Lonnie Holley, a found materials artist, works on a sculpture during the Big Ears Festival at the Southern Railway Station in Downtown Knoxville, TN. Friday March 31, 2023.

Ericksen Goynez-Villeda / Photo Editor

UT sculpture students got the chance to collaborate with artist and musician Lonnie Holley on March 29, where he shared his process with a class before his appearance at the Big Ears Festival over the weekend. Holley also added two popup shows at the UT Downtown Gallery, where his artwork has been on display through March, to his scheduled festival concerts.

“He’s such a generous soul,” Mike Berry, manager of the UT Downtown Gallery, said. “When he was here for the opening there were some kids in here, and he walked up to them and he goes, ‘Do y’all want to make some art?’ and they were like, ‘Yeah!’”
“So he just grabs some copy paper and some pencils back here and they just started making,” Berry said. “That was just his thing, you know, to connect with these kids.”

More than 400 people visited the show’s opening night on March 3 during First Friday, according to Berry. Holley’s found-object sculptures span more than 40 years and focus on Black American history and memory. They have traveled the country and are part of permanent collections in Los Angeles, New York and Washington, D.C. Berry said UT was fortunate to get the opportunity to show Holley’s work.

Also fortunate was professor Jason Brown’s sculpture class, who used wood, fabric, metal objects and rope to answer the prompt “objects that once held importance to you, but now no longer do.”

Holley visited Beaumont Elementary School as well. All the students brought their pieces to the Southern Railway Depot, a Big Ears venue, over Friday and Saturday to make a real-time installation.

“He really gets a lot of joy from that, which is cool,” Berry said. “That he shares his art in that way.”

Holley dropped into the UT Downtown Gallery Friday and Saturday with other festival musicians to perform acoustic sets surrounded by works he created as recently as this year. Many of the pieces, spray painted on paper or canvas, shared a profile motif and featured stencils of faces with different colors, patterns and effects. One painted on a quilt referenced the traditions of Gee’s Bend, Alabama.

The show also included three sculptures and three videos on a loop. A human sculpture made out of steel and a group of baseball bats inside a Birmingham News can nod to the artist’s hometown. A small Statue of Liberty inside an open birdcage was an up-close example of the themes in I woke up like this, which showed other figurines in cages, flags, ropes, lawn jockeys and guns. Another video, I Went A Little Too Far (Mistreating Love), followed Holley through European palaces, churches and forests.

Holley was behind the soundtracks to the videos, contributing shouts, drones and wails over horns and snare drums. He began recording music in 2006 and released his first album in 2012. The third video, Kindness Will Follow Your Tears, was a song off his fifth album, released March 10 and featuring Justin Vernon of Bon Iver. Holley performed Thursday and Sunday at The Mill & Mine.

Berry said around 250 people had visited on Thursday, Big Ears’ opening day, before Holley’s first concert. Wednesday is the gallery’s slowest day, but Berry said yesterday they had almost 60 pre-festival visitors, more than the usual handful.
“This is the first quiet moment all day right now,” Berry said. “People were out and about and in town and had read about it and seen postings about the show.”

Berry said the reception had been fabulous, and even those who knew his sculpture had discovered his other works.

“Either they’ve never heard of Lonnie Holley and they’re like, ‘Wow, this is incredible.’ or they’re big fans and they’re coming and they’re just having a great time,” Berry said.

Larry Schumer came from Newton, Massachusetts, to attend Big Ears and said he had seen Holley’s work before.
“I didn’t know he was exhibiting here, but as soon as I walked by the place, I said I wanted to come in,” Schumer said. “He’s spectacular … I think his technique is beautiful but also his political statements in his art. He mixes that art with his beliefs very well, like the birdcage is amazing. And the piece with the baseball bats in is incredibly powerful.”

Schumer said he had seen Holley perform live at a festival several years ago as well as inside the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art with Holley’s 2017 exhibit.

Berry said Big Ears has included the UT Downtown Gallery before, and yearly since 2016. The collaboration started via professor Paul Harrill and previously had been art films.

According to Berry, this is the first time they have shown an exhibit by an artist who was playing Big Ears at the same time.

Sam McAllister, Holley’s publicist, said Holley is the artist-in-residence for the 2023 festival and has always loved Knoxville and Big Ears.

Executive and Artistic Director Ashley Capps asked Lonnie if he would be open to doing a show of Lonnie’s visual art to coincide with the festival, which would mean Lonnie as performer, visual artist, filmmaker and educator would all be on display at the festival,” McAllister said.

“And his work was going to be featured in the Tennessee Triennial, so he thought having a separate show would be nice.”

“We feel a little unique … That’s been a fun thing for us, just trying to change it up,” Berry said.