



*RADCLIFFE BAILEY:  
THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP*

APRIL 21–AUGUST 18, 2017

GreaterRestonArtsCenter

Front cover image: *Untitled* (detail), 2010



*Untitled, 2010*

## INTRODUCTION

*Radcliffe Bailey: The Great Dismal Swamp* marks a significant moment in the history of the Greater Reston Arts Center (GRACE). Not only is Bailey an internationally recognized artist, based in Atlanta, but he has deep personal ties to Virginia and the Washington, DC, metro area. When former GRACE Executive Director and Curator Holly Koons McCullough approached Bailey about this exhibition as part of the newly articulated vision of making the Art Center a “destination” for contemporary art in the region, Bailey enthusiastically signed-on and offered the concept. The Great Dismal Swamp is, well, a swamp, located on the border between Virginia and North Carolina that served as a onetime stop on the Underground Railroad where escaped slaves could rest with a lessened fear of discovery because of the environs and a semi-permanent community of refugee slaves living within the swamplands.

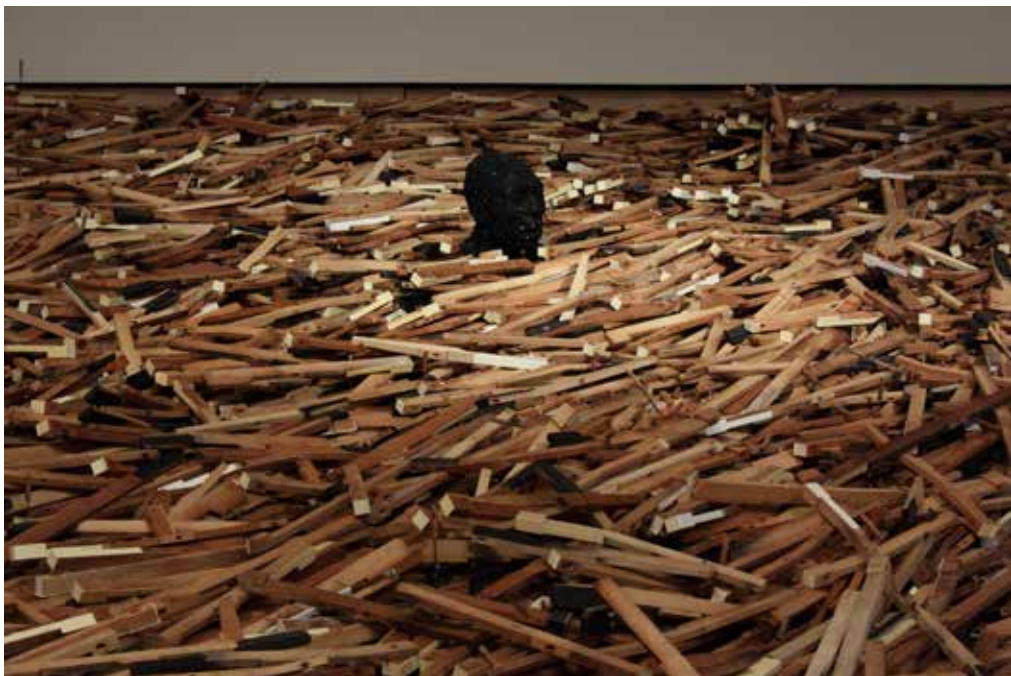
This exhibition is one in a series of ambitious projects that GRACE has undertaken in the past few years. Patrick Dougherty's *A Bird in the Hand* (2015) and Shih Chieh Huang: *Synthetic Transformations* (2016) helped to establish GRACE as the destination it has become. We will continue to present inspiring programming by local, national, and international artists to enrich the community by promoting involvement and excellence in contemporary art. The very definition of our community is ever changing and expanding; we remain an inclusive and accessible space for all, always free and open to the public.

It is with the able leadership of Robert Goudie as Chair of the Board of Directors, and the entire GRACE Board, that the Art Center has grown to what it is today. Many thanks are due to our friends and sponsors who have contributed in this first year of the ongoing Biennial Campaign. Thank you, all, and to the Arts Council of Fairfax County who has made this exhibition possible with its generous support from the very beginning. Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels, Ruth Phaneuf, and Daniel Tsai at Jack Shainman Gallery and Tony L. Owens, Bailey's studio assistant, graciously shepherded the development of the exhibition.

