

# Face Time: Abigail DeVille

*By Hannah Turpin*



Photo: Melissa Blackall/The Cooper Gallery

Abigail DeVille is an artist unafraid to dig deep. Whether creating paintings, sculptures, installations, or performance works, she's constantly scavenging for unwanted materials that surface histories and communities similarly cast aside. "I'm interested in telling invisible histories," she says. Born and raised in the Bronx, New York, the borough she still calls home, DeVille has witnessed the shifts and struggles of that city her whole life. In her work, she looks to trash as "archaeological evidence" that reflects a specific site in time and especially how it has been transformed through systemic oppression and abandonment. Equally interested in art and American history, her practice sheds light on how national conversations and policymaking influence issues of gentrification, disenfranchisement, and poverty. *St. Louis Blues* (2017), for example, responds to the city's Old Courthouse, a historic site of slave auctions, the Dred Scott trials, and redlining. Because her works are site-specific, she develops them through research and intuitive response. Each unique environment, says DeVille, allows her work to reveal just how far-reaching and habitual discrimination has been in American society. "I call it the hangover of slavery," says DeVille. Yet there's a sliver of hope, too; a reminder that we can also have a positive effect on our future. Her work *Harlem World* (2011), currently on view at Carnegie Museum of Art as part of the group exhibition *20/20: The Studio Museum in Harlem and Carnegie Museum of Art*, includes found trash combined with paintings made by 8- and 9-year-olds of imagined universes designed for superheroes. DeVille's work reminds us that we as a nation can still design our own shared universe. It just takes, in her words, "an exercise of acknowledgment."

### **When did you first realize you wanted to be an artist?**

Kindergarten. I was in a large kindergarten class and they had different learning centers that kids would be broken up into, and I would always make a beeline to the arts center with the easel. I remember one day when they forced me to go to the writing center and I cried. So I always loved art from very early on.

### **What sparked your choice of using trash?**

I was really interested in painting, but I didn't have any money for oil paint and stuff like that, so I just started scavenging from the street and using materials around school.

**You talk about trash being a witness to and record of our time. Is that something you identified from the beginning?**

It grew. I think you have all this excitement and pleasure with making. But then I feel like where the hard work is conceptually: What kind of artist do you want to be? How's this taking shape? And what are you actually talking about; what histories are you engaging with and communicating through this specific material? I say that trash is the archaeological record of our present moment. So I'm historicizing our present moment and trying to tease out this longer history.

**Given the mission of your work, do you view it as political or activist?**

I don't think of it in that way. I don't think of it in a scientific way, either, in terms of archaeology. But it's definitely a constant digging up of "no, you can't bury this." If we don't understand what is constantly being buried, then we can't understand the present moment or all the decisions and things that continue to pile up because of all these other decisions that were made that have been glossed over. We feel it; we see it. It ripples through every fabric, every moment of society. It affects everything that we do. I call it the hangover of slavery. We just can't get over it. People just can't deal with our legacy of racism. So it's like the constant act of digging holes. I feel a little bit like Bugs Bunny.

**The overarching theme of 20/20 looks at this current moment of tumultuous change in our social and political landscape. What do you think the artist's role is in all of this?**

I think it's the role of all of us, where we have—even more so than ever—the responsibility to be active participants as citizens in this country and to not fall asleep at the wheel. Where you don't have the privilege to act like you don't live here or that your vote, your voice, your actions that you take from day to day don't matter; they affect people and the world around you.

I think artists are in an interesting position where they can potentially talk about the things that they're passionate about, or make observations about the world around them, and people will listen. But even so, I think of art as being a time capsule and a container of its time and place. It's like alternative history. It's the stuff that is forgotten in the 24-hour news cycle of whatever dominant corporate thing that you're supposed to be learning, when there's actually a lot more going on that we never hear about or we don't know about. It's thinking about making work that's just in contrast and counter to the dominant narrative.