

ABIGAIL DEVILLE

In Harlem, Abigail DeVille Looks to Disrupt
New York's History of Gentrification



In 1609, a ship called the Half Moon (translated from the Dutch “De Halve Maen”) arrived off the coast of what would eventually become New York City. As the captain of the vessel, Henry Hudson, sailed up the river that would one day bear his name, he encountered some of the 10,000 or so indigenous people living on either bank. In his journals, Hudson reportedly described them as “clothed in mantles of feathers and robes of fur, the women clothed in hemp, red copper tobacco pipes, and other things of copper they did wear about their necks.” Tellingly, Hudson wrote not of people but possessions. It is fitting that the story of New York City begins with a man who saw land, objects, and profit, but not human beings.

By the late 1600s, nearly all the indigenous people in the area had died from smallpox or been driven out by the same settlers who brought the disease. One wonders how quickly people forgot that the river Hudson sailed up was once called the Mahicanituck. Now, as then, New York City is marked by displacement in the search for profit. As rising rents push people—mainly minorities—out of their homes, the culture of the city is shifting. Watch as developers rebrand the South Bronx the “Piano District,” public housing turns into private condos, and neighborhood businesses become branches of Whole Foods. And under it all, the land remains—a page upon which this story is “written, erased, rewritten,” as author Teju Cole put it. Only memory and history can interrupt this cycle of revision we call progress.

Artist Abigail DeVille is acutely aware of the parallels between our past and present moments. “If you took any block in New York City and dug it up, there’s blood, there’s bones, there’s everything,” DeVille told me when I visited her sculpture in Socrates Sculpture Park one sweltering Friday. A lifelong resident of the city, DeVille is a cross between an artist, an archaeologist, and a historian. When she begins a piece, she starts by researching the location where it will be built (“I like the library”) before foraging across streets, dumpsters, industrial sites, and more to find materials that tell the stories she has unearthed.



The particular work I had come to see was on view as part of the exhibition “Landmark.” When she was asked to participate in the show, that title spurred DeVille to think about who made landfall in this part of the so-called New World, who “discovered” New York. After some investigation, she named the work *Half Moon* and began building. The schematic of Hudson’s ship provided a general framework for a work that she would complete in two weeks. What she created is a careful assembly of wood reclaimed from dilapidated houses, furs meant to recall the Lenape Native Americans who once wore similar coats, detritus from an area of the city that Robert Moses demolished, tattered American flags, and more. With this multiplicity of objects, the piece speaks to the “displacement of everybody,” in DeVille’s words. “From the history of who first got here until right now—the constant shifting, moving, and displacement of people.” Even the sculpture’s white birch, collaged onto certain parts of the work, recalls the birchwood home structures built by the Lenape.

In mid-October this year, in collaboration with the Caribbean Culture Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI), DeVille will mount her ship to a float and drag it down 125th Street in Harlem in an effort to foster connections between Spanish Harlem and West Harlem. Though she has a work on display at Hauser Wirth & Schimmel in Los Angeles, DeVille is quick to voice her discontent with the conventional spaces of the art world. “I just think white walls are incredibly boring,” she told me. As with any art piece that addresses the displacement of marginalized communities, the challenge of reaching those communities remains. The conundrum that “art world” spaces are both linked to neighborhood gentrification and alienating to many of those local residents persists. By bringing *Half Moon* into the world, in what DeVille calls a processional, there is “more potential for—I don’t want to say change, but engagement,” she says. Moving through the streets of Harlem, it will serve as “a temporary or makeshift monument, a testament to the strength and endurance of a community.”

Half Moon’s voyage through Manhattan is hardly DeVille’s first engagement with the world outside of the gallery walls. She’s orchestrated three processions so far in several different cities, including Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and New York, though she describes the first two as “guerrilla” events, comprised of objects collected during her 10-day “reverse migration” into the American South. Another of her processions moved through 124th Street, not far from the Studio Museum in Harlem, where she was an artist-in-residence two years ago.

When she does operate inside a museum's walls, DeVille never leaves them white. For an exhibition in Baltimore, presented by the city's nomadic, non-collecting art museum The Contemporary and titled "Only When It's Dark Enough Can You See The Stars," she filled the site of the old Peale Museum nearly to its bursting point. Opened in 1814, the Peale was the first structure in America intended to serve exclusively as a museum. But the building assumed other roles at various points in time, including as one of the first public schools for African American children after emancipation (some 500 kids were crammed into the bathroom-less space). "I just riffed on different moments in the history of this particular building," DeVille told me of the recently closed show, which consisted of 10 installations.



For one room, DeVille fashioned a huge section of an American flag out of tarp. "You know, the Star Spangled Banner is about the War of 1812," she says. During the conflict, the British pounded Fort McHenry, which flew a massive 30-by-42-foot American flag that survived the bombing. The man who would write the anthem—Francis Scott Key—watched from a ship anchored nearby, and in the morning he saw the flag was still there. "Of course it was still there!" DeVille says laughing. "It was 30 by 42 feet!"

She finds a certain humor in the myths and narratives the United States tells about itself, so often do these stories of triumph obscure the conflicts that endure in this country, that are woven into the very fabric of its creation. During my visit, she told me about a “drive-by” that occurred when Hudson sailed up from the bottom of Manhattan, where he was based, to the top, which was controlled by Native Americans. The first time he made the trip, Hudson had unsuccessfully tried to kidnap some of the indigenous people. When Hudson ventured uptown again, “there was this clash, this scuffle that happened near 125th Street, but on the river,” DeVille said. “They shot at him with bows and arrows.” In 2016, the divide between the top of Manhattan and the bottom continues, as the money generated by Wall Street fuels the development of pricey real estate and, simultaneously, the displacement of people in Harlem.

And as these spaces gentrify, DeVille worries the ensuing homogenization will upend communities and cultures that have been developed over decades. White America is often eager to champion its embrace of immigrants and outsiders, so long as they assimilate. But in places like New York, those who move into communities of color or “lower” economic class are quick to bring with them a sea of pharmacy chains and banks at the expense of local businesses. “A Whole Foods including local vendors is not assimilating to a community,” DeVille said. “A community is independently owned businesses where people know each other’s names and talk to each other.” DeVille mentioned a piece she recently read in the New York tabloids by a woman who is “*pissed* about the noise in Dyckman Street. And I’m like ‘yo, who told you to move to Dyckman Street?’”

European settlers called the Americas the New World. Had Hudson spoken in the language of 2016, he might have dubbed Manhattan an “up-and-coming” colony. The real estate jargon deployed over the last 400 years has changed, but it’s not all that different. Again and again, prospectors see land that is full as land that is empty. And in that land these newcomers tell their stories, loudly and without regard for those who first called it home. Once one is armed with an ear for these histories of erasure, perhaps then there will be the potential to say, “not this again, we want something else, something different.” Perhaps we can imagine a world where DeVille’s *Half Moon*, which chronicles violence, loss, and displacement, isn’t only an artwork that speaks powerfully to our present moment, but also one that helps to galvanize a movement to disrupt the process of gentrification.