



Abigail DeVille

Everyday Processions

BY SUSAN CANNING

This page and detail: A Picture of the Universe in Clock Time, 2017. Installation from "Momentum 9: Alienation," 9th Nordic Biennial of Contemporary Art, Moss, Norway.

Fashioned from rubbish and recycled materials, Abigail DeVille's sculptures refuse their role as art objects. Instead, her assemblages of repurposed items revel in excess and the casual circumstance of the everyday. Recognizing the potential of cast-off things to tell stories and enunciate other histories, DeVille proposes an alternative, social purpose for sculpture (often combined with performance and collaborative projects), one that entangles us in the complex relations of race, history, and class, where art and life cross paths. Directly and dramatically, she takes us to the street.

Born and raised in New York City, DeVille studied illustration and design at the Pratt Institute, attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, and received her BFA from the Fashion Institute of Technology in 2007. At Yale, where she focused on painting (MFA, 2011), her work expanded in scale and into space, as the line between painting, sculpture, and installation became increasingly blurred. At the same time, ongoing stage and set design collaborations with Peter Sellars and Charlotte Brathwaite encouraged a theatrical bent that persists in the spectacle of her immersive environments.



Left and detail: *Nobody Knows My Name*, 2015. Mixed media, installation at Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

invisible histories that her installations and performances expose and reclaim.

Harlem Stories (2014), a performance produced in conjunction with a Studio Museum residency and documented in Art21's "New York Close Up" series, follows DeVille through the streets of Harlem as she pushes a large cart filled with junk. Her activity elicits a range of reactions, while her voice-over ties her actions to street culture, the local economy of cart pushers, and urban labor. For DeVille, the streets of Harlem require intervention before their characteristic identity is completely lost to development and gentrification. Stopping at various sites along a route related to her family history, DeVille places small plaster heads—perhaps a self-portrait or the bust of a relative—as markers or offerings (one location was a former boarding house where her grandfather, a poet, had lived). Moving from personal reclamation to a more public act in the last Harlem Story, DeVille uses plastic bags and the collected junk in her cart to fashion a memorial near the East River and the Willis Avenue Bridge—the site of an undocumented African American burial ground. Here, her sculptural performance of remembering focuses on restoring dignity to the unidentified.

DeVile calls many of her pieces "processionals." These dramatic and provisional actions—like the push cart march through Harlem—are intended to make connections and engage communities with issues of concern, particularly displacement and marginalization. They advance a defiant response based in difference and dissent, problematizing the notion of "site-specific" art. While her assemblages might appear spontaneous, even haphazard, they are, in fact, the result of extensive research, coming together after much time and energy spent gathering materials.

Half Moon (2016), created for Socrates Sculpture Park, a former ferry slip, landfill, and illegal dump located along the East River in Queens, is a case in point. The title refers to Henry Hudson's ship, which sailed

Initially, DeVille's sculptures look like Modernist mash-ups referencing Cubist collage and Dada performance, Jean Tinguely's self-destructing machines and Mark di Suvero's large constructions, or even Robert Rauschenberg's and John Chamberlain's assemblages. But DeVille's nod to Modernist tradition and its (often male) protagonists remains irreverent and circumspect, even guarded. Indeed, her work archly challenges the legacy and legitimacy of Modernism by paying homage to an equally important but less heralded history drawn from African American culture and community. Her assemblages recall Simon Rodia's monumental steel, concrete, and found object constructions at Watts Towers, Noah Purifoy's sculptures recycled from the refuse of the 1965 Watts riots, John Outterbridge's assemblages of cast-off clothing and scavenged materials, and David Hammons's

sculptures incorporating humble materials like hair, bottle caps, wine bottles, rags, and cigarette butts. Also in the mix are references to collages, sculptures, and installations by women artists like Betye and Alison Saar and Louise Nevelson, who likewise reclaim rejects to invest them with new meanings and narratives. In addition to sharing the approaches and working methods of these artists, DeVille is similarly engaged in presenting social and political critique.