My sincerest gratitude goes to Holly Koons McCullough for so ably organizing this exhibition. Thank you to the GRACE staff—Sofia Blom, Stephanie Booth, Maggie Edwards, Erica Harrison, Sarah Black Sadler, and Carolyn Supinka. You make this all possible every day.

Finally, the biggest thank you goes to the artist, Radcliffe Bailey, for entrusting his work to us. It is an honor to have this exhibition on view in Reston for the community of the D.C. metropolitan area and beyond to enjoy, ponder, respond to, and engage with. Thank you for sharing.

Lily Siegel  
Executive Director and Curator



*Windward Coast - West Coast Slave Trade (detail), 2009–2011*

## CURATOR'S STATEMENT

Radcliffe Bailey (b. 1968, Bridgeton, New Jersey), a nationally-recognized mixed-media artist, has resided in Atlanta since childhood. As a prominent African American artist living and working in the Deep South, Bailey is surrounded by the weight of history. His home, a strikingly modern house with a massive attached studio, is nestled in the woods on property that once saw fighting during the Civil War. The artist occasionally comes across artifacts from the conflict on his property. The scars of that war, and the experience of his ancestors, deeply inform the art he produces in this otherwise serene, leafy neighborhood.

I first became acquainted with Radcliffe Bailey during my tenure as Director of Collections and Exhibitions at the Telfair Museums in Savannah, Georgia, where I exhibited his work and was fortunate to acquire a piece for the museum's collection. When, several years later, I contacted him about the possibility of this exhibition at the Greater Reston Arts Center (GRACE), he immediately informed me that he had family history in Virginia. His grandfather had grown up in Palmyra near Charlottesville, and had served as a tour guide at Monticello. Not surprisingly, he also had a strong interest in the state's Great Dismal Swamp, a vast tract of land in Southeastern Virginia spanning across the border into North Carolina. Like his property in Atlanta, the Swamp is part and parcel of the geography of slavery in America.

The Great Dismal Swamp, today a federally-designated national wildlife

refuge, concealed and sheltered communities of slaves fleeing captivity on the Underground Railroad. The Swamp has a fascinating history. In the mid-eighteenth century, George Washington launched business ventures aimed at draining and logging in the Swamp, and initiated the construction of a canal to connect the Chesapeake Bay and Albemarle Sound across its expanse. While the dense and often perilous interior of the Swamp ultimately thwarted Washington's business interests, it offered an inhospitable but viable shelter for communities of escaped slaves. Some traveled through the Swamp as part of their journey North on the Underground Railroad. Others, known as maroons, sheltered permanently in the Swamp, finding freedom from captivity and cruelty in its forbidding terrain.

These maroon communities inspired both literature and visual art during the nineteenth century. William Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem "The Slave in the Great Dismal Swamp" was published in 1842. More than two decades later, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* was published prior to the eruption of the Civil War. The novel explored the story of Dred, a maroon from a community of escaped slaves living in the Great Dismal Swamp. Visual artists, including the great landscape artist Thomas Moran, also addressed the subject. Commissioned by an ardent abolitionist, Moran completed a painting of a slave couple fleeing into the treacherous waters of the Swamp, pursued by slave hunters and their vicious dogs. Moran's depiction of the impenetrable environment, which dwarfs the escaping slaves, envisions the Swamp as both hazard and haven. Following



the Civil War and emancipation, the Swamp and its residents returned to obscurity and the maroon communities were largely forgotten. During the past two decades, however, archaeology undertaken by Daniel Sayers, Associate Professor and Department Chair, Department of Anthropology, at American University has uncovered much evidence about the maroon settlements in the Swamp, and the subject has once again attracted the attention of artists and writers.

Bailey has long treated issues of race and the historical experiences of African Americans in his work, mining his personal ancestry as well as the history and legacy of slavery. Collectively, the works included in this exhibition evoke the roots of slavery—the enforced capture and treacherous transport of Africans to America—as well as ensuing struggle for survival and ultimately freedom, a struggle deeply connected to the history of Virginia. Addressing the origins of African slavery, Bailey's *Windward Coast* (2009–2011) installation evokes the forced transport of slaves from Africa to America in the perilous journey known as the Middle Passage. Nearly submerged in a sea of piano keys, one glittery bust of a man floats in isolation, a potent symbol of both persecution and perseverance. The darkness of this work is offset by the piano keys themselves, referencing the healing power of music as well as the cultural legacy of Africans in America.

