

**ABIGAIL DEVILLE**

Born 1981 in New York, NY; works in Bronx, NY

**EDUCATION**

**2011**

Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT Major: Painting

**2007**

Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, Madison ME

**2007**

Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, NY BFA ('09), AAS ('06)

**2000**

Pratt Institute, New York, NY Completes 32 Credits. Major: Illustration

**SOLO & TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS**

**2021**

*Homebody, Shacks and Legends*, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, NY

*Light of Freedom*, The Momentary, Satellite Contemporary Art Space of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AK, Hirschhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC *Seeds of Empire*, Galerie Michel Rein, Paris, France

**2020**

*Light of Freedom*, Madison Square Park Conservancy, New York, NY

**2018**

*The American Future*, Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, Portland, OR

**2017** *No Space Hidden (Shelter)*, Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA *Chaos or Community?* Galerie Michel Rein, Brussels, Belgium

**2016**

*Only When It's Dark Enough You Can See The Stars*, Peale Museum, The Contemporary, Baltimore, MD

**2015**

*AMERICA*, Galerie Michel Rein, Paris, France

*Nobody Knows My Name*, Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago IL

*The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Byerly Gallery, Radcliffe Institute, Cambridge, MA

## **2014**

*Cousin Suzy and the Infinite Deep*, Marginal Utility, Philadelphia, PA.

*The New Migration*, 5x5 DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities, Anacostia, DC

## **2013**

*Invisible Men: Beyond the Veil*, Galerie Michel Rein, Paris France.

*Gastown Follies*, Artspeak, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

XXXXXX, Iceberg Projects, Rogers Park, Chicago, IL

*Njiedka Akunyili & Abigail DeVille: New Paintings*, Gallery Zidoun, Luxembourg

## **2012**

*If I don't think I'm sinking, look what a hole I'm in*, Night Gallery, Los Angeles, CA. *Inside-Outliers'*

*Alchemy: Working the Edges of Perception*, M55 Gallery, Long Island City, NY.

*Invisibility Blues*, Recess Activities, The Dependent Art Fair, New York, NY.

## **2010**

*Dark Star*, Recess Activities, New York, NY.

*Gold Mountain*, Marginal Utility, Philadelphia, PA.

## **2009**

*Black Gold*, The Bronx River Art Center, Bronx, NY.

## **Group Exhibitions**

### **2021**

*Brand New Heavies*, curated by Racquel Chevremont & Mickalene Thomas, Pioneer Works, Red Hook, Brooklyn, NY

### **2020**

*Pedestrian Profanities*, curated by Eric Mack, Simon Lee, New York, NY

*Art at a Time Like This*, curated by Barbara Pollock & Anne Verhallen, Bronx, NY *Untitled, 2020*

curated by Thomas Houseago, Punta della Dogana, Venezia,

IT *Another Country*, Terrault Gallery, Baltimore, MD

### **2019**

*Figuring the Floral*, Wave Hill Art Gallery, Bronx, NY.

*MoMA PopRally & the Bronx: Beauteous*, Andrew Freedman Home, Bronx, NY.  
*Baneful Medicine*, curated by Andrew Weinstein, John Jay College, New York, NY. *Assemblage*,  
Leonard Pearlstein Gallery, Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA.

## **2018**

*Postcard From New York II*, Anna Marra Contemporenea, Rome Italy  
*Out of East Reach*, DePaul Art Museum, Chicago, IL.  
*The Tesseract*, Cinque Mostre 2018, American Academy in Rome, Rome Italy  
*Black Value*, Black History Florence, Fondazione Biagiotti Progwtti Arte, Florence Italy.  
*Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction*, 1960s to Today, National Museum of Women in Arts, Washington DC

## **2017**

Sculpture Garden Commission, Miami Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, FL.  
*Empire State Works in Progress 2017*, Whitney Museum of American Art, NY  
*20/20: The Studio Museum in Harlem and Carnegie Museum of Art*, Pittsburgh, PA  
*A Picture of the Universe in Clock Time*, Momentum 9, Moss Norway  
*Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today*, Kemper Museum, Kanas City, MO.  
*Harlem: Found Ways*, Cooper Gallery at Hutchins Center, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA *Urban Planning: Contemporary Art and the City 1967-2017*, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, MO.  
*Platform at the Armory*, Armory Show Pier 92, curated by Eric Shiner, New York, NY.  
*The Intersectional Self*, The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, New York, NY.

