

# EAST CITY ART



## ACADEMY 2014 Featured Artist: Levester Williams

July 9, 2014

BY WADE CAREY



Detail, Levester Williams *Ain't No Promised Land Here* (2013). Photo courtesy of the artist.

*Levester Williams joined me for an early lunch at Meat-In-A-Box in Falls Church June 26th near where he has been living while attending George Mason University's School of Art. He is one of the MFA students in the [Academy 2014 invitational show](#) at CONNERSMITH Gallery, located at 1358 Florida Avenue NE. This is the 14th annual group show originated by Leigh Conner and Jamie Smith featuring work of artists enrolled in Washington area fine arts degree programs. The Washington arts community learned recently that this show will be the last group show mounted at the current CONNERSMITH gallery before [that space takes on a new role as the home of the Washington Fringe Festival](#). The exhibition will open **Saturday, July 12** and will run **through August 9**. As various portraits of Andy Warhol on the walls above our table gazed down, we began by talking about his most recent work shown at GMU.*

*(This transcript of our conversation was edited for concision and clarity.)*

**Wade Carey:** I did have a chance to go to Artifex [the GMU School of Art MFA gallery show]. But I didn't get a chance to see you there. I had already met Jay Hendrick. He has been sending me invitations to things, so I knew I wanted to go to

Artifex this year. So it was good that I went out there and I saw your work both upstairs [in the main gallery] and I had a chance to go downstairs, although there was nobody with me, to sort of walk me through it, and talk me through it, but I had a chance, by myself, to go to the crit. room to see the piece downstairs. Let's start from there and we can work back to who you are and how you got to where you are. Let's talk about the two pieces that I saw in the Artifex space, starting downstairs.

**Levester Williams:** The piece downstairs you experienced is *Confinement*. The materials consist of a bed sheet I received from the local Fairfax adult penitentiary, steel wire, turnbuckles, and metal wall mounted hooks.



Levester Williams *Confinement* (2014) Bed sheet from an US prison, wire, steel, turnbuckles, wall mountable hooks 6ft x 15ft x 8ft (dimension varies). Photo courtesy of the artist.

**Wade Carey:** The viewer is on one side. There is a plane of wires stretched from one wall to the other. I can't remember where it started but it was pretty much from the floor. There was a plane and there is a wire that stretches across. You are creating a wall but it's not a real wall. It is an image of a barrier.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** Yes. The wire is spaced every four inches and stretched from one wall to the other wall. It demarcates the space while it simultaneously acts as a barrier.

**WADE CAREY:** It looked a little bit like a table to me.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** The wire almost looks like an electric fence to the viewer. The bed sheet draped on top of the geometric steel structure appears as if it is a table. With the setup of the three lights, it appears flat at a distance. However, as you get closer, you actually notice that the sheet is gently draped and has some weight to it. The steel structure's width and length are the size of a single twin-sized bed. The height is ambiguous as the height oscillates between the height of a bed, table and coffin.

**WADE CAREY:** It was definitely ambiguous. All of the media you chose were drawn out of that penitentiary vibration.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** Well, the sheet itself was retrieved from a prison, so it has that history of incarceration and of those who used that sheet. That sheet is paired with a rigid geometric structure. I created a barrier that symbolizes how those who are marred by penal confinement are marginalized and now subjected to legal discrimination in almost every aspect of their life—from housing to voting to employment. They are separated from mainstream society. That bed sheet is essential to the idea because it represents the idea of comfort and stability. When the sheet covers you, you are usually in a mode of rest. Now individuals who are or had been incarcerated hover between an axis of security and insecurity, stability and instability. That is what the piece represents.

**WADE CAREY:** I regret you weren't there with me when I saw the piece. I sensed the message of isolation and of confinement but there were other subtleties in the piece, especially what the bed sheet meant and the dynamic of the covering and the mysteriousness of the object under the bed sheet. How it helped try to express the identity of that confinement.