*Clotilde* (2014), named after the last known U.S. slave ship to transport captives from Africa to America in 1859, is one of Bailey's recent "black paintings" characterized by a surface embellished with glittery black sand. In



*Travel by Night, 2007*

addition to a model ship physically encrusted in the surface of the painting, *Clotilde* features white coral occlusions. The stark dichotomy between the black surface and white coral neatly encapsulates the nature of the racism that fueled slavery. Ladder-like tracks call to mind the Underground Railroad that would eventually lead a fortunate few to freedom in America.

The massive lantern entitled *Travel by Night* (2007) likewise references the dangerous journey through the network of sanctuaries known as the Underground Railroad. The figure of a black man emerges from the lantern's glass, a ghostly remnant of the thousands of escapees who traveled under the cloak of darkness in their flight from slavery. The lifestyle of the maroons and refugees is further explored in *67/68* (2016), a cabinet of humble objects representing a makeshift domicile, reflecting the make-do culture common to the communities of maroons who settled in places like the Great Dismal Swamp. While the Swamp served as a sanctuary for thousands, it was also a forbidding environment in which to survive, requiring extreme tenacity and perseverance of the displaced.

Several of the works in the exhibition explore the blending of cultures that resulted from the slave trade. *Creole* (2013), a title that refers to a person of mixed African and European descent, is fashioned of weathered steel and portrays a tall ship and an oar, common leitmotifs in Bailey's work that signify conveyance. Meanwhile, a glittery bust similar to the one in *Windward Coast* is equipped with military-style headgear and an ornate pedestal, blending histories by appropriating the high-art conventions of western society.

Similarly, a series of mixed-media collage works including *Madagascar*, *Low-Lying* and *Conductor* (all 2016) juxtapose African art, religion, and culture with European sheet music, seeking cultural equivalencies.

Unique within the exhibition, *Blue/Black* (2016) is a delicate glass heart that calls to mind the fragility of human life, and re-enacts the spilling of black blood that has stained America's history. It may also reference the commodification of black bodies, enslaved to harvest crops like indigo, which was used to make blue dye. Like so much of his imagery, the color blue holds multiple associations for the artist, signifying both water and the African American musical form known as the blues.

Bailey's work reflects the complex strata of history, encapsulated in lush layers of paint, embodied within evocative objects, or reflected in found images of African Americans. The artist once remarked that, "making art is like writing a book. Each work of art is a different page, but all are part of the same book."<sup>1</sup> Seen in that context, the works in this exhibition constitute a powerful tale of dislocation, survival, and, ultimately, redemption. Although deeply rooted in his personal and cultural heritage, Bailey's work ultimately addresses universal themes of identity and ancestry, hurt and healing, displacement and endurance, germane to us all.

Holly Koons McCullough  
Guest Curator

---

<sup>1</sup> Lilly Lampe, "Art: Interview Radcliffe Bailey," *BOMB*, July 16, 2013, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/7278/radcliffe-bailey>



