

Black Mobility

Ford Bronco Steering Wheel, 2023

Robert Louis Brandon Edwards (b. 1988)

New York, NY

Rubber and metal

16 in x 7 in

What is the steering wheel to you? What is it to me? For some, it represents freedom. For others, it represents the uncertainty of not knowing whether its use could lead to an unjust traffic stop because of the color of their skin. Separating the steering wheel from the car allows us to view and investigate it as an object removed from its original context, intended function, and designed purpose. The sixth classification of Jules Prown's categorization of material culture, which he determines by function, is 'device'. Prown's object-based research method is an attempt to understand the everyday experiences of humans through objects; objects which can age, break, crack, deteriorate, evolve, and/or fail. Does it then, in fact, remain an object or does it become a 'thing' as Martin Heidegger and Bill Brown suggest? What does the object become in this theoretical space? Does it become art? By objectifying something such as the steering wheel and reducing it to an object or directional device that all, if not most of us have encountered at some point in our lives, what do we do with this knowledge? Does it allow us to think critically about history and about preservation? Some of us encounter the steering wheel directly or indirectly on a daily basis. How will this analysis change our perspective of what the steering wheel represents? Independent of its horn, steering column, box, rack, and drivetrain, the steering wheel is a symbol of modernity. It represents progress and resistance but it also represents risk and a history of racial injustice.

The steering wheel on view here was removed from a first-generation Ford Bronco (1966-1977), a sports utility vehicle marketed to white outdoorsman which is significant because its design team included McKinley William Thompson, Jr., the Ford Motor Company's first Black automobile designer. In July 1963, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, era of Sundown Towns, Race Riots, and hyper-policing of Black mobility, when carrying *The Negro Motorist Green Book* was a necessity, during the summer Medgar Evers was assassinated, and right before the March on Washington and bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, Thompson drafted some of the early conceptual drawings for the, would be Bronco. Sixty years later, Black automobile designers continue to be a minority while Black motorists continue to be the majority of people stopped, searched, and harmed during traffic stops by local and state law enforcement in the United States. What does this say about Black mobility in this country— socially, politically, economically, and physically?

What does this say about the steering wheel?

**While the experience of touch is important in object-based research, please reframe from touching.*