

Art

Anatomy of a Disputed Emancipation Monument

The Chazen Museum of Art in Wisconsin didn't quite know what to do with a controversial emancipation statue of Abraham Lincoln in its collection until Sanford Biggers stepped in with an idea.

Debra Brehmer - May 23, 2023

MADISON, Wisconsin — The Chazen Museum of Art, on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has done a remarkable job tackling the problem of how to reassess museum holdings that are racist, Confederate, or rife with assumptions of domination.

The project that's become re:mancipation germinated when nationally known artist Sanford Biggers was on the Madison campus for the closing of his exhibition Bam in 2019. At a dinner, Museum Director Amy Gilman and Biggers discussed a problematic sculpture that has been on view in the Chazen's permanent collection since 1976. The museum was unsure about what to do with "Emancipation Group" (1873) by Thomas Ball. Biggers's response was that it should be thoughtfully examined rather than simply removed. "We should always have some debate," he said in a phone conversation. "It's a pillar of democracy."



Over the next two years, in consultation with Biggers and Mark Hines of MASK Consortium, as well as a team of academics, curators, and artists, the current exhibition re:mancipation was developed. It focuses on nearly every inch of this sculpture.

Thomas Ball (1819–1911) was an American living in Florence, Italy, when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865. Shortly after, he started work on a version of "Emancipation Group." At least five half-sized marble versions and two life-sized bronze monuments were produced, one

of which remains on view in Washington, DC. The other bronze monument was removed from display in Boston in 2020, after 12,000 individuals signed a petition in protest.

The four-foot-high white marble sculpture at the Chazen shows a tall, lean Lincoln — aged and craggy — dressed as a statesman in a double-breasted topcoat with a bow tie, standing over a crouching, shirtless Black male in a loincloth. Lincoln's hand extends over the freed man's head in the gesture of a Christ-like blessing. The young Black man gazes outward. His arm shackles are broken. A chain rests near his feet. Lincoln holds the Emancipation Proclamation in his right hand. For more than a century, many viewers undoubtedly thought of the sculpture as honorable — a stately homage to a great man who abolished slavery in the Confederacy. It was the first major abolition monument — a source of pride. But Black viewers may have not seen it in that light. At the time of the sculpture's dedication in Washington, DC, Frederick Douglass responded that, "What I want to see before I die is a monument representing the Negro, not couchant on his knees like a four-footed animal, but erect on his feet like a man." This is ironic because although Black individuals raised the money for this sculpture, they were not in charge of hiring the artist or overseeing the result.



The current movement to remove controversial monuments from public view has not always generated constructive means of reframing these works as teaching tools. The Chazen takes an intersectional approach — overlaying the rhetoric of public museum timelines and graphs with museum historiography, enlivened in the final room with wall-sized projections of contemporary artistic responses in dance, music, and poetry.

The exhibition is entered through a narrow room of data that outlines the global history of slavery. Digestible, bright, clean graphics announce that "Human life began on the African continent." We learn that between 1770 and 1783 the enslaved population in the 13 colonies was 459,446. By 1860 it was 3,950,343, more than 10 percent of the general population.

Rounding a corner into the main room, the focus moves from vast histories to the materiality of the sculpture itself. The Chazen, via 3D printing through MASK Consortium, examines the iconography of its individual components: the scroll, broken chain, bleeding heart, and facial features of the Black man. By illuminating symbolism as a means of storytelling, the museum studies the distinct visual languages first generated in ancient Greece and Rome to memorialize greatness through the roots of democracy and the fundamentals of imperialism. The visitor then confronts the actual sculpture. Historic paintings that formerly surrounded "Emancipation Group" in the permanent collection are re-positioned here for context. The face of a White European

merchant next to the lavish portrait of Lady Caroline Montagu, daughter of the governor of Jamaica, form a chorus of colonial rule dependent on slavery. Every museum is lined with these portraits of power — the property owners, conquerors, industrialists, bullies, builders, importers, and extollers of slavery. But the Chazen takes this one step further by infiltrating the room with visual echoes, such as Kehinde Wiley’s enormous “Portrait of Artist Carrie Mae Weems, Eris” (2017), who looks over her shoulder, across the room toward Lady Caroline. Here the show becomes more of a call and response than a tutorial.



In the final room, a floor-to-ceiling projection of contemporary artists’ reactions to the show’s content floods the space with sound and movement — exploding the conversation, an exaltation. It is a space, as Biggers says, “for propositions,” rather than answers. DJ Rich Medina, rapper Pharoahe Monch, jazz trumpeter Keyon Harrold, dance professor Chris Walker, artists Lynore Route and Wildcat Ebony Brown, and Madison faculty and students are included. Nearby, several capes and sculptures by Sanford Biggers from his Chimera series occupy the room.

Biggers had not intended to contribute a work of art in direct response to the Lincoln sculpture, until an irresistible idea materialized. Set in place during a reception in May, Biggers’s “Lifting the Veil” (2023), a marble sculpture the same scale as the Ball monument, shows Lincoln and Frederick Douglass in conversation, with Douglass standing tall as he lifts an actual quilted cloth, a veil of ignorance, from Lincoln, who is seated, barefoot, and gazing down at the proclamation in his hands. Biggers said he modeled his response after a historic sculpture of

Booker T. Washington titled “Lifting the Veil of Ignorance” (1922) by Charles Keck, at Tuskegee University.

Biggers sees this project as “a new form of institutional critique.” In his sculpture, the power dynamic is inverted but not denied: Douglass and Lincoln had discussions about slavery. They are both players here. The story is reoriented in a tender way.

Gilman acknowledges the complexity of this undertaking. She hopes the show engages viewers intellectually and emotionally. “We do not believe there is precedent for this,” she noted, referring to the depth of analysis presented here. “What does it mean to be a museum?” is the overriding question being asked, she said, noting that the museum will be reinstalling its permanent collection in 2025 and the fate of “Emancipation Group” has not been determined. She thinks it will return to the collection, but it will carry the evaluative lessons of this project.



re:mancipation continues at the Chazen Museum of Art (750 University Avenue, Madison, Wisconsin) through June 25. The exhibition was curated by Amy Gilman in consultation with artist Sanford Biggers and MASK Consortium.

Image credits:

Image 1: Sanford Biggers, "Lifting the Veil" (2023), marble, textile and selective laser sintering nylon powder, 44 1/2 x 36 1/4 x 21 1/4 inches (photo by John Berner, courtesy Chazen Museum of Art)

Image 2: Installation view of *re:mancipation* at the Chazen Museum of Art. Pictured: Thomas Ball, "Emancipation Group" (1875), white Carrara marble, 45 1/2 x 27 9/16 x 21 1/4 inches (photo Debra Brehmer/*Hyperallergic*)

Image 3: Left to right: Sanford Biggers, Amy Gilman, and Mark Hines of MASK Consortium (photo courtesy Chazen Museum of Art)

Image 4: Installation view of *re:mancipation* at the Chazen Museum of Art. Pictured: Sanford Biggers and Lynore Route, "Moon Medicin 'Wide Awakes Cape'" in front of a video of musician Keyon Harrold wearing the cape (photo courtesy Chazen Museum of Art)