Her process of recovering and refashioning discarded objects into large-scale assemblages and installations invites a reconsideration of the meaning assigned to the abject and the thrown-away. For DeVille, trash is not without value or significance. Indeed, these found cast-offs provide archaeological evidence of a lived past that informs present experience, embodying the

down the river that now bears his name to claim Dutch sovereignty over the land called *Mahicanituck* by the Lenape. Using scraps of wood salvaged from houses, scavenged materials including fur, cloth, straw, bottles, flags, and even birch bark woven in a manner that recalled Lenape building methods, DeVille constructed a ghostly, hollowed-out ship frame. Exposed to the elements and tilting, this moldering and derelict wreck conjured the past while speaking to migration, marginalization, and neglect today. As *Half Moon* makes evident, DeVille is intrigued by how discarded things retain the residue of earlier lives, invoking history, identity, even origins and functions lost to time. Her process of recovery and display excavates these lost histories, investing the overlooked with new narratives.

Although DeVille has exhibited in galleries, she prefers specific sites or architectural spaces and often makes installations during residencies in which she can immerse herself in local history. In 2016, working with Baltimore's The Contemporary, an itinerant museum that presents exhibitions in non-traditional spaces, she created nine separate installations in the Peale Museum, America's first museum (founded by the artist Rembrandt Peale), which has been empty since 1997 and is now coming back to life. (These works are also documented on <https://art21.org>.) Collectively titled *Only When It's Dark Enough Can You See The Stars*—a quotation from Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1968 speech in Memphis, given the day before he was assassinated—the installations not only responded to the history of the building, which had served as Baltimore's first City Hall, a public school for African American children, and the Municipal Arts Museum, but also to present-day events in the city, including the civil unrest following the death of Freddie Gray in police custody.

In this vacated space, DeVille created a dense, intertwined accumulation of materials, everything from historical photographs of children at the school to arrangements of bottles, trashcans, discarded furniture, wooden lattices, blacked-out protest signs, music, videos, and even portraits of distinguished men, with each room providing a dramatic context and conceptual frame for



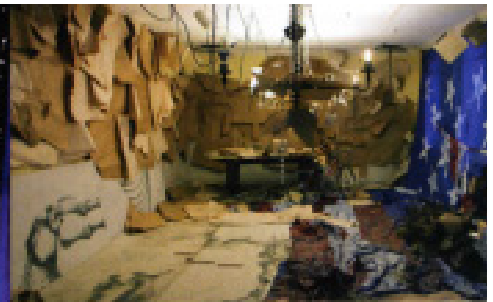
Above: *Half Moon*, 2016. Reclaimed lumber, plastic tarps, and accumulated debris, view of work at Socrates Sculpture Park. Below: *Sarcophagus blue*, 2017. Boat, mannequin legs, tights, wood, rope, and painting, dimensions variable.



her performative inquiry. One narrow room contained a dilapidated fragment of a large American flag—a reference to Francis Scott Key's anthem and the oversize flag displayed at the Peale after the War of 1812. Accompanied by a dilapidated chandelier with paper stars, sheets of antiqued paper, and broadsheets chronicling the Freddie Gray protests, DeVille's flag resisted patriotic display with a counter-narrative chronicling the racism and violence experienced by the "other" Baltimore. Another room juxtaposed a coat rack with objects hanging from hooks like so many body parts, while a wall

of television monitors played looped videos of the protests and rioting that had happened nearby.

Despite this often visceral commentary on current events, DeVille also sought to transcend rage and anger. In addition to staging numerous paths through the museum that encouraged interaction and discovery, she also provided room for community and exchange. On the second floor, a small stage with several rows of pews offered a space for reflection and an open mike where anyone could speak, perform, or engage in song or protest.



Installation views from *Only When It's Dark Enough Can You See The Stars*, 2016. Clockwise from bottom left: *The People's Theater, Colored Grammar School No. 1 1874-1888*, and *Charm City Roundhouse*. Multi-part work at The Contemporary, Baltimore.

out of garbage cans or accumulations of found objects and glowing plastic filament similarly trapped viewers between contradictory impulses. Were these desirable commodities or discarded waste, something to collect or overlook? Awaiting activation through performance, DeVille's sculptures asserted the aggressive properties of their fabrication—a process as intense and powerful as the juxtapositions of figures and objects. Set in motion when pushed or pulled, they forced viewers to choose where they stood and how to respond to the what, where, and how of their ever-shifting, even chaotic surroundings.

