

Burning Meditation

The ICA hosts Abigail DeVille's "Deo Vindice (Orion's Cabinet)," an art installation inspired by the burning of Richmond.



"Deo Vindice (Orion's Cabinet)" will be on display through Aug. 18. The work was originally commissioned as part of "Monuments," a recent Los Angeles exhibition at The Brick and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA). Photos by David Hunter Hale.

When Richmond's powder magazine exploded early the morning of April 3, 1865, it killed several people, shattered windows across the city, and started a fire that quickly spread out of control.

In the waning days of the Civil War, retreating Confederate soldiers were given orders to set fire to Richmond's bridges, supply warehouses and powder magazine before the city fell to the Union. The fire would destroy large portions of the mostly abandoned city.

“Deo Vindice (Orion’s Cabinet),” a new art installation by artist Abigail DeVille at the Institute of Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, is inspired by this historic event. The work was originally commissioned as part of “**Monuments**,” a recent Los Angeles exhibition at The Brick and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA), that featured damaged and graffitied segments of Richmond’s former Confederate monuments to Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis and Matthew Fontaine Maury.

“This was the first ever contemporary exhibition that combined decommissioned monuments from across the South — many of which were from Virginia — and canonical works of art,” explains Amber Esseiva, the ICA’s senior curator. “Abigail, for that show, produced this incredible installation, meditating on the 1865 burning of Richmond by the Confederacy in lieu of surrendering to the Union Army.”

The installation uses charred china cabinets and draped white sheets to reference historical photos of Richmond’s ruins.





Artist Abigail DeVille has family ties to Richmond, and previously exhibited "A Mourning," an installation that reconstructed her great-grandfather's 1938 death at Central State Hospital. The work was exhibited at the University of Richmond's Harnett Museum of Art.

"The piece is incredibly dark, which is different from its presentation in L.A., and is surrounded by these blue, purple and yellow lights that present a piece in ruin and in flames," Esseiva says.

The Latin phrase in the work's title translates to "God Will Vindicate," and was the official motto of the Confederate States of America. The second part of the title references Orion, the giant huntsman of Greek mythology. The piece is organized spatially after the Orion constellation.

"There are various cultural myths around Orion, but it's really a myth of male prowess and ego and warfaring and loss, which has many ties to the Confederacy as it relates to the response to loss in 1865," Esseiva says. "The china cabinets are really thinking about the histories that we continue to pass down generationally to our families."

She adds that DeVille sees the work of preserving and projecting histories as deeply connected to homemaking.

“[DeVile] is thinking about women’s roles, specifically following 1865 and the Reconstruction period, around the Lost Cause, and these kinds of gendered practices: the warfaring, fallen hero, and the matriarchal force within families that continues,” Esseiva says.

DeVile, who has family ties to Richmond, is known for creating large-scale, immersive exhibitions using found objects. The Bronx-based artist has had her work exhibited at The Whitney, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, The Studio Museum in Harlem, and the New Museum in New York.





"Deo Vindice (Orion's Cabinet)" is modelled spatially after the Orion constellation.

Visitors to the University of Richmond's Harnett Museum of Art earlier this year may have seen DeVille's exhibit **"A Mourning."** The installation reconstructed the 1938 death of her great-grandfather Luther Wilson at Central State Hospital; originally started as a hospital for wounded Confederate soldiers in 1862, the facility was reassigned in 1870 for the treatment of "colored persons of unsound mind."

The ICA commissioned a new work from DeVille for its own exhibition. Titled "Black Hole Chapel," the work continues DeVille's interest in cosmology and the history of enslaved people using the stars to find their way to safety.

"It is a piece that is thinking about the other side of this history, the impacts of the Confederacy and white supremacy, through assembled archival audio works from the Alan Lomax archive in the Smithsonian," says Esseiva, referencing the renowned ethnomusicologist who conducted field recordings of folk music in the 20th century. "This is a collection of six songs that were recorded in the '20s and '30s by sharecroppers, field workers, incarcerated people, and those are interspersed with transcripts of formerly enslaved Virginians."

Those transcripts are read by Kymberly Newberry, an art historian and curator who is a visiting assistant professor of art history at the University of Richmond. Additionally, the exterior of the ICA reflects the exhibition, sporting the image of an 1865 photograph by Alexander Gardner that shows the area of Belle Isle and the Tredegar Iron Works after the burning of Richmond.

"It's such a powerful installation," says Jessica Bell Brown, the ICA's executive director.

“Abigail and her family have had such a longstanding history in Jackson Ward specifically. That confrontation with the past on a very deep and personal level has been very powerful to witness.”

Coming up on July 31, Esseiva will moderate a talk about the “Monuments” exhibition at the ICA, featuring DeVille, “Monuments” co-curators Hamza Walker and Hannah Burstein, and Devon Henry, the contractor whose company removed Richmond’s Confederate monuments.



File photo: Jessica Bell Brown, executive director of the ICA at VCU, speaking to supporters and patrons at the museum. Photos by Scott Elmquist

On Sunday, the VCU student newspaper The Commonwealth Times* published a story about the ICA. **The report states** that current and former ICA employees “described a deteriorating work environment marked by ethics complaints, restrictions on expression, a fear of retaliation among staff and a high turnover rate.”

In the story, ICA Executive Director Bell Brown said that she was “committed to building a stable, transparent and sustainable culture for the ICA,” and that “while some team members have chosen to leave for other opportunities, this is part of transition. I’m

listening, and making room to hear staff concerns in real time so we can address challenges directly and support a healthy workplace for the ICA as we go forward.”

Style has not independently verified The CT’s reporting; reached out to by Style, a spokesperson working on behalf of the ICA declined to comment on the story.

“Deo Vindice (Orion’s Cabinet)” will be on display through Aug. 18 at the ICA at VCU. “Monuments: An Evening with Abigail DeVille, Hamza Walker, Hannah Burstein, and Devon Henry,” will be held July 31 at 6 p.m. (doors open at 5:30 p.m.). For more information visit icavcu.org.

** – Full disclosure: Griset formerly served as executive editor of The Commonwealth Times.*

ABIGAIL DEVILLE

DEO VINDICE (ORION’S CABINET)

ICA