*Conductor, 2016*



*Low-Lying, 2016*



*Madagascar 1, 2016*

## BIOGRAPHY

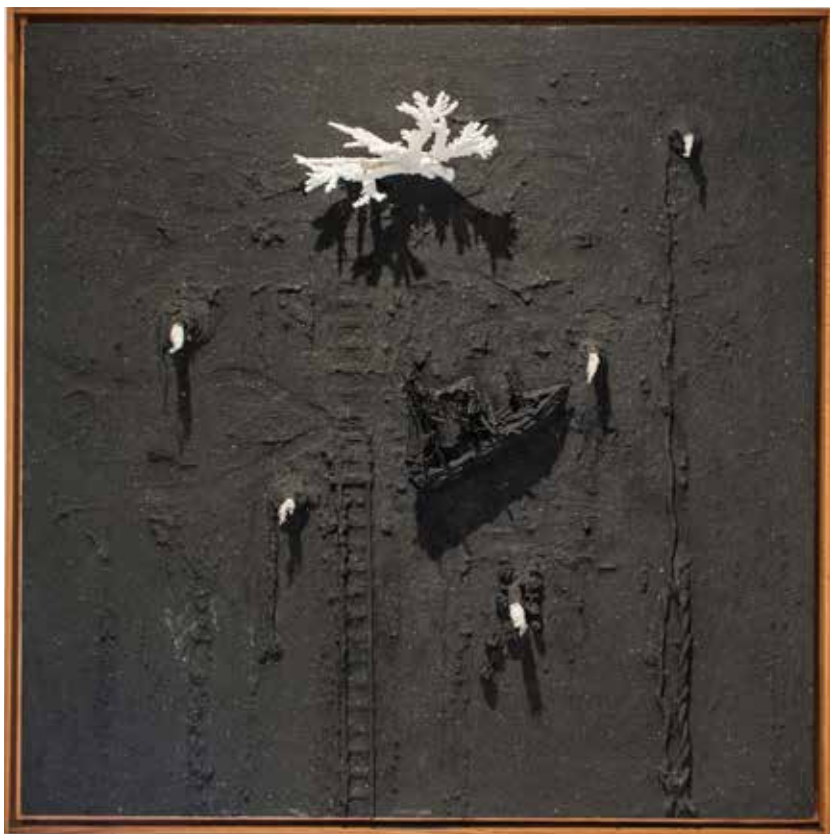
Radcliffe Bailey (b. 1968, Bridgeton, New Jersey; lives and works in Atlanta) received a BFA in 1991 from the Atlanta College of Art. His work is included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; the Denver Art Museum; and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta; among many others. The artist is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

*Radcliffe Bailey: The Great Dismal Swamp* is the artist's first solo exhibition in the D.C. metropolitan area.





*Creole, 2013*



*Clotilde*, 2014



*Clotilde II, 2014*



67/68, 2016



*Blue Black, 2016*

# CHECK LIST OF EXHIBITION

*Travel by Night*, 2007

Glass, steel, candelabra, and photo emulsion  
60 x 36 x 48 inches

*Windward Coast - West Coast Slave Trade*,  
2009–2011

Piano keys, plaster bust, and glitter  
Dimensions variable

*Untitled*, 2010

Glitter, felt, feather, and wood  
35 x 11 x 11 inches (pedestal)  
14 x 14 x 5 1/2 inches (head with hat)

*Creole*, 2013

Steel  
70 x 61 x 20 inches

*Clotilde*, 2014

Black sand, wood, and coral  
76 1/4 x 76 1/4 inches  
80 1/16 x 80 3/16 x 4 inches framed

*Clotilde II*, 2014

Mixed media  
76 1/4 x 76 1/4 inches  
80 1/16 x 80 3/16 x 4 inches framed

*67/68*, 2016

Wood cabinet including various objects  
82 1/2 x 42 x 31 1/2 inches

*Blue Black*, 2016

Glass and ink  
10 1/4 x 5 1/4 x 4 1/2 inches (glass heart)  
69 x 79 x 4 1/2 inches overall

*Conductor*, 2016

Mixed media including collage elements,  
paint, and glass on panel  
60 x 60 x 5 3/8 inches

*Low-Lying*, 2016

Mixed media including collage elements,  
paint, and glass on panel  
60 x 60 x 5 3/8 inches

*Madagascar 1*, 2016

Mixed media including collage elements,  
paint, and glass on panel  
60 x 60 x 5 3/8 inches

All courtesy of the artist and  
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The mission of the Greater Reston Arts Center is to enrich community life by promoting involvement and excellence in contemporary visual arts.

We gratefully acknowledge the leadership of our Board of Directors and the valued support of our sponsors, members, and patrons.

This catalog was published in conjunction with the Greater Reston Arts Center's *Radcliffe Bailey: The Great Dismal Swamp* exhibition, made possible in part through the generous support of the Arts Council of Fairfax County, ORConsulting, Allegra Print and Staybridge Suites Chantilly.



© 2017 Greater Reston Arts Center. All Rights Reserved.

All images ©Radcliffe Bailey. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Greater Reston Arts Center programs are supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, Virginia Commission for the Arts, the Arts Council of Fairfax County, and the Reston Community Center.



# GreaterRestonArtsCenter

12001 Market Street, Suite 103 • Reston, VA 20190 • 703.471.9242

[RESTONARTS.ORG](http://RESTONARTS.ORG) • Always free and open to the public

# GreaterRestonArtsCenter

12001 Market Street, Suite 103 • Reston, VA 20190 • 703.471.9242

[RESTONARTS.ORG](http://RESTONARTS.ORG) • Always free and open to the public