## **2016**

*Strange Oscillations*, University Galleries, Illinois State University, Normal, IL.  
*Home*, Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute, New York, NY.  
*Material Girls*, Contemporary Calgary, Canada.  
*LANDMARK*, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, Queens, NY.  
*Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women*, 1947-2016. Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles, CA

## **2015**

*If You Leave Me can I Come Too*, Hunter East Harlem Gallery, New York, NY  
*From the Ruins...* 601 Artspace. New York, NY  
*Consequential Translations*, Centro Cultural de Espana en Santo Domingo, D.R.

*When You Cut Into the Present the Future Leaks Out*, Old Bronx Borough Courthouse *Material Girls*, Central Gallery & Mediateque. Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, SK, Canada

## **2014**

*Puddle, pothole, portal*. Sculpture Center, Long Island City, NY.

*Playing With Fire: Political Interventions, Dissident Acts and Mischievous Actions*, El Museo del Barrio, New York, NY.

*Material Histories*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY.

*Sensitive Instruments*, Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, IL.

*Rites of Spring*. Contemporary Art Museum Houston, Houston, TX.

## **2013**

*Guts*, Abrons Art Center, Henry Street Settlement, New York, NY.

*Black in the Abstract*. Contemporary Art Museum Houston, Houston, TX. *Gastown Follies*. Artspeak, Vancouver, BC, Canada

*Who Wants Flowers When You're Dead?* The Poor Farm, Little Wolf, WI.

*Bronx Calling: The Second AIM Biennial*, Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, NY.

*Future Generation Prize Exhibition*. The 55th Venice Biennial, Venice, IT.

*They might as well have been remnants of the boat*. Calder Foundation, New York, NY.

## **2012**

*Future Generation Prize Exhibition*. Pinchuk Art Centre, Kiev, Ukraine *Space Invaders*, Lehman College Gallery, Bronx, NY.

*First Among Equals*. Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA.

*The Ungovernables*. The New Museum Triennial, New York, NY

## **2011**

*Bosh Young Talent Show*. Stedelijk Museum, 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands.

*The (S) Files 2011*. El Museo del Barrio, New York, NY.

*The Un-nameable Frame*. Green Gallery, New Haven, CT

*Reflecting Abstraction*. Vogt Gallery, New York, NY.

## **2010**

*Bonzai*, Red Lotus Room, Brooklyn NY.

*Planet of Slums*. Mason Gross Galleries, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ.

*Critical Perspectives.* Green Gallery. New Haven, CT.

*Rompe Puesto.* The Bronx River Art Center. Bronx, NY.

## **2009**

*How the Other Half Lives.* Green Gallery, New Haven, CT.

*A proposito: Pan Latino Dialogues.* Ely House. New Haven, CT.

*The Open.* Deitch Studios. New York, NY.

## **2007**

DK Magazine. Pro qm. Berlin, Germany

Fine Arts BFA 2007, The Museum at FIT, New York, NY.

CAA & NYCAMS BFA Exhibition. New York Center for Art & Media Studies, New York, NY.

## **2006**

*Artstar,* Deitch Projects. New York, NY

## **AWARDS, GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS & RESIDENCIES**

### **2018**

United States Artists Fellow

The Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant

### **2017**

Rauschenberg Artists in Residency

Chuck Close Henry W and Marion T Mitchell Rome Prize, 2017-2018

### **2016**

William H. Johnson Prize, (honored finalist)

### **2015**

William H. Johnson Prize, (honored finalist)

Theo Westenberger, Estate Award

Cite Internationale Des Arts Paris, Artist in Residence, Sept- November 2015 OBIE Award for Design, (sets& costumes) for Prophetika: An Oratorio, LaMaMa Creative Capital Visual Artist award recipient

### **2014**

Rema Hort Mann Foundation Emerging Artist Grant Recipient

The Radcliffe Institute for Advance Study Fellowship, Cambridge, MA, 2014-2015

## **2013**

The Studio Museum of Harlem Artist in Residence, New York, NY, 2013-2014

## **2012**

The Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant, New York, NY

Artist in the Marketplace, Bronx Museum of Art, Bronx, NY

LMCC Swing Space Resident, Governors Island, New York, NY

Recess at Pioneer Works, Artist in Residence, Brooklyn, NY

The Edward and Sally Van Lier Fund of the New York Community Trust.