Upstairs in the gallery there was another piece that was provocative—maybe hard for people to figure out. Let's talk about that.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** It's called, *White Desire*. I wasn't too pleased by the placement because the wall itself was at an angle.

**WADE CAREY:** It's in a corner.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** Yes, it's in the corner with the wall at an angle. It wasn't as strong because...

**WADE CAREY:** Also, it was next to a window. There was light coming in at an angle.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** A lot of light. There were too many distractions. Because of those elements, I was less pleased. When I first displayed it, the wall where I installed was parallel or perpendicular to the other walls. Additionally, I had more control of the light. But the piece itself, *White Desire*, how do I begin? It was inaccessible to the viewer.

**WADE CAREY:** Way up on the wall.



Levester Williams *White Desire* (2013) Porcelain, wood, joint compound, gallery paint, 8.5"x11" rectangular recess at 8ft above floor. Photo courtesy of the artist.

**“For me, race is a regime of looking.” – Levester Williams**

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** I purposefully made the bottom of the recess eight feet above the floor so that the viewer would have to look up at it. I wanted to accentuate them looking—the gaze—similar to the second iteration of the piece downstairs, the *Confinement* at the Work House in Lorton. Some of the GMU MFA candidates had a month or so that we could use for

experimental works or pieces in the gallery space upstairs in Building 16. So in March of this year, 2014, I did a second iteration where, instead of one side, I installed two sides of the wire as there were two entry points. I had two barriers of steel wire demarcating the space and blocking the viewer from access to the bed sheet draped across the metal structure. And with that piece, that iteration, I wanted to emphasize the gaze. And this is in alignment with what I'm going to say about *White Desire*. If there were multiple people in that space with some on the other side, the viewer would see the other viewer looking at the object. And so, they would have the awareness that they, too, were participating in that gaze. The gaze that I'm talking about is the speciesist gaze. If you go to a national museum or a zoo, they categorize and display things based on their *assigned* differences. Speciesism is placing value based on species membership. That categorization gives power to those who define. The speciesist gaze preceded the racist gaze. I don't know if you are familiar with Sarah "Saartjie" Baartman, also called the Hottentot Venus, a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa—anachronistic term for that period—who was brought to Europe and displayed because of her body shape and her elongated private parts. She was transformed into a sight under the white gaze. In that second iteration of *Confinement* and in *White Desire*, I wanted the viewer to be aware of that gaze. For me, race is a regime of looking. Race is based on arbitrary physical marks, skin tone, hair texture, bone structure, so race becomes a regime of looking. It is not limited to the visuals, however. You see, hear, and feel race. Well at least in the United States. Race is fluid in different parts of the world and is constituted quite differently. But I want to put this in the context of the US.

**WADE CAREY:** We are Americans and so we have had most of our experiences about how the pseudo-science has come to be here.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** That piece is focused on race as a regime of looking. The egg in *White Desire* becomes the symbol of whiteness and what it entails.

**WADE CAREY:** So, the object is an egg?

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** It's egg-like.

**WADE CAREY:** I wondered what it was. It's ovoid. It's a beautiful rounded, white—well, I call it beautiful just because it is simple and smooth. It is an enigmatic shape inside a recess, inaccessible, up high. The whole thing is enigmatic. But, clearly, what you say happens in that every viewer has to look up and wonder. There is clearly an achievement of an effect. But I am curious how that might change depending on the venue or depending on the space that it is in, if the core of the work is to place the viewer in a specific relationship to the object. For example, you were a little concerned about the light.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** That's where the curator of that show placed my piece. It is not where I wanted to place my piece. The lighting and the proximity to another artist's work may influence how people interpret the piece.

