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Sadie Barnette: "Artwork Inspired by an Abraham Lincoln Moment Is Reimagined"

By David Kaufman

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Jeffrey Meris's "The Block is Hot: The Resurrection" (2023) for "Emancipation," moves to and fro, producing a cloud of fine dust that the artist said expresses "the grinding down, the pulverizing" from oppression. Credit: The artist

Seven artists explore "The Freedman" for a provocative new show at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth.

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Any major milestone offers the opportunity for much-needed historical reflection, if not reconsideration. And this year, the 160th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation arrives at a particularly thought-provoking moment for a nation still grappling with the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow and decades of entrenched inequality.

Into this dynamic and racially charged atmosphere comes "Emancipation: The Unfinished Project of Liberation," which is on display at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth. "Emancipation" has its genesis in an intriguing premise: What if an iconic artwork — in this case, sculptor John Quincy Adams Ward's "The Freedman" from 1863 — is so historically fraught that it requires an entirely new cultural and aesthetic interpretation for the current era?

Initially modeled in plaster and later cast in bronze, "The Freedman" portrays a formerly enslaved man clad in a loincloth, his left arm in manacles, his right breaking free from the chains of bondage. His gaze is executed with both clarity and hesitation — at once looking forward to freedom's promise while grappling with the uncertainty (if not disbelief) of emancipation itself.



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The sculpture, which was considered progressive for its time, can be found at the Carter, along with other notable American cultural institutions, including the [Art Institute of Chicago](#) and [New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art](#); (Eight copies were created from the statue's original plaster mold). Completed the same year President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, "The Freedman" is among the highest-profile examples of Abolition-era art — a canon that mined to great renown both the war to end enslavement along with the conflicted jubilation that accompanied its demise.

Increasingly debated by scholars for its place within this realm, "The Freedman," nonetheless, remains "an aspirational work and one of the first from that era to show a man liberating himself from enslavement," [said Maggie Adler, curator at the Amon Carter Museum](#), who curated "Emancipation" in partnership with [Maurita Poole, director of the Newcomb Art Museum at Tulane University](#). Hauntingly powerful, even at a mere 19 inches tall, "the piece wasn't so much in need of remedying," Ms. Adler continued, "but an 'unpacking' for the present moment." Which is exactly what "Emancipation" has achieved.

Beginning just before the pandemic, Ms. Adler and Ms. Poole worked with seven artists — mostly young, all of color — to create new artworks that explore the vast implications of "The Freedman," both from the era in which it was designed to the present day. On one hand, Ward has clearly provided his subject with agency; " 'The Freedman' is a commentary on the idea of Black peoples' own role in emancipating themselves," said Ms. Poole, of the statue's myriad readings.

Yet the piece also "directly plays into many of the false myths around abolitionism and emancipation," added Caitlin Meehye Beach, assistant professor of art history and affiliated faculty in African and African American Studies at Fordham University. "Particularly the idea that freedom was something bequeathed" to the enslaved, acceded by whites as an act of benevolence, rather than a fundamental component of human existence.

Such sentiments effectively erase Black voices from the emancipation process, said Ms. Beach, and were a crucial factor in the campaign in 2020 to remove the statue "Freedman's Memorial" from Boston's Park Square. Completed in 1876, the piece depicts Lincoln standing over a kneeling and formerly enslaved man and seemingly bestowing his freedom upon him; a copy of the work remains on view in Washington, D.C. Another version of that piece has prompted a parallel exhibition at the Chazen Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which had invited modern artists to react to that statue.

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"Home Good: Centerpiece" (2021) is part of the artist Sadie Barnette's contribution to "Emancipation." She draws from an F.B.I. surveillance dossier on her father, a former Black Panther. Credit: the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco

On display through July 9, "Emancipation" has created a new body of work that speaks to these historical infelicities while expanding the contemporary discourse around representations of race, power and privilege. The artists — Sadie Barnette, Alfred Conteh, Maya Freelon, Hugh Hayden, Letitia Huckaby, Jeffrey Meris and Sable Elyse Smith — represent diversity of gender, geography, materials and styles. Many had never previously engaged with "The Freedman" or were even aware of the complex discourses around abolitionist-era artwork.

"The only prompt we gave them," Ms. Poole said, "was to focus on a theme dealing with emancipation and liberation — or a lack thereof."

Conceived before the pandemic, the exhibition came to life during the dark days of the early Covid lockdowns, which presented unique challenges and opportunities. Zoom meetings replaced

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the face-to-face encounters that typically bind creators with curators, while artists unable to visit "The Freedman" at the Amon Carter opted to view it at institutions closer to home. Most of the artists first met each other at "Emancipation's" opening in March.

"We were particularly surprised by the convergence of the resulting ideas, along with the freedom of expression that happened independently of one another," Ms. Adler said.

The pandemic, said Ms. Barnette, who is based in Oakland, Calif., only reinforced the solitary nature of her studio process. Ms. Barnette's work — "FBI Drawings: Do Not Destroy, 2021" — repurposes parts of an F.B.I. surveillance dossier compiled on her own father, a former Black Panther. Her piece features pages from the dossier embellished with, as well as illuminated by, crystals, roses and the faces of [Hello Kitty](#) cartoons.

The choice to focus on her father's experience "really vocalizes the fact American history is family history, is Black history," Ms. Barnette said. "It's our uncles and fathers and aunties and parents who've made it happen — not some archetypal hero."



The Fort Worth-based artist Letitia Huckaby mined her family's lore for her "Emancipation" pieces, which include "Ms. Angela and the Baby" (2022). Credit: the artist and Talley Dunn Gallery

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Ms. Huckaby, based in Fort Worth, has also mined her own family's lore for her myriad "Emancipation" pieces, which originated in her two recent series, "A Tale of Two Greenwoods" from 2021 and "Bitter Waters Sweet" from last year. Works featured in both series use photography, scraps of cotton, embellished flowers and precisely positioned frames to revisit the communities of freed Black people in Tulsa, Okla., and "Africatown" in Mobile, Ala. — the former destroyed by white mobs in 1921, the latter still standing.

Born in Haiti and raised in the Bahamas and now based in New York, Mr. Meris confronted a painful episode from his own life — a stop by New York City Transit police for jumping over a subway turnstile after his MetroCard failed to activate — to create "The Block is Hot: The Resurrection" for "Emancipation." Originally part of Mr. Meris' "Now You See Me; Now You Don't" series, the piece consists of a plaster body positioned on a rectangular steel base and held aloft by pulleys, ropes and straps — balanced by a concrete block.

The plaster piece moves to and fro, releasing a cloud of fine dust that accumulates beneath it. "For me, this expresses the grinding down, the pulverizing amid the harshness of 400 years of sanctioned oppression in this country," Mr. Meris said. "I wanted to make this violence visible."



The artist Hugh Hayden produced the most literal interpretation of "The Freedman" for "Emancipation" with his "American Dream" (2023). Credit...Amon Carter Museum of American Art

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Mr. Hayden, based in New York, also takes a politically strident tone when explaining "American Dream," his piece for "Emancipation." The work is the most literal interpretation of Ward's 160-year-old original — a 3-D printed plastic reproduction of "The Freedman" featuring a Black man of a similar pose and visage looking upward while rising from a broad Adirondack Chair.

Mr. Hayden speaks of the figure with tones of hope and progress. The chair is a symbol, said Mr. Hayden, "of the American Dream, and a level of personal choice that actively looks past the chattels" so prominent in Ward's original. "Because for me, it was important that we move beyond the visualizations of slavery and just show someone who's free," Mr. Hayden added, "even if he is not yet fully there."

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