International Studio and Curatorial Program, Brooklyn, NY

## **2011**

Alice Kimball Traveling Fellowship, Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT

**2007** Camille Hanks Cosby Fellowship, Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME

**2005** The Frank Shapiro Memorial Award for Excellence in Fine Arts, Fashion Institute of Technology

## **THEATRICAL INSTALLATIONS & COSTUME DESIGN**

### **2019**

*Moon Medicin*, concept band fronted by Sanford Biggers, directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, costume design Abigail DeVille, Kennedy Center

### **2018**

*within the sand and the sea: a meditation on lost and forgotten places and people*. Concept/Director: Charlotte Brathwaite, Installation/Costume Design: Abigail DeVille Ussher Fort, Jamestown, Accra, Ghana

*SHASTA GEAUX POP*, Costume Designer: Abigail DeVille, directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, written by Ayesha Jordan, Out Line Festival, The High Line, New York, NY, Right About Now Festival, Companie Theater, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, Under the Radar Festival, The Public Theater, New York, NY

### **2017**

*Parable of the Sower*. Librettist, Composer and musical Director: Toshi Reagon, Stage Director Eric Ting, Set Art: Abigail DeVille, New York University arts Center, Abu Dhabi, UAE, Carolina Performing Arts, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill,

*SHASTA GEAUX POP*, Costume Designer: Abigail DeVille, directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, written by Ayesha Jordan, WOW Festival, San Diego, CA, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH,

*Geneva Project*, choreographed by Jennifer Harrison Newman, directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, Set/Installation design: Abigail DeVille, The Bronx Academy of Arts & Dance, Bronx, NY,

## 2016

*Can I Get a Witness?* The Gospel of James Baldwin, composer/writer/musician: Meshell Ndegeocello, Directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, costume, set/installation design: Abigail DeVille, Harlem Stage,

*Bee Boy*, composer/writer/musician, Guillermo Brown, directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, costume design: Abigail DeVille, residency at The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Center for Art, Science & Technology,

*SHASTA GEAUX POP*, Costume Designer: Abigail DeVille, directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, written by Ayesha Jordan, The Bushwick Starr

*House or Home*, The Hawtplates, composers/lyricist/performers, Justin Hicks, Jade Hicks & Kenita Miller, Socrates Sculpture Park,

*Geneva Project*, choreographed by Jennifer Harrison Newman, directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, Set/Installation design: Abigail DeVille, Jack, Brooklyn, NY,

## 2015

*Geneva Project*, choreographed by Jennifer Harrison Newman,

directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, Set/Installation design: Abigail DeVille, Jack, Brooklyn,

*Prophetika: An Oratorio*, directed by Charlotte Brathwaite,

composer/pianist Courtney Bryan, sound designer Justin Hicks, installation/costume design Abigail DeVille, LaMama Experimental Theater Club,

*The Day the Earth Stood Still*, directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, costume designer Abigail DeVille, MIT, Cambridge, MA,

## 2014

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by William Shakespeare, directed by Peter Sellars, installation/set design Abigail DeVille, Stratford Festival, Stratford, Ontario, Canada

*She Talks to Beethoven*, by Adrienne Kennedy, directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, set design Abigail DeVille, Jack, Brooklyn, NY

*The Sun Ra Visitation Series*, (Pt.2) Sun-ology, by Sylvan Oswald, directed Charlotte Brathwaite, orb maker Abigail DeVille, Joe's Pub at The Public Theater

## VIDEO & PERFORMANCEWORKS

### 2018

*Abigail DeVille Listens to History*, film directed by Wesley Miller, New York Close Up, March 7, 2018

<https://art21.org/watch/new-york-close-up/abigail-deville-listens-to-history/>

## **2017**

*Only When Its Dark Enough Can You See the Stars*, directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, Installation/costume/Production design Abigail DeVille, premiered at The Whitney Museum of American Art, October 13-15, 2017

<https://whitney.org/Events/AbigailDeVille>

## **2016**

*The New Migration: Brooklyn Procession*, directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, The Brooklyn Museum, August 6, 2016

Baltimore Procession, *Only When Its Dark Enough Can You See the Stars*, The Legacy New Edition Marching Band, directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, Baltimore City Hall, June 11, 2016

## **2015**

- ongoing *The Bronx: History of Now* involves the construction of 100 site-specific sculptural installations using found objects, fragments of histories and community narratives to tell the story of the present moment in the Bronx.

