

# THE GREYLOCK GLASS

Sadie Barnette: "Emancipation' — Contemporary Artists' Visions of Emancipation 160 Years in the Making"

Submitted News

January 26, 2024



John Quincy Adams Ward (1830–1910), *The Freedman*, 1863. Bronze.  
Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

**WILLIAMSTOWN** — In conjunction with the 160th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) will present newly commissioned and recent works by Sadie Barnette, Alfred Conteh, Maya Freelon, Hugh Hayden, Letitia Huckaby, Jeffrey Meris, and Sable Elyse Smith in a new exhibition visualizing Black freedom, agency, and the legacy of the Civil War today and beyond.

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The seven installations featured in *Emancipation: The Unfinished Project of Liberation*—spanning sculpture, photography, and paper and textile fabrications—will react to the legacy of John Quincy Adams Ward’s bronze sculpture *The Freedman* (1863) from the Amon Carter Museum of American Art’s collection and will highlight the diversity of materials and forms in sculpture, installation, and mixed media today.

Co-organized by WCMA and the Carter, the exhibition demonstrates how historical art collections can serve as a resource and inspiration for contemporary artistic practices. *Emancipation* will be on view at WCMA from February 16 through July 14, 2024, before traveling to its last destination at the Telfair Museums in Georgia. The exhibition opened at the Carter in the spring of 2023 and traveled to the Newcomb Art Museum at Tulane University this past fall.

WCMA will host an opening celebration from 6 to 8 p.m. on Friday, Feb. 23.

Seeking a deeper understanding of what freedom looks like for Black Americans after 160 years, *Emancipation* interrogates the role of sculpture in American life by bringing the perspectives of contemporary Black artists into dialogue with the multi-faceted form and content of Ward’s *The Freedman*. Initially envisioned and sculpted by Ward before the end of the Civil War, the figure is depicted on the cusp of liberation, with bonds ruptured but not removed. The work is one of the first American depictions of a Black figure cast in bronze, and the Carter’s cast from 1863—dedicated to the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, an all-Black infantry unit—is the only copy of its kind with a key that releases a shackle from the figure’s wrist. While considered aspirational in its time, over a century and a half later, *The Freedman*’s reflection of uncertainty and endurance seem to manifest the long reach of American slavery.

In the WCMA venue of the exhibition, curators Destinee Filmore and Kevin Murphy aim to provide museum visitors with a deeper understanding of the nuanced histories of enslavement, abolition, and emancipation in Massachusetts through objects from the museum’s collection and others borrowed from local partners.

“Collaboration has been at the heart of this exhibition since its inception, so our decision to engage our local partners in telling the story of emancipation in the Berkshire region was a natural call to make,” said Filmore, a former WCMA Mellon Curatorial Fellow who is now Assistant Curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “This exhibition encourages each venue or visitor to form their own understanding of enslavement and freedom by following the example of the contemporary artists as they respond to the show’s theme and historical materials.”

The WCMA iteration of *Emancipation* will display a new set of archival objects, including an early copy of the Emancipation Proclamation and a pamphlet of Frederick Douglass’s iconic 1852 speech *Oration* from the Williams College Chapin Library of Rare Books. A stunning example of Josiah Wedgwood’s Medallion produced for the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, on loan from the Clark Art Institute, will be situated amongst other historical materials that tell the story of abolitionist causes. A recently conserved bust of Abraham Lincoln by Sara Fisher Ames—an artist with direct ties to Williamstown and Williams College—from WCMA’s collection rounds out the additions to the exhibition and actively contributes to the show’s goal of revisiting the enduring legacy of liberation.

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The seven living artists represented in *Emancipation* were each invited to explore *The Freedman* through the lenses of their own lives and the multiplicity of meanings those contexts create for the form of emancipation.



Sadie Barnette; photography courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. Photography by Chanell Stone.

**Sadie Barnette** (b. 1984) is premiering new drawing works—based on FBI files that document how her father’s work for the Black Panther Party caused him to live under surveillance—and a sculptural table featuring her signature glitter paint. Barnette’s interpretation of “emancipation” draws on themes of abolition and decommodification, introducing fantastical, celebratory materials like glitter to exist in conversation—and in conflict—with challenging historical materials.

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Alfred Conteh; Photography courtesy of the artist.

**Alfred Conteh** (b. 1975) presents his celebrated sculpture work *Float* together with a large-scale work on canvas to explore the relationship between freedom, economic stability, and citizenship, including African Americans' right to bear arms for the protection of their families. Throughout his work, rust and decay serve as metaphors for the vulnerability of Black citizens under the corrosive weight of White supremacy.

