TIMES UNION

Sadie Barnette: "Exhibit on emancipation at Williams College powerful, necessary"
By William Jaeger
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Sadie Barnette, FBI Drawing series and Homegood Centerpiece from 2022.
William Jaeger

"Emancipation: The Unfinished Project of Liberation" at the Williams College Museum of Art churns around a word that is allied, for Americans at least, to the specific freedom of Black men and women from slavery. It's a loaded start for a powerful, beautiful, necessary exhibition.

The show statement explains: "Seven of today's leading Black artists … were selected to make visible their perspectives about freedom and imprisonment, identity and personhood, enslavement and emancipation." The anchor is the 1862 executive order by Abraham Lincoln, the Emancipation Proclamation, which has near its beginning these remarkable words: "all persons held as slaves … shall be then, thenceforward, and forever, free…" If only it were so simple.

The seven contemporary artists here make the complications tangible. In their own ways they also proclaim what emancipation means to them a century and a half later, alongside some very 19th-century objects and documents.

With his kinetic sculptures, Haitian-born artist Jeffrey Meris sets a tone of horrible beauty. In "A still tongue keeps a wise head," a white head made of plaster-like Hydrocal sits on a perforated steel table that serves as a giant grater when the head is mechanically moved, on occasion, leaving a fine white dust below. This self-destruction is echoed more elaborately in "The Block is Hot," where a white plaster cast of the artist's torso is suspended against a metal grate with similar intentions, highlighting various pressures of identity and survival amid colonial structures, past and present.

At the other end of the large hall, a pink alcove has been created for a series of mixed-media "FBI drawings" by Sadie Barnette that seem to be giant reproductions of official reports. Each details the surveillance of Black subjects, with redactions and unexplained additions (like Hello Kitty drawings and holographic vinyl patches) that add to a painful surrealism, taken whole. A round table in the middle of this open room has cameras tucked under the glass, as if spying on unwary visitors.

The notion of being emancipated might be shrouded in these works, but wall texts position the artists' intentions for us. Meris, for example, is looking for healing amid these disintegrations. The brightly dyed tissue papers used in works large and small by Maya Freelon, including a grand hanging "quilt" overhead, are meant to discover the hidden strengths of delicate materials.

This last work, called "Fool Me Once, Shame on You (Lincoln)" is a critique, too, reminding us of the convoluted language and legacy of the Emancipation Proclamation, and of Lincoln's role. Other works owe something to Lincoln, as well, starting with "Bust of Abraham Lincoln," carved from marble between 1864 and 1866. There is also "The Freedman," John Quincy Adam Ward's 1863 early small bronze sculpture of a Black man now free. Compare this to the Hugh Hayden white plastic sculpture from 2023, where another Black man in a similar position is rising from a chair, a brilliant reminder, of the ongoing process of finding freedom, even in our times.

Letitia Huckaby distills this in words: "Oftentimes when we think of the word 'emancipation,' we use it as a definitive, but it's not. It's a process, something ongoing." Huckaby's series of oval, layered photographic diptychs show us Greenwood, the present-day Mississippi neighborhood where her father was born, next to the brooding emptiness of another Greenwood, the neighborhood in Tulsa, Okla., destroyed by the 1921 race massacre.

And there is much more, merging two centuries of struggle against long odds into our present times, with art that is inventive, formally rich and socially acute. It all is a reminder that liberation is unavoidably convoluted and regrettably unfinished.