<https://creative-capital.org/projects/the-bronx-history-of-now/>

## **2014**

*Abigail DeVille's Harlem Stories*, directed by Nick Ravich, New York Close Up, web premiere September 19, 2014

<https://art21.org/watch/new-york-close-up/abigail-devilles-harlem-stories/>

*The New Migration, Anacostia Procession, 5x5 Project*, DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, curator Justine Topher, directed by Charlotte Brathwaite,

Anacostia, Washington DC, September 6-October 5

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/entertainment/when-a-painting-comes-to-life/2014/09/11/>

*Abigail DeVille's Flair for the Dramatic*, directed by Nick Ravich, New York Close Up, June 6, 2014,

<https://art21.org/watch/new-york-close-up/abigail-devilles-flair-for-the-dramatic/>

## **LECTURES**

### **2021**

In Conversation with Shelia Pepe, Brooklyn Rail, Brooklyn, NY

Artist Talk, UGLY, NYU Abu Dhabi, New York, NY

Skowhegan Artist Talk, New York, NY

Public Conversation, Madison Square Park Conservancy, New York, NY



## **2020**

Artist Talk, Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT

Public Conversation, Madison Square Park Conservancy, New York, NY

Public Conversation, Madison Square Park Conservancy, New York, NY

In Conversation with Christopher Ho, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago IL

Call And Response: An Artist Conversation, Xenobia Bailey, Daniel T. Gaitor- Lomack, The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY

Hue Webinar Artist Talk, Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, NY

Penny Stamps Lecture Series, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI

## **2019**

Artist Talk, Boston University College of Fine Arts, Boston, MA

Artist Talk, Cornell AAP Architecture Art Planning, Ithaca, NY

Alchemy: Found Material in Contemporary African American Art, New Museum, NY Artist Talk, Columbia University School of the Arts, New York, NY

Artist Talk, Hartford Art School University of Hartford, West Hartford, CT

Artist Lecture, Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT

Talking Nauman, MoMA PS I, Long Island City, NY

Artist Talk, Union Docs Center for Documentary Art, Brooklyn NY

## **2018**

Artist Talk, Columbia River Correctional Institution, Artists in Residence Program, Portland, OR

Artist Talk, Nike, Beaverton, OR

Artist Talk, Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland OR

Artist Talk, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC

In Conversation with Alex Gartenfeld, Institute of Contemporary Art Miami, Miami FL Only When Its

Dark Enough Can You See The Stars, American Academy in Rome, Rome IT Artist Talk, Cornell University in Rome, Spring 2018

Artist Lecture, Syracuse University in Florence, Italy

In Conversation: LaToya Ruby Frazier, Abigail DeVille, Alex Kitnick & Yael Lipschutz, Gavin Brown, New York, NY

## **2017**

Artist Talk, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA

Artist Panel: Urban Planning, Abigail DeVille, David Hartt, Maya Stovell,

Kelly Shindler, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, St. Louis, MO

## **2016**

Artist Talk, University of Maryland Center for Art and Knowledge at The Philips Collection The Sosnoff Lecture Series, The City College of New York, New York, NY

Artist Talk, The Contemporary Baltimore, Baltimore, MD

Artist Talk, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD

Artist Lecture, Purchase College, SUNY, Harrison, NY

Artist Lecture, Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts, Richmond, VA **2015** Artist

Lecture, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee Peck School of the Arts, WI Artist Lecture, Ox Bow School of Art, Saugatuck, MI

In Conversation with Steven Nelson, The Ethelbert Cooper Gallery for African American Art, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