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Maya Freelon; Image courtesy of Jillian Clark.

**Maya Freelon** (b. 1982) has made an entirely new site-specific work utilizing her signature approach to large-scale, colorful tissue-paper installations. For Freelon, using recycled materials, or “maximizing the minimal,” is itself an emancipatory act—dissolving barriers between “high” and “low” art and allowing accessible materials like tissue paper to take up space within historically inaccessible institutions. Her artistic practice has been influenced significantly by her grandmother, who provided Freelon with both experiential and literal material, as well as by her godmother and namesake, Dr. Maya Angelou.

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Hugh Hayden; Photography courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery

**Hugh Hayden** (b. 1983) creates work that serves to delight and repulse with seemingly comfortable elements and sharp, foreboding features that reference the discomfort of American historical narratives. For this exhibition, Hayden will create his own version of *The Freedman*, departing from his signature woodworking with a 3D-printed piece that locates the subject firmly within the present day.

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Letitia Huckaby; Photography by Rambo.

**Letitia Huckaby** (b. 1972) presents her new silhouette and photo series, *The Descendants*, responding to the recent discovery and excavation of the *Clotilda*, the last known slave ship, from Alabama's Mobile River. The series will be joined by Huckaby's multipart artwork *Under Two Greenwoods*, featuring autobiographical photo-textiles that reference sites of the Tulsa Massacre as well as the artist's family origins in Greenwood, MS. These projects continue Huckaby's ongoing exploration of questions surrounding heritage.

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Jeffrey Meris; Photography by Merik Goma.

**Jeffrey Meris** (b. 1991) is activating new and recent work using plaster, including *The Block is Hot*, a kinetic sculpture that dispels dust onto the floor for Meris to then draw with. The artist, who was born in Haiti and raised in the Bahamas, sees his body of work as just that: a body—or rather, as possessing a dual identity of bodily and architectural, working in symphony to create something both technical and conceptual, as seen in *The Block is Hot*.

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**Sable Elyse Smith** (b. 1986), in her interpretation of "emancipation," calls to attention the nuances of visibility and how the most apparent manifestations of violent systems do not capture their full scope. For this exhibition, Smith has created a new iteration of her well-known jack sculptures, *Riot I* and *Pivot II*, which will allude for the first time to the unmistakable black, white, and blue colorway of a police car.

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"As a curator, I'm tasked with unlocking the multiple meanings artworks accumulate over their lifetimes, but I hold the firm belief that historical works find their true potential in the hands of contemporary artists," said Maggie Adler, Curator of Paintings, Sculpture, and Works on Paper at the Carter. "The Carter is committed to fostering the efforts of living artists whose work resonates with history, and *Emancipation* is a case study in the new creative possibilities that can be realized by seeking inspiration from historical collections."

"This exhibition is timely since Americans are reckoning with history and how to interpret the impact and after-effects of slavery," said Maurita Poole, Executive Director of Newcomb Art Museum and co-curator of *Emancipation*. "The contemporary art breathes new life into the notion of emancipation and hopefully will encourage audiences to reconsider their perspectives about freedom and full citizenship in the United States."

*Emancipation: The Unfinished Project of Liberation* is co-organized by the Amon Carter Museum of American Art and the Williams College Museum of Art. The exhibition is co-curated by Maggie Adler, Curator of Paintings, Sculpture, and Works on Paper at the Carter, and Maurita Poole, Executive Director of Newcomb Art Museum, Tulane University. The WCMA exhibition is supported by the Michael S. Engl 1966 Williams College Museum of Art Fund with generous support for the living artists' installations made possible by Sasha and Edward P. Bass.

The exhibition will be presented with a companion book, co-published with the University of California Press, featuring Q&As with the exhibition's seven contemporary artists and essays by Kelvin L. Parnell Jr. (PhD candidate, University of Virginia, Department of Arts and Sciences); Kirsten Pai Buick (professor, art history, University of New Mexico); Andrew J. Walker (Executive Director, Amon Carter Museum of American Art); Thayer Tolles (Marica F. Vilcek Curator of American Painting and Sculpture, Metropolitan Museum of Art); Pamela Franks (Class of 1965 Director, Williams College Museum of Art); and the co-curators, Maggie Adler and Maurita Poole. The book will also include a short story by N. K. Jemisin (Hugo Award winning Black science fiction/fantasy writer).

Editor's Note: The following article is derived from officially released information, published with few or no editorial changes. *The Greylock Glass* occasionally provides our readers with such content if the information is factual in nature, and requires little to no interpretation or analysis, often when original reportage would not provide additional relevant information.

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