

**On View**

## 'Trash Is a Record of Existence': Watch Artist Abigail DeVille Distribute Garbage in Harlem to Reflect on the Neighborhood's Changing Landscape

As part of a collaboration with Art21, hear news-making artists describe their inspirations in their own words.

**Caroline Goldstein**, October 29, 2020



Production still from the Art21 "New York Close Up" film, "Abigail DeVille's Harlem Stories." © Art21, Inc. 2014.

Right now in Madison Square Park, a section of golden scaffolding surrounds a massive sculpture of a torch. The torch's abstracted flames are actually made from mannequin limbs painted blue and entwined around each other so that they point up toward the sky. The work, titled *Light of Freedom* (2020), is the creation of [Abigail DeVille](#), a contemporary artist born and raised in the Bronx, whose practice centers on the shifting urban landscape of New York and on memorializing lives lost.



With *Light of Freedom*, DeVille remembers the earliest enslaved Africans who were brought to New Amsterdam, only to be lost again to a history that privileges other stories over theirs.

In an exclusive interview as part of [Art21's New York Close Up](#) series, DeVille traveled around Harlem with a pushcart filled with trash as she visited personal landmarks of the changing neighborhood.

The story of Harlem, [she says in the video](#), “is just the natives being displaced up to this very moment. But, they helped shape the place into what it is now.” Those people, like her grandfather who was raised in a boarding house that now carries a six-figure price tag, are the subjects of the “invisible histories” she wants to acknowledge with her artistic interventions.



Installation view, Abigail DeVille's *Light of Freedom* (2020). Photo: Andy Romer Photography. Courtesy of the Madison Square Park Conservancy.

“It feels like the earth is shifting,” she says as she places a sculptural cast of her own face at the site of her grandfather’s childhood home.

In the video, DeVille goes on to trek to a sandy strip of land at the base of the Willis Avenue bridge near 126th street, which is believed to be the site of an African burial ground. There, she unloads her cart filled with fabric, metal, toys, and other cast-off objects. “I was trying to invoke a human kind of presence,” she tells Art21, “I think of trash as a record of existence... these things were used by people. History is permeating everything, whether you know it or not.”