Artist Talk, Radcliffe Institute for Advance Study at Harvard, Cambridge, MA

In Conversation with Nate Young, Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago IL

## **2014**

Art Speak Lecture, The Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, NY Artist Summer Lecture Series, The Maine College of Art, Portland, ME

Artist Lecture Roundtable: Witness: Art and the Civil Rights in the Sixties,

Bruce Davidson, Abigail DeVille, Mark di Suvero, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Jack Whitten, Brooklyn Museum, NY

Sensitive Instruments Panel: Cora Cohen, Dana DeGiulio, Abigail DeVille, Susanne Doremus, Michelle Grabner, Suzanne McClelland, Deirdre O'Dwyer, Jennifer Packer, Monique Prieto curated by Molly Zuckerman-Hartung

Artist Talk, The Contemporary Museum of Art Houston, Houston TX

## **2013**

Artist Talk, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn

"Différentes voix", In Conversation: Abigail DeVille, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Patrick Javault, Fondation-Entreprise-Ricard, Paris, France

Artist Talk, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia PA

The Artist's Voice: Lost And Found, Naima J. Keith in conversation with Abigail DeVille, Valerie Piraino, Cullen Washington Jr. Studio Museum in Harlem, NY

## **SELECTED COLLECTIONS**

Kadist Art Foundation, San Francisco, CA Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, NY

Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris, France Kaviar Factory, Henningsvaer, Norway The Studio  
Museum in Harlem, New York, NY

**The New York Times**

# 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

October 23, 2021

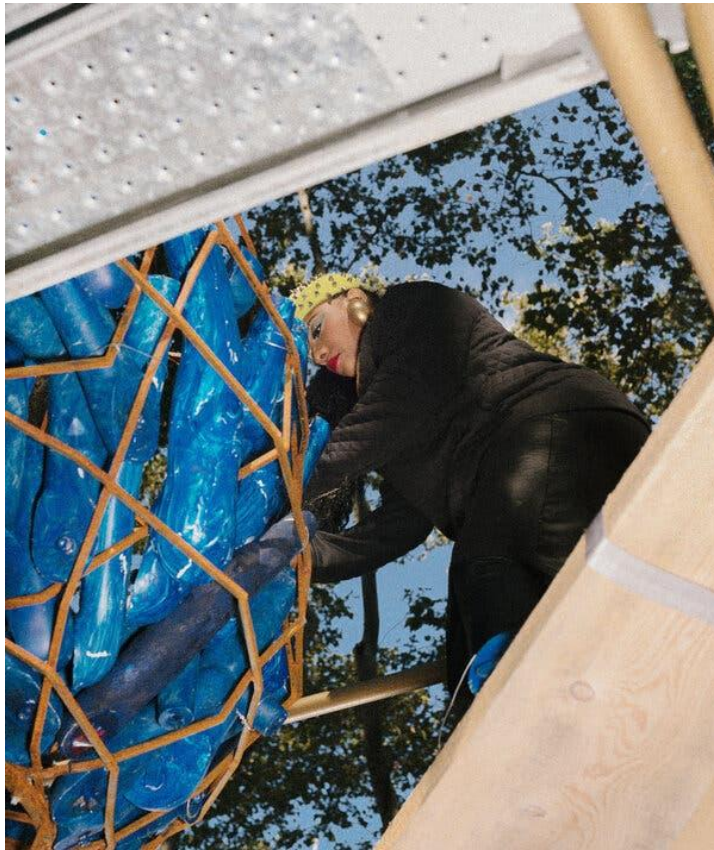


Abigail DeVille with her sculpture in Manhattan's Madison Square Park. Credit Tonje Thilesen for The New York Times

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.



Tonje Thilesen for The New York Times

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.



Tonje Thilesen for The New York Times

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!" 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."

Tonje Thilesen for The New York Times









# Abigail DeVille

## Everyday Processions

BY SUSAN CANNING

Fashioned from rubbish and recycled materials, Abigail DeVille's sculptures refuse their role as art objects. Instead, her assemblages of repurposed items revel in excess and the casual circumstance of the everyday. Recognizing the potential of cast-off things to tell stories and enunciate other histories, DeVille proposes an alternative, social purpose for sculpture (often combined with performance and collaborative projects), one that entangles us in the complex relations of race, history, and class, where art and life cross paths. Directly and dramatically, she takes us to the street.

