved the perilous journey across the Tennessee River seeking asylum during the Civil War. Many were shielded from re-enslavement in "Camp Contraband," the Union army encampment in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

The river here is presented as a formidable force of nature that can be both destructive and benign, and its enveloping presence





conveys a sense of eternal motion. The water surrounds a large mound of rich soil embedded with utensils, pans, lamps, ropes, boots, weapons, and a Bible, which represent items abandoned during the flight toward freedom. Fifty-six wooden discs encircle the mound, each bearing a depiction of a person of unknown identity. However, these subjects are not limited to Civil War–period figures; they represent a variety of eras, acknowledging that freedom and the pursuit of freedom are ongoing processes.

Please walk carefully through the spiral configuration as you contemplate *Deep River*.



During the Civil War many runaway slaves made the dangerous journey across the Tennessee River to a Union Army site referred to as “Camp Contraband.” There they were given asylum and shielded from being captured or returned to their owners.



**Deep River, 2013**

Fifty-six wooden discs, found objects, soil,  
video projections, sound

**Flight from Deep River, 2013**

Conté crayon on wood, found objects



## GALLERY 2

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### KIN SERIES

Created between 2008 and 2011, Lovell's *Kin* series currently comprises sixty works on paper. They combine tenderly rendered likenesses of Black women or men with vintage objects. Each image is drawn with a high degree of realism; however, Lovell's hand is still apparent in the careful shading and gritty textural quality of the subjects' visages. The complex emotions Lovell captures in each face also invite the viewer to contemplate the humanity and singularity of every individual in the *Kin* series.

These likenesses are derived from Lovell's carefully assembled collection of more than three thousand government identification photographs and photo booth pictures that date from 1850 to 1950. In depicting real people from the past, each *Kin* work





represents a life lived. Lovell's subjects are brought into the viewer's space through the artist's juxtaposition of each face with a found object. These objects bring color, both literally and metaphorically, to the drawings. Lovell's carefully chosen objects have been used and touched by their previous owners, imbuing the works in this series with a further sense of realness and tactility.



## GALLERY 2

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### **Kin VI (Nobody), 2008**

Conté crayon on paper, wooden chain

Collection of Julia J. Norrell, VA

### **Kin LVI (Revolution), 2011**

Conté crayon on paper, model train cars and tracks

Collection of Susan and David Goode

### **Kin XXVII (White Like Me), 2008**

Conté crayon on paper, rifle target

Collection of Kenneth Spitzbard and Keisha Wardlaw Spitzbard

### **Kin II (Oh Damballa), 2008**

Conté crayon on paper, paper flags

Mott-Warsh Collection, Flint, MI

### **Kin XXXVIII (A Sprig of Rue) , 2011**

Conté crayon on paper, enamel paint



**Kin I (Our Folks), 2008**

Conté crayon on paper, paper flags

Collection of Reginald and Aliya Browne

**Kin IX (To Make Your False Heart True), 2008**

Conté crayon on paper, flask

Collection of Dale Mott and Ken Hyle, Washington, DC

**Kin XL (Breath), 2010**

Conté crayon on paper, model ship

Collection of Alix Madigan and David Yorkin



## GALLERY 3

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### TABLEAUX

Starting in the late 1990s, Lovell began making stand-alone tableaux that blend his interest in drawing, assemblage, and memory. Tableaux have traditionally been defined as pictures in which characters are arranged for dramatic effect, usually within a clearly conceived narrative. Rather than reconstruct details of a complete story, however, Lovell chooses to evoke the possibility of one. His tableaux convey a sense of visual poetry.

In these conceptual works, charcoal drawings of individuals rendered on wooden planks are combined with found objects that extend into the viewer's space. Many of these works feature exquisite, highly finished images of figures who appear not so much drawn on their wooden surfaces as emerging organically from them. These





images of anonymous individuals emanate a ghostly quality that suggests lives once lived but now past. Lovell sources the images from vintage studio and other types of photographs, which frees him from any attachments to the narrative of the person's life.



**The Company You Keep, 2002**

Charcoal on wood, chair

**Wreath, 2000**

Charcoal on wood, barbed wire

Collection of the Bronx Museum of Arts, Purchase,  
Acquisitions Fund, 2001.2.1

**Still, 1999**

Charcoal on wood, found objects

**Crossroads, 2012**

Conté crayon on wood, paperback books

**Dawn to Dawn, 2006**

Sculpture, charcoal on wooden barn door  
and industrial spool disk, chain, newel post,  
wooden shovel, earth

**For..., 2008**

Charcoal on painted wood, globes

Private Collection



**America, 2000**

Charcoal on wood, flags

**You're My Thrill, 2004**

Charcoal on wood, bombshell casings

**Brethren, 2000**

Charcoal and collage on wood, knife

Collection of Vincent and Pilar Pita



## GALLERY 3

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### PROLOGUE: WORKS ON PAPER

Lovell traveled widely as an art student in the 1980s, and he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from The Cooper Union School of Art. At the start of his artistic career, he visited Mallorca, Spain; Morocco; Venice, Italy; and Mexico, experiences that helped broaden his general knowledge of the world and led to his Prologue period of works on paper (1985–97). Lovell's travels also sparked an interest in domestic architecture, which is reflected in his work of the 1990s and early 2000s that center on the home as a common motif. In *House IV*, a simple house is seen inside the mind's eye of an unknown figure. This image marks a shift in subject matter and, eventually, in medium, as the artist next embarked on a series of drawings on walls inside homes, which honor previous residents. *The Prologue* series conveys particularly





personal and emotional ideas, memories, and aspirations of the artist through haunting motifs that include clothing, flora and fauna, and partial figural forms, often interwoven and seemingly floating in the picture plane.