The *Empire State Works in Progress* formed a key part of *The Invisible Project*, a performance directed by Charlotte Brathwaite, and a collaborative film projection produced by DeVille and Brathwaite. Immersive and visionary, *The Invisible Project* transformed the Whitney's white box performance space into a place of dramatic spectacle. Audience members entered a dark, semi-lit room, making their way through a maze of sculptures with the aid of LED lights mounted on headbands. As they turned their heads, shifting their attention and gaze, many small beams of light gathered in an odd spotlight effect on sculptures and performers. Like the lights, the sculptures, performers, and spectators were in constant motion, further disrupting any possibility of passive looking or non-engagement. No one could remain detached or in one spot—it was either participate or get out of the way. As the performance unfolded, spoken texts by Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Ellison, and Frank B. Wilderson III resonated through the room, part of a mix-tape of words,

This notion of passage, implying both pathway and enactment, transit and migration, invites a radical re-thinking of the act of looking at and experiencing art. Breaking down the wall between artist and viewer, DeVille brings visitors into the process, insisting that they find a place in the performative processions. Her installations act as interventions, as those passing through the layered process of referencing, recycling, and recalling become entangled in dueling histories and narratives, as aesthetics fuse with politics.

Empire State Works in Progress (2017), DeVille's piece for the Whitney Museum's "Calder: Hypermobility" exhibition, brought many of these aspects together in an all-encompassing, collaborative event that included assemblages, a film, and a performance. The title purposefully quotes Alexander Calder's *Work in Progress* (1968), his only work for theater, presented at the Opera House in Rome. Calder was involved in every aspect of the project, from the concept to the set designs, costumes, music (by three Italian composers experimenting with electronic sound), and choreography (one

part featured bicyclists doing figure-eights on stage); he even included stables and mobiles as part of the performance.

Like Calder, DeVille aimed to engage viewers in a total theater experience. Her sculptures—some recycled from earlier installations and others newly constructed—were all installed on multi-sided, movable frames or mounted on wheels, so that they could be pushed and turned about. Several were constructed out of black, brown, and white plastic mannequin parts—in one, multiple legs mounted on a wooden boat rose up as if kicking; another contained busts, legs, and other limbs hanging from a clothing rack that knocked together when pushed; and one very large sculpture wedged the mannequin parts into a steel frame, along with shopping carts, tarps, and metal scraps all bound together with chains. Imprisoned within entangled environments, these disassembled mannequins acted as surrogates for the body, and in particular, the black body in the diaspora—parts without heads or identity, moving and passing through, caught between past and present function. Other pieces assembled



The Invisible Project, 2017. Performance created in collaboration with Charlotte Brathwaite, featuring Abigail DeVille's *Empire State Works in Progress*, shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

music, and sound design composed and performed by Justin Hicks and Meshell Ndegeocello. Along with Okwui Okpokwasili and Paul Pryce, Hicks and Ndegeocello (dressed in costumes designed by DeVille and made from recycled clothing, plastic filament, and metal) moved and manipulated the sculptures, as they led participants in a processional that surged around and through the flickering LED lamplights and sudden strobe bursts. The film projected overhead shared the same title as the Baltimore project — *Only when it's dark enough can you see the stars* — only reinterpreted as an aspirational quotation. Here, Okpokwasili and Pryce, each dressed in flowing, vaguely royal cloaks fashioned by DeVille out of musical instruments, clothing, metal, plastic pieces, and uniforms, strode through vast landscapes, an airfield, and a crowded Times Square. (Both robes were recycled from earlier assemblages — one from a group exhibition at the old Bronx Courthouse and the other made during the Studio Museum residency.) The Times Square sequence in particular captured the Afrofuturist vision of *The Invisible Project*, with the two performers appearing like alien voyagers wandering through a nocturnal landscape of bright lights and gaudy commercialism.

Blending organic form and raw materiality with the laden histories of recycled



things, DeVille's sculptures and costumes reinforced *The Invisible Project's* multiple narratives of passage, present experience, and future projection. By fusing the real and the fantastic, sound and music, and the choreographed interactions of performers, sculptures, and viewers, the film and the installation enacted a poetic, soulful, confrontational, and dynamic performance of the desires, fears, and hopes circulating around being black in America.

Building on Calder's desire to activate sculpture by freeing it to move in time and space, DeVille continued to push the expressive range of her objects. Within the public spaces activated by her processions, the sculptures reach their full potential,

speaking both to the layered archaeology of the past and the contentious dynamic of the present. It will be interesting to see how her work evolves in Rome, where she is a fellow at the American Academy (she was also named a 2018 United States Artists fellow.) In a city steeped in historical layerings, she is using the discarded, the buried, and the forgotten to envision "New Monuments to Forget the Future," part of a developing project called "Invisible Men: Beyond the Veil." At the end of her stay, she will have found new ways to take her work to the street once again.

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