Born and raised in New York City, DeVille studied illustration and design at the Pratt Institute, attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, and received her BFA from the Fashion Institute of Technology in 2007. At Yale, where she focused on painting (MFA, 2011), her work expanded in scale and into space, as the line between painting, sculpture, and installation became increasingly blurred. At the same time, ongoing stage and set design collaborations with Peter Sellars and Charlotte Brathwaite encouraged a theatrical bent that persists in the spectacle of her immersive environments.

ISTVAN VIRAG, COURTESY THE ARTIST

This page and detail: *A Picture of the Universe in Clock Time*, 2017. Installation from "Momentum 9: Alienation," 9th Nordic Biennial of Contemporary Art, Moss, Norway.





Left and detail: *Nobody Knows My Name*, 2015. Mixed media, installation at Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.



Initially, DeVilve's sculptures look like Modernist mash-ups referencing Cubist collage and Dada performance, Jean Tinguely's self-destructing machines and Mark di Suvero's large constructions, or even Robert Rauschenberg's and John Chamberlain's assemblages. But DeVilve's nod to Modernist tradition and its (often male) protagonists remains irreverent and circumspect, even guarded. Indeed, her work archly challenges the legacy and legitimacy of Modernism by paying homage to an equally important but less heralded history drawn from African American culture and community. Her assemblages recall Simon Rodia's monumental steel, concrete, and found object constructions at Watts Towers, Noah Purifoy's sculptures recycled from the refuse of the 1965 Watts riots, John Outterbridge's assemblages of cast-off clothing and scavenged materials, and David Hammons's

sculptures incorporating humble materials like hair, bottle caps, wine bottles, rags, and cigarette butts. Also in the mix are references to collages, sculptures, and installations by women artists like Betye and Alison Saar and Louise Nevelson, who likewise reclaim rejects to invest them with new meanings and narratives. In addition to sharing the approaches and working methods of these artists, DeVilve is similarly engaged in presenting social and political critique.

Her process of recovering and refashioning discarded objects into large-scale assemblages and installations invites a reconsideration of the meaning assigned to the abject and the thrown-away. For DeVilve, trash is not without value or significance. Indeed, these found cast-offs provide archaeological evidence of a lived past that informs present experience, embodying the

invisible histories that her installations and performances expose and reclaim.

*Harlem Stories* (2014), a performance produced in conjunction with a Studio Museum residency and documented in Art21's "New York Close Up" series, follows DeVilve through the streets of Harlem as she pushes a large cart filled with junk. Her activity elicits a range of reactions, while her voice-over ties her actions to street culture, the local economy of cart pushers, and urban labor. For DeVilve, the streets of Harlem require intervention before their characteristic identity is completely lost to development and gentrification. Stopping at various sites along a route related to her family history, DeVilve places small plaster heads—perhaps a self-portrait or the bust of a relative—as markers or offerings (one location was a former boarding house where her grandfather, a poet, had lived). Moving from personal reclamation to a more public act in the last Harlem Story, DeVilve uses plastic bags and the collected junk in her cart to fashion a memorial near the East River and the Willis Avenue Bridge—the site of an undocumented African American burial ground. Here, her sculptural performance of remembering focuses on restoring dignity to the unidentified.

DeVilve calls many of her pieces "processionals." These dramatic and provisional actions—like the push cart march through Harlem—are intended to make connections and engage communities with issues of concern, particularly displacement and marginalization. They advance a defiant response based in difference and dissent, problematizing the notion of "site-specific" art. While her assemblages might appear spontaneous, even haphazard, they are, in fact, the result of extensive research, coming together after much time and energy spent gathering materials.