**WADE CAREY:** Especially in a mixed show where you don't have just one artist. There are so many different energies going on in one place.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** I named it *White Desire* for a reason. I could have just named it "Desire," or then, the piece would be open to any kind of interpretation. I wanted to direct their interpretation into a particular way, based on the title itself even if they did not understand the entirety of the piece. The egg-like object represents wholeness as it is complete within itself. The egg is made out of porcelain. Porcelain objects are precious in the

beholder's mind because they are more expensive than other ceramics. So I made the object out of porcelain to accentuate its value. Additionally, the egg-like porcelain object represents whiteness. Whiteness, a system that establishes chains of relations to create inclusion and exclusion for the construction of difference and otherness in race, is a master signifier. The master signifier doesn't subject itself to another signifier. All other races are subject to whiteness. To look and desire the egg, a symbolic representation of whiteness, is to desire oneness, wholeness, and pure enjoyment. The desire is to overcome one's difference because race is based on differences determined from those aforementioned arbitrary marks. Within the dominant racist narrative of race, to be black, to be the *other*, is to lack or have a lack of value.



Detail, Levester Williams *White Desire* (2013) Photo courtesy of the artist.

**WADE CAREY:** When you were selected to be in Academy 2014, that is coming up, was it to reproduce or to remount one of the pieces that you've already shown or was it for a new piece? What did [CONNERSMITH Gallery's Academy 2014 curator] Jamie Smith choose?

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** The chosen pieces were those I had already completed and shown. Jamie chose the *The White Ladder* and *Ain't No Promised Land Here*. These are pieces she saw in my studio here. She visited with some George Mason's MFA students who signed up for a visit. But most of my pieces are installations, so she only saw them either online or the pieces in their component parts. I didn't have the space to put them together—or the time. After the visit, she sent me an e-mail detailing which pieces she chose and asked me if I would submit those two pieces for the Academy 2014 exhibition. I agreed. Shall I explain those two pieces?

**WADE CAREY:** Yes, please!

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** I'll start with *Ain't No Promised Land Here*.



Levester Williams *Ain't No Promised Land Here* (2013) Residue from Bricks Found in Abandoned Detroit Packard Plant, Repurposed Cotton Sheet, and Pins, 38 x 40 x 40 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.

I repurposed a personal bed sheet and made an outline of my body from brick dust. The brick dust is crumbled from bricks I found in the Detroit Packard plant, an old abandoned luxury car factory. I placed the crumbled brick pieces on the sheet and removed the pieces to have the residue remain. So, you have this red line of my body. Why I chose that plant is because it ties in with my family and the African-American's collective experience. African-Americans during the Jim Crow era wanted to escape the South and the deep entrenchment of discrimination. So, many African-Americans migrated to industrial cities of the north and Detroit was one of those cities. Tragically, African Americans endured, once again, racial discrimination, such as redlining and housing and employment discrimination, in those now post-industrial cities. The North was this Promised Land to blacks, but it came out to be yet again a place of deep marginalization. Desiring to connect to that history and the challenges faced today, I used the bricks as way to represent the hopes and aspirations of African Americans. The other piece is called *The White Ladder*. It is against the wall. You have cotton ties that are scaling up the wall. They are looking like they are coming from the inside of the briefcase. It is just a regular leather briefcase, repurposed. I had cotton as if it is spewing out of the leather briefcase. The cotton itself is hand-picked from a Southern plantation, raw cotton.

**WADE CAREY:** These are pieces of raw cotton as they would come picked right off the plants?

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** Yes. Hand-picked from a Southern plantation and spewing from a leather briefcase. [Laughing]

**“Many of my artworks use materials with specific histories that I elicit to create an alternate narrative.”**



Levester Williams *The White Ladder* (2013) Hand-picked cotton from a southern plantation, leather briefcase, cotton ties, thread 108" x 20" x 9". Photo courtesy of the artist.



**WADE CAREY:** Sounds delightful. I think I can see why she might have picked that one.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** Many of my artworks use materials with specific histories that I elicit to create an alternate narrative. Three of four of the pieces that I have explained have taken specific materials that have a particular history pertinent to my concept. So, yes, *The White Ladder* is another piece like that. It is called that for a reason, because of the exclusion of women and minorities in a capitalist society. It's based on white privilege.

