

Thursday, May 26th, 2016

The Journey of Life is Circular: Fred Holland, 1951 to 2016

by Lilly Wei



Fred Holland, *Woman with 1,000 Eyes*, 2015. Cast glass, black eyed peas, and cork, 2-1/2 x 17 x 3 inches. Courtesy of Tilton Gallery

There is a photograph of Fred Holland captured with knees bent, on his toes, his body taut in an angulated S-curve, wearing a ten-gallon hat that obscures his face, looking downward, his arms akimbo, about to pivot into the next position and the next in a swift sequence of movements catapulting him toward the dance's end. The picture was on a long table at his memorial service on April 10 at the Middle Collegiate Church in the East Village. With it were a number of other photos of him performing—several in which he is even more precariously balanced, more dramatically torqued—as well as ones of him as a stylish bon vivant. Holland died on March 5, in New York at the age of 65 after a more than six-year struggle with cancer. It was a little over a week after his show opened at the Tilton Gallery. While too ill to attend in person, he was present via FaceTime from his hospital bed.



Fred Holland (1988). Photo: Peggy Jarrell Kaplan, courtesy Tilton Gallery.

Holland began his career as a performer and choreographer, although he had studied painting in art school. Born in Columbus, Ohio in 1951, he graduated from the Columbus College of Art & Design in 1973, coming to New York in 1982. He danced with the Zero Moving Dance Company, with Ishmael Houston-Jones, Meredith Monk, and others, who introduced him to the dance world. In addition, he designed props, backdrops and whatever else was required for the performances. In 1992, due to an injury, he switched to the visual arts, a natural transition. While a performer, he won a Bessie Award and four National Endowment for the Arts choreography grants, among other honors. As a sculptor, he received a Creative Capital Award, a Lower Manhattan Cultural Council grant and two Pollock-Krasner Foundation grants, to name a few, and was a participant at residencies sponsored by MoMA PS.1, Vermont Studio Center, Art Omi, Cité International des Arts and the American Center in Paris.

Holland showed in a number of galleries and art institutions in New York (including Gallery X, PPOW, Momenta, and the Drawing Center), across the country and internationally (Praetoria, Montréal, Paris, Lodz, Istanbul) in solo and group shows from the early 90s until his death. He had two solo exhibitions at Tilton, the earlier one in 2009. The last exhibition, consisting of recent sculptures made from the simple, often organic materials that he loved, offered a narrative of personal memories intertwined with that of his African American heritage. Holland makes these materials, frequently domestic, unmistakably his own, wresting a delicate, poetic beauty from them that was both folkloric and urbane. There is a clear glass female figure recalling slender fertility goddesses filled with his signature black-eyed peas, a staple of southern

cooking. There are many pillows; some are stacked then tenderly draped with a wine-red shawl turning it into a kind of bier atop which are several cupping glasses, alluding to a traditional medical treatment. There are two plaster-covered, mostly monochromatic reliefs of embedded Lincoln pennies, another favorite item and salvaged bricks tagged with

little brass plaques that read "When Negroes Lived in Harlem." An installation of transparent glass bottle-like forms stamped with his face that he called *Buoys* (2015) and *Compass* (2015), another of white plaster casts of his head arranged in a circle around a toy compass might point to categories of consciousness, the focus on the mind, the body discarded. The latter also seems to say that the journey of life is circular, the beginning and end indistinguishable, the end once again the beginning. The reversal of the word "compass" as the title of the show, "SSAMMOC" underscores the idea of circularity, indicative of a two-way passage, a journey in which the outward navigation eventually becomes the journey home, with no further directions needed.

Not long before his death, Holland said, "I've made some good work." He sounded satisfied.

