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An Exhibition Proposes Alternatives to Removing Contentious Statues

The Chazen Museum of Art in Wisconsin is presenting “re:mancipation,” a multifaceted effort to add context to a 130-year-old sculpture.

By Siddhartha Mitter April 26, 2023



The New York-based artist Sanford Biggers saw the Chazen Museum's discomfort over showing Thomas Ball's "The Emancipation Group" as an opportunity "to open things up." Credit...Mary Inhea Kang for The New York Times

In 2020, as statues of Confederate generals and other contentious historical images were being taken down in many cities, Sanford Biggers, the acclaimed New York-based contemporary artist, and Amy Gilman, the director of the Chazen Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, were watching with keen interest.

A year earlier, while visiting the museum, Mr. Biggers had encountered a statue by Thomas Ball that depicted Abraham Lincoln standing tall, his outstretched arm hovering above a freed slave who crouches seminude at his feet. Known as “The Emancipation Group,” it was a four-foot marble sculpture from 1873.

Ms. Gilman had expressed her discomfort about continuing to show it without context. They had agreed to think about it together. But do what?

“The museum was almost ashamed, it seemed, of the piece being in their collection,” Mr. Biggers said in a recent interview in his studio in the Bronx in New York City. “They were about to put that thing into storage. And I was like: This is actually an opportunity to open things up.”

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As part of “re:mancipation,” a borrowed Thomas Ball marble from 1875 is installed alongside 3-D-created casts of its components, allowing viewers to consider the elements separately. Credit...Chazen Museum of Art/Kirstin Pires

Also in the Chazen exhibition, British and American portraiture from the collection is accompanied by text about how the portrait’s subject, or its artist, drew wealth or otherwise benefited from the plantation economy or the trans-Atlantic trade in slaves and commodities, or how the artistic choices in the work reflect racist or imperial aesthetics. A timeline begins with African civilizations, weaving Black history into the conventional Western-focused art history narrative, then turns local, documenting struggles for inclusion at the university. Running on a large screen is video of events in which participants respond to

“Emancipation Group:” conversations, fabric workshops, D.J.-ing, dance and performance. There are also quilt works by Mr. Biggers; sculptures from his “Chimeras” marble series, which blend European and African archetypes; spaces to read and meet, and more.

It all makes for an unusual ensemble. “It’s a bold move for an indexical museum at a university to do something like this, because it’s touching into contemporary art practice,” Mr. Biggers said.

The project, he added, was a kind of “process piece” provoked by the Ball sculpture: “a response of how to analyze it collectively, look at what it did and how it functioned, and how we can repurpose it to serve something different now.”

Ms. Gilman said that the tumult of 2020, when statuary like Ball’s was deemed racially and politically offensive and was being removed, made it urgent to deal with “Emancipation Group” in an innovative manner — and trust an artist to lead the way.

“Something opened up with Covid and with the murder of George Floyd — and then the decision that Boston made to actually remove the statue from view,” Ms. Gilman said. “Everyone opened up in a way that we were not ready before.”

For Mr. Biggers, whose more visible ventures in the same period included “Codeswitch,” a traveling museum survey of quilt works, and “Oracle,” a statue installed at Rockefeller Center and then at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, “re:mancipation” was an under-the-radar pandemic project.



Choreography is incorporated into the Chazen's "re:mancipation" exhibition. Here, the dancers Stacy Smith, left, and Amansu Eason perform a response piece in a gallery. Credit...Chazen Museum of Art/Eric Baillies

He made multiple visits with his collaborator Mark Hines, a founding partner in MASK Consortium, which digitizes art using 3-D scanning; the two also play together in the band Moon Medicin. They brought others, including the D.J. Rich Medina, the rapper Pharoahe Monch, the jazz trumpeter Keyon Harrold, the artists Lynore Route and Wildcat Ebony Brown, plus faculty, students and Madison residents. Chris Walker, a choreographer and dance professor, said the project marked his first encounter with "Emancipation Group."

"The first thing I noticed was his knuckles in the ground," said Mr. Walker, who is Jamaican, of the figure of the freed slave. "My body immediately said 'no.'" Absorbing his physical reaction to the statue — to the "yearning" he detected in the Black man's neck; to Lincoln's stance; to the odd negative space between the two figures — he developed choreographic associations.

The result is a composition in which two dancers hold close like a couple in a Jamaican dance hall. A third figure represents the protests from which they have taken brief respite, and that they will re-enter. "Liberation is rooted in how we restore on a daily basis," Mr. Walker said.

While preparing "re:mancipation," Mr. Biggers resisted making his own sculpture in response to "Emancipation Group." But eventually he relented.

His new work, "Lifting the Veil" will join the exhibition in May. A marble statue with the same dimensions as "Emancipation Group," it shows a seated Lincoln holding a scroll. The president will be draped in a quilt; above him stands Frederick Douglass, his hand over Lincoln's head as if to raise the fabric. It is a pointed reference, as Douglass gave the speech to inaugurate Ball's statue in Washington in 1876.

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Mr. Biggers' new work, "Lifting the Veil," shown here in a working model, will join the exhibition in May. One of the artist's quilts will be draped over Lincoln, with Frederick Douglass appearing to lift it. Credit...Mary Inhea Kang for The New York Times

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He had realized, he said, the similarities between the "Emancipation Group" sculptures and another classic image: Booker T. Washington lifting the veil of ignorance from an ex-slave, as shown in a 1922 statue by Charles Keck on the Tuskegee University campus.

"What if we made it Frederick Douglass lifting the veil of ignorance off Lincoln?" Mr. Biggers said. "Because those two had a confrontational but somewhat friendly exchange over several years." Making Lincoln barefoot, he added, implied "that he has not totally evolved to maturity or wisdom. Obviously, Frederick has his shoes on."

The spirit of the piece, Mr. Biggers said, was similar to what Douglass expressed in his speech in 1876: how Lincoln's role was important, but only part of the story.

Its backers hope that "re:mancipation" will inject ideas into both museum practice and the debates over monuments. Deborah Cullen-Morales, program officer at the Mellon Foundation, which contributed \$250,000, said the project can prove a valuable example. "It can model how institutions should and are capable of having complex conversations about fraught objects and their fraught subject matter," Ms. Cullen-Morales said.

For Ms. Gilman, the project is already a success in the way it has broken old habits. "We are learning about ourselves, we are learning how to move forward in artistic spaces," she said. An upcoming re-installation of the entire museum will draw on this experience, she added.

Mr. Biggers said he hoped the exhibition would demonstrate that there were alternatives to taking down an objectionable monument or leaving it up unchallenged.



Lynore Rutte's and Mr. Biggers' Moon Medicin "Wide Awakes Cape" (2022) is set against video selections projected on a wall of the Rowland Gallery. This section of the video shows the jazz artist Keyon Harrold wearing a "Wide Awakes Cape" and playing his response to the Ball sculpture. Credit...Chazen Museum of Art/Kirstin Pires

“It’s really up to the people who live with these things,” he said. “But rather than have just one way you’re supposed to respond to monuments, it’s better to have these options.”