**WADE CAREY:** We've talked about the work that is going into Academy 2014. Now we're going to back up a bit and figure out how you got there.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** I received my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art and Design at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where I attended from 2008 to 2013. I did a semester abroad in 2011 in Cape Town, South Africa, at the University of Cape Town. I was there for five months and I took one class in print making and lithography and two history classes. One history class was on the Westernized historical construction of Africa up to the 1800s and the other was on the history of South Africa up to 1900s. I learned about the Dutch colonization of South Africa and then the first and second British occupation. With the exposure of the different cultures, the displacement of myself from my culture, and those classes, I learned much about my own culture, the American culture, and capitalism, itself. I would say spending that time, that experience, pushed my work more quickly than I imagined it would. Even though I was incorporating race in my work beforehand, I came with a different, more enriched understanding about the American culture and race. I simply became more aware how race is tied up in a system of differences. Before that experience, I hadn't identified it beyond individual racism. I understood race as those perpetuated by individuals themselves but not by a system. But after my experience abroad, I understand now and am still learning how economics and politics underpin the history of race in the US.

**WADE CAREY:** I have always thought, and most of the people that I've talked to about it have agreed, that it should be mandatory that students be required to leave the country as a part of their education. Everybody who goes to school in the U.S. should have to get out of the U.S., I don't care where, and it almost doesn't matter where anymore, just to get some perspective about how almost everywhere else is not like here. That by itself, even though every experience is going to be different, helps you to educate yourself about what being here is all about. It really is important. I think that most kids just don't understand because they never get a chance to stand outside of the situation that they are in. I am a big believer in semester abroad or year abroad. It's so important, I think.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** And actually, the University of Michigan, at the School of Art and Design, they now require all their undergrads and graduate students, BFA and MFA students, to go abroad. In order to receive a Fine Arts degree, they have to study abroad whether it's a semester or a year-long or an internship.

**WADE CAREY:** And so now you are going back to VCU [Virginia Commonwealth University]?

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** I am not going to continue with the Master of Fine Arts in Arts and Visual Technology at George Mason. I was there at George Mason from 2013 until May 2014. I have established my MFA candidacy in Sculpture and Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

**WADE CAREY:** Yes, that is what I read, which is why I was a little confused at the beginning after we talked about the work I saw at Artifex and about what work was going into Academy 2014. I had a sense that you were down in Richmond.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** No, I came to GMU first. As soon as I graduated from Michigan in 2013, I went to pursue my Master for Fine Arts at George Mason. There was no break in between. While at GMU, I applied once again to MFA programs across the country, including the MFA sculpture program at VCU. I will start the two-year program in Sculpture and Extended Media at VCU this coming fall.

**WADE CAREY:** Tell me more about the sculpture program at VCU and why it was appealing to you, why you decided to go down there.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** Well, it's ranked as the best MFA program in sculpture. And the facilities are amazing. I am not limited, but quite overwhelmed in what I am able to create.

**WADE CAREY:** Do you have any idea where you are going to start in the work that you are going to do, any sense of the media you are going to start experimenting with?

