

The Many Lives and Losses of the Western Hemisphere's Oldest Museum

by Alex Ebstein on June 10, 2016

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Installation view of Abigail DeVille's "Charles Wilson Peale" (2016) at the former Peale Museum (all photos courtesy the Contemporary, Baltimore) (click to enlarge)

BALTIMORE — Most contemporary art museums operate in service of the art they exhibit, the setting playing a secondary role to artists' intentions. Baltimore's [Contemporary](#), however, mounts exhibitions and programs that question the role of the museum, what issues qualify as "contemporary," and how to challenge the expectations of both its artists and its audience. Since the Contemporary reopened in 2014 as a nomadic museum, it has partnered with existing institutions to expand its presence and continue to examine the theme of access. The Contemporary's current exhibition, [Only When It's Dark Enough Can You See The Stars](#) by New York-based artist [Abigail DeVille](#), is the

museum's most radical and extensive collaboration, delving into the layered history of a lesser-known, local landmark.



Installation view of Abigail DeVille's 'Only When It's Dark Enough Can You See The Stars' at the former Peale Museum (click to enlarge)

The strength of *Only When It's Dark Enough Can You See The Stars* is in the obvious presence of multiple hands, voices, and a local sense of social and civic responsibility that equals if not outstrips the artist's vision. Housed in the former [Peale Museum](#), a 200-year-old building in the center of downtown Baltimore and the first purpose-built museum in the Western Hemisphere, DeVille's exhibition is a dense tangle of materials, themes, and histories. Various iterations of the building's use as well as

historical events in Baltimore are examined in room-sized installations. These histories are presented parallel to the lineage of racial tension, housing segregation, and activism that has shaped the city.

While there is no specific sequence for exploring the exhibition, the installations on the lower level deal with the more distant past while the upstairs portion spills into the present, complete with a "Peoples Theater" that invites viewers to act as performers and participate directly in the exhibition. The lower level includes interpretations of the building's 15-year stint as the Peale's Baltimore Museum and Gallery of Fine Arts, the Civil War-era City Hall, and, post-emancipation, the first public African American high school in the city. In DeVille's installation "Charles Wilson Peale," the museum's history is glimpsed through borrowed reproductions of the Charles Peale painting "[Exhumation of the Mastodon](#)" and Peale portraits displayed above and to the sides of an impressive mantle. Spilling from the fireplace, however, is a twinkling pile of rubble with small, recognizable fragments like a plaster bust and crystal beads from a chandelier. From behind a curtain of black tattered plastic — a permeable membrane that reappears in other rooms of the exhibition — mannequin legs protrude in a somewhat heavy-handed allusion to a ghost or entity that, like the viewer, can traverse the abstracted history.



Installation view of Abigail DeVille's "Colored Grammar School Number 1 1874–1888" (2016) at the former Peale Museum (click to enlarge)

"Colored Grammar School Number 1 1874–1888" is a sullen room filled with hints of an overcrowded classroom. Six hundred pieces of slate culled from the [Loading Dock](#) (a local salvage company for building and other secondhand materials) stand in for the number of students who squeezed into the small building for their education. While the number and history are significant, the arrangement is somewhat haphazard and requires some explanation to achieve its full impact. At the center of the space, a single mannequin in an Orioles hoodie sits at a desk reading reproductions of late 19th century schoolbooks. Shoes, mirrors, and other objects that evoke bodies close the space in on the viewer. The students are remembered but remain anonymous, a chapter recorded with less specificity than that of the Peale era, but rendered with much more emotion.

The last of the downstairs installations, "Charm City Roundhouse," has a tremendous impact with a room-sized US flag that crumples from the wall to the floor. Light fixtures hang at an eerily low height and the room is piled with papers and office detritus that suggest disrepair, neglect, and ineffective policies.



Installation view of Abigail DeVille's "Charm City Roundhouse" (2016) at the former Peale Museum

The majority of the project's research was conducted by the Contemporary's programming director, Ginevra Shay, heading up a small team that worked with the [Afro American Newspapers](#), [Real News Network](#), and the [Baltimore City Historical Society](#). DeVille was then asked to interpret the findings through her own maximal style of mixed media installation.

DeVille's creative latitude is displayed much more grandly on the upper floor of the museum. Here, themes of housing inequity, protest movements, and the enormity of our material histories are evoked with stark arrangements and decisive, dramatic moments. The materials used in these installations have more energy and less nostalgia than those deployed on the ground floor. In one room, television footage of the city's [2015 uprising](#) and civil rights protests from the 1960s is presented on a bank of TVs, interspersed with

monitors displaying static. Sound pieces by composer [Justin Hicks](#) crescendo overhead in “Black Hole,” an installation in a hallway that consists of 500 stacked office-style metal trash cans, each containing bottles, lightbulbs, and other expendable goods. The exhibition’s upstairs rooms flow more naturally, eventually leading to the cathedral-like performance space, which hosts weekly salons that bring in additional audiences and continue to examine the museum as an evolving entity.



A performance taking place in Abigail DeVille’s “Peoples Theater” at the former Peale Museum

Abigail DeVille’s [Only When It’s Dark Enough Can You See The Stars](#) continues at the former [Peale Museum](#) (225 North Holliday Street, Baltimore, Maryland) through June 11. A closing reception will be held on Saturday, June 11, from 7–10pm.