*Half Moon* (2016), created for Socrates Sculpture Park, a former ferry slip, landfill, and illegal dump located along the East River in Queens, is a case in point. The title refers to Henry Hudson's ship, which sailed



down the river that now bears his name to claim Dutch sovereignty over the land called *Mahicanituck* by the Lenape. Using scraps of wood salvaged from houses, scavenged materials including fur, cloth, straw, bottles, flags, and even birch bark woven in a manner that recalled Lenape building methods, DeVille constructed a ghostly, hollowed-out ship frame. Exposed to the elements and tilting, this moldering and derelict wreck conjured the past while speaking to migration, marginalization, and neglect today. As *Half Moon* makes evident, DeVille is intrigued by how discarded things retain the residue of earlier lives, invoking history, identity, even origins and functions lost to time. Her process of recovery and display excavates these lost histories, investing the overlooked with new narratives.

Although DeVille has exhibited in galleries, she prefers specific sites or architectural spaces and often makes installations during residencies in which she can immerse herself in local history. In 2016, working with Baltimore's The Contemporary, an itinerant museum that presents exhibitions in non-traditional spaces, she created nine separate installations in the Peale Museum, America's first museum (founded by the artist Rembrandt Peale), which has been empty since 1997 and is now coming back to life. (These works are also documented on <<https://art21.org>>.) Collectively titled *Only When It's Dark Enough Can You See The Stars*—a quotation from Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1968 speech in Memphis, given the day before he was assassinated—the installations not only responded to the history of the building, which had served as Baltimore's first City Hall, a public school for African American children, and the Municipal Arts Museum, but also to present-day events in the city, including the civil unrest following the death of Freddie Gray in police custody.

In this vacated space, DeVille created a dense, intertwined accumulation of materials, everything from historical photographs of children at the school to arrangements of bottles, trashcans, discarded furniture, wooden lattices, blacked-out protest signs, music, videos, and even portraits of distinguished men, with each room providing a dramatic context and conceptual frame for



Above: *Half Moon*, 2016. Reclaimed lumber, plastic tarps, and accumulated debris, view of work at Socrates Sculpture Park. Below: *Sarcophagus blue*, 2017. Boat, mannequin legs, tights, wood, rope, and painting, dimensions variable.



her performative inquiry. One narrow room contained a dilapidated fragment of a large American flag—a reference to Francis Scott Key's anthem and the oversize flag displayed at the Peale after the War of 1812. Accompanied by a dilapidated chandelier with paper stars, sheets of antiqued paper, and broadsheets chronicling the Freddie Gray protests, DeVille's flag resisted patriotic display with a counter-narrative chronicling the racism and violence experienced by the "other" Baltimore. Another room juxtaposed a coat rack with objects hanging from hooks like so many body parts, while a wall

of television monitors played looped videos of the protests and rioting that had happened nearby.

Despite this often visceral commentary on current events, DeVille also sought to transcend rage and anger. In addition to staging numerous paths through the museum that encouraged interaction and discovery, she also provided room for community and exchange. On the second floor, a small stage with several rows of pews offered a space for reflection and an open mike where anyone could speak, perform, or engage in song or protest.





Installation views from *Only When It's Dark Enough Can You See The Stars*, 2016. Clockwise from bottom left: *The People's Theater, Colored Grammar School No. 1 1874-1888*, and *Charm City Roundhouse*. Multi-part work at The Contemporary, Baltimore.



This notion of passage, implying both pathway and enactment, transit and migration, invites a radical re-thinking of the act of looking at and experiencing art. Breaking down the wall between artist and viewer, DeVille brings visitors into the process, insisting that they find a place in the performative processions. Her installations act as interventions, as those passing through the layered process of referencing, recycling, and recalling become entangled in dueling histories and narratives, as aesthetics fuse with politics.

*Empire State Works in Progress* (2017), DeVille's piece for the Whitney Museum's "Calder: Hypermobility" exhibition, brought many of these aspects together in an all-encompassing, collaborative event that included assemblages, a film, and a performance. The title purposefully quotes Alexander Calder's *Work in Progress* (1968), his only work for theater, presented at the Opera House in Rome. Calder was involved in every aspect of the project, from the concept to the set designs, costumes, music (by three Italian composers experimenting with electronic sound), and choreography (one

part featured bicyclists doing figure-eights on stage); he even included stables and mobiles as part of the performance.

