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Reimagining Lady Liberty's Torch to Meet This Moment

In her first New York solo exhibition at Madison Square Park, Abigail DeVille conjures a long line of freedom fighters.

By Hilarie M. Sheets

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Abigail DeVille with her sculpture in Manhattan's Madison Square Park. Credit Tonje Thilesen for The New York Times

When Abigail DeVille began site research for her public art project in Manhattan's Madison Square Park, she stumbled on a wild 1876 photograph of the Statue of Liberty's detached hand and flaming torch in the park. For six years, the surreal fragment was on view there to generate excitement and raise funds for the pedestal to hold the colossal statue coming to New York from France.

"History had already done it for me," said Ms. DeVille, who knew instantly that the giant torch was the perfect form to contain materials and metaphors conjuring the struggle for liberty in America, past and present.

The installation titled “Light of Freedom,” the 39-year-old Bronx artist’s first solo exhibition in her hometown, opens on Oct. 27 in the park just north of East 23rd Street. There a 13-foot-tall, rusted lattice structure evokes the silhouette of Lady Liberty’s torch. Inside the handle is a weathered schoolhouse bell, a visual “call to action” according to Ms. DeVille. Dozens of mannequin arms, painted blue, are clustered inside the armature of the flame shape, suggesting both a wave and the hottest part of fire.

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The piece summons “a long line of freedom fighters who have been protesting to exist in this nation from the very beginning,” Ms. DeVille said. Here and in other site-specific works around the country, she has collected found objects and unearthed little-known African-American histories, reframing them in installations that can both provoke and inspire.

This summer, Brooke Kamin Rapaport, the deputy director and chief curator at the Madison Square Park Conservancy, approached Ms. DeVille about making a piece that could address the tumultuous political moment and protests erupting across the nation after the killing of George Floyd.

“The program needed to pose the question of how public art right now can impact people and communities and respond in civic space to this unprecedented time,” Ms. Rapaport said.

While an accelerated timeline for the conservancy, three-months lead time for the artist was “almost luxurious,” Ms. DeVille said, laughing heartily earlier this month at her small Bronx studio, where mannequin limbs cascaded in an unruly mountain. In 2017 alone, she completed 14 on-site projects, including in Los Angeles, St. Louis, Pittsburgh and Miami. “I usually just land somewhere, research, gather materials and then install happens over two weeks,” she said of her itinerant practice.

In her research for “Light of Freedom,” including Ric Burns’s 1999 series “New York: A Documentary Film” and a 1977 article in The New York Times, she learned that 11

Angolans were the first Blacks brought to New Amsterdam in 1626 by the Dutch West India Company. After successfully petitioning for their freedom in 1644, some were later granted land to farm just south of the future Madison Square Park, as a buffer between the Dutch settlements downtown and the Native peoples further north.

In the years after the British took over the city, “Black people’s lands were confiscated,” Ms. DeVille said, calling that dispossession the first wave of centuries of gentrification upending lives and pushing Black communities to the margins.

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The artist elevates their continual pushback for justice, writ large by the Black Lives Matter movement, in the torch’s flame, crowded with the outstretched mannequin arms as an image of both oppression and exultation. “‘If there is no struggle, there is no progress’,” she said, quoting a Frederick Douglass speech that has informed how she approached the piece.

Ms. DeVille “collapses how we think about past, present and future time, especially for Black Americans’ narratives,” said Deana Haggag, the president and chief executive of United States Artists. In her former role as executive director at the Contemporary museum in Baltimore, Ms. Haggag commissioned the artist in 2016 to make an installation examining the city’s former Peale Museum, where she contextualized the history of Black protest in Baltimore a year after Freddie Gray’s death in police custody.

Ms. DeVille got her first big break in 2005 while a student at the Fashion Institute of Technology. She was one of eight unknown artists, selected by the dealer Jeffrey Deitch, to land a role on the short-lived reality TV show “Artstar.” “It was really a casting call because it was your work and what you were wearing,” Ms. DeVille said. When the show premiered, Mr. Deitch told The New York Times that Ms. DeVille’s work had matured the most over the course of filming. He sold one of her inventive large-scale collages to a Belgian collector for five figures. “That was a big encouragement to keep going on this path,” she said.

While at Yale University, where she received a master's in fine arts in 2011, Ms. DeVille was influenced by her grandmother's penchant for collecting houseplants, silverware, appliances, clothing and other random throwaways from her neighbors, calling her the "unofficial archivist" of her housing project in the Bronx. The objects were "the silent witnesses of all these people's lives," said Ms. DeVille, who surreptitiously carted some items back to school. "That shaped the way I thought about material."

At Yale, she incorporated some of these castoffs into her first installation piece, "New York at Dawn," her response to a Federico García Lorca poem referring to "a hurricane of black doves that paddle in putrescent waters." That was also her first use of a mannequin as a generic stand-in for humanity.

"It can speak very quickly to larger societal concerns," said Ms. DeVille, who sees herself working in the lineage of assemblage artists that include Noah Purifoy, Robert Rauschenberg and Louise Nevelson. At her studio, a mannequin wearing a space helmet and yards of glittery chain necklaces is a work in progress for the group show "Pedestrian Profanities," curated by the artist Eric N. Mack and opening at Simon Lee in New York on Oct. 29.

For Madison Square Park, she has contained her torch within scaffolding, which she sees as a metaphor for the continual labor involved in the building of freedom and also as a ladder symbolizing how different groups have ascended, at times on the backs of others. "It's not that the Statue of Liberty is a myth — this place has been a refuge for lots of people," Ms. DeVille said. She gilded the scaffolding to refer to Emma Lazarus's famous poem about the statue that includes the line, "I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

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But Ms. DeVille's "Light of Freedom" commemorates the kind of efforts that have not been talked about or have been lost to history. "It's a response to what happened this summer and what's continuing to happen in terms of the calls for this racial reckoning," she said. "It's a monument to all of those things, and there is joy in that."