

Abigail DeVille presents **Dark Matters**

Join artist Abigail DeVille for a sunset performance to mark the end of *Light of Freedom's* exhibition in the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden.

About this event

Since it's installation in October 2021, DeVille's makeshift liberty torch has inspired reflection upon the relationship between this Nation's ideals and its actions, and encouraged the metaphor of light itself as both connective tissue and uplifting force. A sunrise performance by DeVille marked the sculpture's arrival on the Mall with a call to light and to liberty; with the sculpture's departure DeVille now considers light in its relationship to darkness and to the policing of Black bodies throughout history. More than a hundred years before the Statue of Liberty was commissioned, for example, illumination laws such as "A Law for Regulating Negroes and Slaves in the Night Time" were passed in New York, stating that: "If any such Negro, Mulatto or Indian Slave or Slaves, as aforesaid, shall be found in any of the Streets of this City, or in any other Place, on the South side of the Fresh-Water, in the Night-time, above one hour after Sun-set, without a Lanthorn and lighted Candle in it, so as the light thereof may be plainly seen . . . then and in such case, it shall and may be lawful for any of his Majesty's Subjects within the said City to apprehend such Slave or Slaves." By law, failure to go unilluminated upon city streets during this time was illegal for any person of color. As a result, a carried torch of fire, presented as an American icon of Freedom, carried a double and oppositional meaning for an arm attached to a Black person: the policing of bodies for capture and re-enslavement.

On eve of the exhibition closing, DeVille calls citizens to contemplate this history through the lens of a participatory performance focused on the theme of illumination. Visitors will come together to collectively create sound and light as the sun sets over the National Mall.

This project received support from the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative.

PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE

Timing subject to change

7 pm ET | Sculpture Garden opens

7:30 pm ET | Performance: Dark Matters

Dark Matters is a performance presented to mark the closure of Abigail DeVille's *Light of Freedom* (2020), a sculpture displayed in the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden from October 15, 2021 to April 17, 2022. The performance will begin at 7:30 p.m. on Saturday, April 16, and last approximately 45 minutes.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in 1981 in New York, DeVille received her Master of Fine Arts from Yale University in 2011 and her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the New York Fashion Institute of Technology in 2007. Recent exhibitions of her work include *Brand New Heavies* at Pioneer Works New York, and *The American Future* at PICA, Portland. DeVille's work has also been exhibited at The Whitney, Institute of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New Museum in New York, the Punta Della Dogana in Venice, Italy, and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. DeVille has designed sets for theatrical productions at venues such as the Stratford Festival, directed by Peter Sellers; Harlem Stage; La Mama; and Joe's Pub, directed by Charlotte Braithwaite. She has received honors fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, Creative Capital grantee; received an OBIE for design; and has been nominated for The Future Generation Art Prize in the 55th Biennale di Venezia. DeVille was the Chuck Close/Henry W. and Marion T. Mitchell Rome Prize fellow at the American Academy in 2017–2018. She teaches at Maryland Institute College of Art and is a critic at the Yale School of Art.

ABOUT LIGHT OF FREEDOM

Abigail DeVille's critically acclaimed sculpture *Light of Freedom* is a mixed-media installation through which the artist responds to the Black Lives Matter movement within the larger context of America's long relationship to the idea of liberty itself. The Hirshhorn presentation of the 13-foot-tall artwork situates it within the Museum's outdoor Sculpture Garden on the National Mall. DeVille is widely recognized for works that mine the overlooked, often traumatic histories of Black America to spotlight cultural contradictions and inequities.

DeVille draws inspiration from an 1876 photograph that captures the disembodied hand of Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty in New York's Madison Square Park. The fragment was displayed between 1876 and 1882 to excite crowds and inspire donations for its pedestal. A square of golden scaffolding frames DeVille's torch, suggesting a construction site. The artist has exchanged Bartholdi's solid handle for a latticed cage that wraps around a rusted metal bell that can be seen but not rung. Above it, a flame is composed of outstretched mannequin arms. These are painted deep blue to suggest the hottest part of a fire. In referencing America's long-heralded emblem of freedom, DeVille recasts national monuments as sites that embody democracy for only some and questions the distance between American ideas and actions.

By positioning the torch's flame to face the US Capitol building, DeVille's work interrogates the popular mythology embedded in the National Mall, critiquing America's promise of freedom and the tenuous nature of the ideals citizens are charged to uphold. The work celebrates "people that hooked each other arm-in-arm, and protested in the face of potentially death through this pandemic, to fight for whatever this nation actually pretends that it was founded or based on," DeVille said.

Abigail DeVille: *Light of Freedom* was commissioned by Madison Square Park Conservancy, New York, and was first exhibited in Madison Square Park. Its exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden is made possible through support from the Hirshhorn International Council and the Hirshhorn Collectors' Council.