Like Calder, DeVille aimed to engage viewers in a total theater experience. Her sculptures—some recycled from earlier installations and others newly constructed—were all installed on multi-sided, movable frames or mounted on wheels, so that they could be pushed and turned about. Several were constructed out of black, brown, and white plastic mannequin parts—in one, multiple legs mounted on a wooden boat rose up as if kicking; another contained busts, legs, and other limbs hanging from a clothing rack that knocked together when pushed; and one very large sculpture wedged the mannequin parts into a steel frame, along with shopping carts, tarps, and metal scraps all bound together with chains. Imprisoned within entangled environments, these disassembled mannequins acted as surrogates for the body, and in particular, the black body in the diaspora—parts without heads or identity, moving and passing through, caught between past and present function. Other pieces assembled

out of garbage cans or accumulations of found objects and glowing plastic filament similarly trapped viewers between contradictory impulses. Were these desirable commodities or discarded waste, something to collect or overlook? Awaiting activation through performance, DeVille's sculptures asserted the aggressive properties of their fabrication—a process as intense and powerful as the juxtapositions of figures and objects. Set in motion when pushed or pulled, they forced viewers to choose where they stood and how to respond to the what, where, and how of their ever-shifting, even chaotic surroundings.

The *Empire State Works in Progress* formed a key part of *The Invisible Project*, a performance directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, and a collaborative film projection produced by DeVille and Brathwaite. Immersive and visionary, *The Invisible Project* transformed the Whitney's white box performance space into a place of dramatic spectacle. Audience members entered a dark, semi-lit room, making their way through a maze of sculptures with the aid of LED lights mounted on headbands. As they turned their heads, shifting their attention and gaze, many small beams of light gathered in an odd spotlight effect on sculptures and performers. Like the lights, the sculptures, performers, and spectators were in constant motion, further disrupting any possibility of passive looking or non-engagement. No one could remain detached or in one spot—it was either participate or get out of the way. As the performance unfolded, spoken texts by Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Ellison, and Frank B. Wilderson III resonated through the room, part of a mix-tape of words,





*The Invisible Project*, 2017. Performance created in collaboration with Charlotte Brathwaite, featuring Abigail DeVille's *Empire State Works in Progress*, shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

music, and sound design composed and performed by Justin Hicks and Meshell Ndegeocello. Along with Okwui Okpokwasili and Paul Pryce, Hicks and Ndegeocello (dressed in costumes designed by DeVille and made from recycled clothing, plastic filament, and metal) moved and manipulated the sculptures, as they led participants in a processional that surged around and through the flickering LED lamplights and sudden strobe bursts. The film projected overhead shared the same title as the Baltimore project—*Only when it's dark enough can you see the stars*—only reinterpreted as an aspirational quotation. Here, Okpokwasili and Pryce, each dressed in flowing, vaguely royal cloaks fashioned by DeVille out of musical instruments, clothing, metal, plastic pieces, and uniforms, strode through vast landscapes, an airfield, and a crowded Times Square. (Both robes were recycled from earlier assemblages—one from a group exhibition at the old Bronx Courthouse and the other made during the Studio Museum residency.) The Times Square sequence in particular captured the Afrofuturist vision of *The Invisible Project*, with the two performers appearing like alien voyagers wandering through a nocturnal landscape of bright lights and gaudy commercialism.

Blending organic form and raw materiality with the laden histories of recycled



things, DeVille's sculptures and costumes reinforced *The Invisible Project's* multiple narratives of passage, present experience, and future projection. By fusing the real and the fantastic, sound and music, and the choreographed interactions of performers, sculptures, and viewers, the film and the installation enacted a poetic, soulful, confrontational, and dynamic performance of the desires, fears, and hopes circulating around being black in America.

Building on Calder's desire to activate sculpture by freeing it to move in time and space, DeVille continued to push the expressive range of her objects. Within the public spaces activated by her processions, the sculptures reach their full potential,

speaking both to the layered archaeology of the past and the contentious dynamic of the present. It will be interesting to see how her work evolves in Rome, where she is a fellow at the American Academy (she was also named a 2018 United States Artists fellow.) In a city steeped in historical layerings, she is using the discarded, the buried, and the forgotten to envision "New Monuments to Forget the Future," part of a developing project called "Invisible Men: Beyond the Veil." At the end of her stay, she will have found new ways to take her work to the street once again.

*Susan Canning is an arts writer, independent curator, and scholar based in New York.*