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** The artwork that I am currently working on goes back to the bed sheet from the prison. I retrieved forty or more from that prison. I thought, what am I going to do with this? I have to use these, somehow. Interestingly, after one of my critiques of *Confinement*, my colleague, Ben Ashworth, the sculpture studio manager at George Mason and an MFA candidate, provided me with some advice. He felt like the sheet might be able to permanently take that form of a sheet draped over the metal structure. And it really made me think about what I could do with the bed sheets. There is an artist Joseph Havel, whose works I like. He makes free-standing sculptures from mundane objects, like bed sheets, work collars, ties. One of these [*Bed Sheet*, 2005, Polyurethane resin and fabric, 90x12x12] is free-standing. There are no strings. It seems to float in space. He uses polyurethane to make it rigid, to keep its form. In some of his pieces, he casts the mundane objects in bronze and paints the bronze sculpture of ties or sheet. It has this pseudo-appearance of a sheet or bundles of ties, but it is not exactly what it appears. It gave me the idea of what techniques I could use to take the prison bed sheets and make rigid free-standing structures. So, the piece I am working on right now will be at least 12 feet by 6 feet with a height of 7 feet. It's called *Packaged*. First, back to the concept: The Sentencing Project sent a letter to the U.N. outlining how the United States has violated human rights by targeting and incarcerating minorities at an alarming disproportionate rate to their white counterparts. They've not only become incarcerated more, but also are more likely to get convicted and face harsher sentences. They had all these statistics in the letter they sent to the United Nations. In the report, they say, if this trend continues, one in three black males could face penal confinement in their lifetime. Since those incarcerated may now be discriminated against in almost every aspect of their life and the sheer number of mass incarcerations of African Americans and Latinos, it is not absurd at all to see the U.S. criminal system as a new racial caste system. So, I had an idea of casting a black male's full body. I did that. I am going to take the bed sheets I had from the prison and I am going to dip them into a mixture of Hydrocal FGR-95 and glue. It's a polymer gypsum that's harder than plaster. It's used in mold-making techniques. Additionally, the type I'm using is used in architectural applications. It's very strong. I would be dipping the bed sheets in the wet, uncured mixture of the Hydrocal and then placing them over the body cast of the black male. I'll let it sit for a few hours. Once it hardens and cures, I can pop up the bed sheet and you have an impression of a supine resting body still in the bed sheet. I am going to do it thirty-six times. I will place them on a polystyrene structure, also known as foam core. It is a material used for packaging. I will

create this structure to mimic grocery shelves or commercial storage. May I show you an image?



Levester Williams, Work-In-Progress of *Packaged*, 'Cast' prison bed sheet of black male body, 10" x 72" x 35".  
Photo courtesy of the artist.

You have two rows of three columns. There will be six levels that the bed sheets will be stacked on, placed on top of one another.

**WADE CAREY:** The first thing it makes me think of is the triangle trade.

**"I am making that connection between the mass incarceration of African Americans to the idea of packaging and shipping of black bodies similar to the slave trade."**

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** Yes. That's correct. For one thing, the dimensions from one level to the next in the spacing in my piece draws from the space Africans had when stacked on ships during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. When Africans were stacked on crowded ships, they might have had wooden shelves with 12 or 18 inches space between each shelf. I took the height of the structure itself, 7 feet, the standard size of a grocery shelf. I am making that connection between the mass incarceration of African Americans to the idea of packaging and shipping of black bodies similar to the slave trade. They become commodities. They become dehumanized products and are used for cheap labor. There is a code [VA, 53.1-47] which basically mandates nonprofit organizations, agencies, localities that are supported by any portion of Virginia state funds, to purchase products or services provided by people incarcerated in state correctional facilities. The exemptions are if the products provided are

not suitable or if the entity could find products or services at a lesser cost than prison labor. This discrimination is institutionalized. This piece, *Packaged*, shows how the black male bodies are packaged and shipped off, for cheap labor. That's what I'm working on.

**WADE CAREY:** That is very interesting. It sounds really good. You should have fun in Richmond. Richmond has all kinds of people.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** Also, the whole piece itself is coated with pine tar. Black pine tar throughout the centuries was used for wood preservation and the rigging in boats. This is before modern day boating. Pine tar protected the wood not only from the moisture but also from the sun's UV damage. More than likely, the slave ships used pine tar, so that makes another connection to the slave trade, too.

**WADE CAREY:** I'm excited. I think this is great. I think it's great you are going to Richmond. [Levester laughs.] Richmond is wild. It is a long way from Michigan, though.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** I know.

**WADE CAREY:** VCU is fantastic. Central Virginia has a lot of good and bad, like everywhere. You can say that about everywhere, I guess.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** The thing about Richmond is that it has a lot of history. So much history that I can use in my work.