This process was also employed in later works inspired by the histories of places such as Houston, Texas; Havana, Cuba; and the neighborhoods of Quakertown in Denton, Texas, and Jackson Ward in Richmond, Virginia.



**Grandma's Dress, 1990**

Oil stick and charcoal on paper

**Head with Flowers, 1992**

Oil stick and charcoal on paper

**House IV, 1989**

Oil stick and charcoal on paper

**Tree, 1989**

Oil stick and charcoal on paper

National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, P. Bruce Marine  
and Donald Hardy Collection, 2022.148.12

**Sparrow, 1988**

Oil stick and charcoal on paper



## GALLERY 5

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### THE CARD PIECES

*The Card Pieces* utilize an entire deck of vintage playing cards, including a joker. Each work consists of an individual's face and a single vintage playing card. The central positioning of both elements creates a grounded compositional format through which each one takes on its own unique character. There is an implication of destiny, of chance, of one's lot in life.

The formal appearance and geometry of the cards interact with the features, expressions, and accessories of the people depicted. Lovell says, "When making *The Card Pieces*, the most exciting part of the process occurs when I deliberate, and carefully choose the card that best fits the drawn image. The pairing is intuitive, rather than formulaic." The resulting juxtaposition of faces with the suits, symbols, and color



on the cards alludes to psychological and sociological meanings concerning individuality, gender, and power.

The history of a lively and thriving tradition of card games as a social activity within the African American community lends additional interpretive significance to the series.





# **The Card Pieces, 2018–2022**

Charcoal pencil on paper, playing card



## GALLERY 4

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### THE REDS

Lovell's assemblages in *The Reds* series were created on luscious, deep-red paper. He made these works while on an extended trip to Italy. Whereas red can evoke warmth, passion, and vibrancy, it is also associated with fire, danger, and blood. The individual works of *The Reds* are presented alongside *The Anthem Phone 2*. This antique telephone table, sometimes referred to as a "gossip bench," has been repurposed with red upholstery and a rotary telephone from which a stirring vocal rendition of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" plays. The hymn, written in 1900, speaks of the hopefulness of many Black people at that time, who believed they were at the dawn of a new era and headed toward the goal of achieving equality.



**The Red VIII, 2021**

Conté crayon on paper, found object

**The Red VII, 2021**

Conté crayon on paper, found object

**The Red IX, 2021**

Conté crayon on paper, found object

Private Collection, New York

**The Red XI, 2021**

Conté crayon on paper, found object

**Because I Wanna Fly, 2021**

Conté crayon on wood, found objects

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, by exchange, 2022.14

**The Red I, 2021**

Conté crayon on paper, found object

**The Red XIII, 2021**

Conté crayon on paper, found object

Boca Raton Museum of Art, Museum purchase, 2022.21



## **The Anthem Phone 2, 2021**

Vintage telephone, chair

Please take a seat, pick up the phone, and listen to the inspirational song that complements the artist's *Reds* series displayed in this gallery.





## GALLERY 5

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### VISITATION: THE RICHMOND PROJECT

Created in Richmond, Virginia, in 2001, at the former Hand Workshop Art Center, now the Visual Arts Center, this installation celebrates the success of Jackson Ward, America's first major entrepreneurial Black community. In 1903, Maggie L. Walker founded St. Luke Penny Savings Bank, making her the first woman and the first African American to start a bank in the United States. She, along with other members of the community, turned Jackson Ward into one of the most active and well-known centers of African American life in the nation. Several works in this installation feature inhabitants of Jackson Ward, the story of their struggle for emancipation during the Civil War, and their collective efforts to restore themselves and overcome the legacy of slavery.

*Visitation: The Richmond Project* celebrates the lives of the people of the Jackson Ward



community in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and is made up of five parts: *Battleground*, *Restoreth*, *Our Best*, *Coins*, and *Visitation: The Parlor*. During his six-week residency in Richmond, Lovell conducted research throughout the state, including at the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia and The Valentine in Richmond, and worked with painting and sculpture students at Virginia Commonwealth University to construct this installation with locally sourced materials. Approaching *The Parlor*, one hears a woman's voice softly reciting the names and addresses of the sixty-three early 20th-century residents of Jackson Ward published in a 1917 NAACP application for city charter. Boxes of Lincoln pennies in *Our Best* symbolize Walker's Penny Savings Bank and refer to President Abraham Lincoln's role in Emancipation. The individual faces on *The*



*Coins* recall those of presidents on American currency, but Lovell replaces them with the representations of the everyday individuals from Jackson Ward. *Restoreth* symbolizes the historic tradition of a matriarch as a practitioner of folk medicine. Lovell has said of *Visitation: The Richmond Project*, “I want to evoke a sense of place, to be able to feel the spirit of the past for a moment, to feel the presence of these people.”



## GALLERY 5

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**Visitation: The Parlor, 2001**

**Battleground, 2001**

Charcoal on wood, found objects

**Restoreth, 2001**

Charcoal on wood, vintage bottles

**Our Best, 2001**

Charcoal on wood, wheels, pennies

**Coins, 2001**

Charcoal on tondos (wooden discs)