**WADE CAREY:** If you are looking for material, you have material that goes back to the beginnings. To the beginnings before slavery was essentially race-based. Slavery [and indentured servitude] didn't particularly concentrate on Africans where it specifically became racist. Virginia is the heart of where the English decided it was the most economically feasible for African slavery. That's the core of what it was about in America. [e.g., Bacon's Rebellion.] Policy was made, forget those Irish, etc., we want Africans. And we don't want blacks to own property, we don't want Africans to have any hope of becoming free men, to be coming into the country in any other form but as slaves. That was a policy that got started in the later 17<sup>th</sup> Century and just kept going. It is funny because it did not start out that way. In the very early days, they had not thought that up but, as you said earlier, you have to learn about the financial underpinnings of the way the system works. In an ironic way, people can say, hey, it's just business. As odd as it sounds, it's not personal. We are just doing business. And the *Packaged*, as the title indicates, are about business. It is about dehumanizing a segment of the population because it makes sense for another population that has the control to make a profit. We subdue, in this case through the slave trade and centuries of compelled slavery, and make it work—to the extent that it did work in the United States. And elsewhere, of course, but, as you and I have already said in our conversation, I don't know—and until you had more education elsewhere—didn't know much about anywhere else.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** It is the system itself in all honesty that we are part of that prevents us from understanding that narrative. Because you have the dominant narrative, and that dominant narrative would suppress any narrative that speaks against it. So, now, from *White Ladder* to *Confinement* to the new piece, I seek to bring out alternative narratives that otherwise would be unheard. This is what a lot of my pieces are about. My works seek to illuminate these systems of oppression and how they function in both the past and present.

**WADE CAREY:** I think it is so great that you were chosen as one of the candidates and that we'll be able to feature a story about your work and have people come to see the show. And

whatever else is coming up, especially at VCU. I think the people in Richmond definitely are going to be in need of seeing the work that you are going to produce. Virginia is in for a roller coaster ride in the coming months. [Levester laughs.] Not just from you. Politics in Virginia are going wild right now. I think it's up for a lot of change at the moment, which I'm very happy about. I'm glad to see change coming.

One additional thing I always like to ask people: Are there influential people that you can think of, either in the work that you have done, earlier in wanting to become an artist or recently in the last few years? You've mentioned some artists. Are there any others that are particularly key to the directions that you have decided to head in, or that you look to as inspirations? Are there people that got you started that made you want to be an artist or events in your life or moments where you said, oh, this is what I am going to do?

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** I guess I could start with people who I know personally who guided me on the path of a professional artist. There are two individuals who I studied under when I was at Michigan. Marianetta Porter has had a great influence on me since my freshman year. After I came back from South Africa, I needed to talk to someone to implement my experiences and new understanding into my artistic practice. She guided me in my current artistic direction where I elicit history already instilled in the objects. And there is artist Addie Langford Stone-Richards, who taught at Michigan for a while. She accelerated my intellectual curiosity through her encouragement of research in the subject matter pertinent to my work. There, my concepts became much clearer as the materials became part of the intellectual drive of my artworks and did not exist wholly to achieve an effect. Both continually provide outstanding support in my artistic development as they provide letters of support, edit my artist statements and artist proposals, and inform me of various opportunities. I am truly grateful to have both. Also, I am grateful for the general support of School of Art and Design at Michigan, the School of Art at George Mason, and the support I will have at VCUarts. And also, there are so many artists I admire—David Hammons, Nari Ward, Kara Walker, Hank Willis Thomas, Mona Hatoum, Hans Haacke are artists whose art-making are similar to mine or who deal with similar subject matters or whose artworks' aesthetics are similar to mine.

**WADE CAREY:** Well, congratulations! I look forward to seeing you at the opening, I hope. We are all looking forward to great things.

**LEVESTER WILLIAMS:** Thank you!