

# Forbes

## Sanford Biggers Leads Re:mancipation Project At Chazen Art Museum In Madison, Wisconsin

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Sanford Biggers 'Wide Awakes' cape installation view with 'Emancipation Group' in background as part of re:mancipation exhibition at Chazen Museum of Art.

Black freedom as an act of white power. That's the problem. White supremacy.

A partially-clothed freedman kneels before an impeccably dressed Abraham Lincoln who "heroically" breaks the chains of slavery with one outstretched hand while clasping the Emancipation Proclamation in the other. Lincoln's expression, tender, paternal. The figure

remains on the ground, unable to free himself, a non-participant, naïve, dependent upon his white savior.

The scene is depicted in Thomas Ball's 1873 *Emancipation Group*, a marble sculpture that served as a study of *Emancipation Memorial*, Ball's bronze monument erected in Washington, D.C.'s Lincoln Park. Both artworks reflect deeply racist, anti-Black perspectives. These are insulting, humiliating portrayals—a later day caveman representing an entire race of people widely considered at the time of production to lack the intellect or agency to secure their own freedom, completely ignoring the centuries of hard damn work in the face of unthinkable horror Africans brought to America for slavery and their descendants undertook to claim their freedom.

An example of Ball's *Emancipation Group* has been on display at the Chazen Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin in Madison for decades. It has long been a source of controversy. Increasingly so.

While hosting Sanford Biggers (b. 1970; Los Angeles) for an exhibition of his work, the high-powered contemporary artist, Chazen director Amy Gilman, and colleagues began talking about Ball's sculpture. What do you do with this thing? What can be done with this thing?

Biggers has always thought there's a better solution for what to do with problematic artwork.

“My advocacy for interpreting and recontextualizing is not necessarily to preserve the memorial or the monument itself, but it's so that we don't erase history,” Biggers told Forbes.com. “For America to claim to be as exceptional as it is means we have to be exceptional enough to realize the wrongdoings of the past, and to be mature enough to talk about them in a way that can benefit everyone who is sharing this place and this time, and the only way to do that is to confront these objects and this nostalgia for a separated, segregated past.”

Wall text in the gallery attempting to recontextualize its meaning for contemporary audiences wouldn't go nearly far enough. No, *Emancipation Group* would need more than that, but what? What would the artist and the art museum do if they could do anything?

“Our eyes got big with the potential of what we could do,” Biggers remembers thinking at the time.

## re:mancipation

Biggers and the Chazen swung for the fences determining how to address Ball's small sculpture. All of the museum's resources, material and human, were brought to bear. The end result, "re:mancipation," a multi-year project dissecting the history of the sculpture and confronting its place in the museum's collection. The project's title is lowercased intentionally to address the hierarchies that capitalization can reinforce in our culture.

"Re:mancipation" includes a documentary, in-person and virtual exhibitions, an extensive national symposium series, supporting research, archival material, educational resources and, in May, the debut of a new artwork by Biggers at the museum. A major milestone occurred February 6, 2023, when the "re:mancipation" exhibition opened to the public. Included are a vast range of items from the museum's collection dating from prehistory to the present day as well as loans from other institutions.

"I was adamant early on that I didn't want to make a singular response to (*Emancipation Group*)," Biggers said. "In fact, I was like, let's not make an object at all. Let's make this entire project based off things that are already existing in the collection."

Biggers would eventually change his mind about not wanting to personally respond to Ball's sculpture, but that would come later and highlights a critical distinction between the "re:mancipation" project and most art exhibitions.

"Most exhibitions start with a checklist; we actually did not know what the exhibition or the whole project was going to look like," Gilman told Forbes.com. "It's scary from an institutional perspective in the beginning, but it is actually very freeing to have this group of artists from all of these different areas providing so much feedback and input."

The process of developing "re:mancipation" took years. It's still underway, not least of which in the construction of Biggers' sculpture. What was imagined evolved. Time was embraced. Time to think, time to adjust. The goal wasn't the destination, a race against the clock to opening.

"My whole job on this was to bring everybody together, let's connect everybody, let's do this and just trust that you get really smart people, super creative people in the right places at the right moment and just keep everybody focused on that and you're going to turn out something that's

groundbreaking and I think collectively we have done that,” Gilman said. “I could not have predicted the exhibition that we have up right now at the beginning, but it's so much better for the process.”

That fluid, expansive process not only allowed Biggers’ to change course and create an original artwork for “re:mancipation,” it inspired him to do so.

“We've invited so many different musicians and performers and writers and thinkers to respond to this piece, and they've all given us such incredible and rich examples in response,” Biggers said. “I think after going through that experience and filming that and being in the room and seeing all that happen, did make me go back and think, if Keyon Harrold has responded through his performance and Pharoahe Monch has done this piece, and Wildcat (Ebony Brown) has done this piece, I want to offer something too from my language.”

## Lifting the Veil

Biggers’ new work created specifically for this project, *Lifting the Veil*, features a standing Frederick Douglass “lifting the veil” of ignorance from a seated Lincoln. The racial roles are reversed from Ball’s sculpture. The work will be revealed during a special event in May.

“I don't consider that to be a solitary response; I feel (*Lifting the Veil*) to be part of a proposition and this exhibition also is a proposition and maybe an example of how other institutions can address some of their problematic objects,” Biggers said. “And of course, there should be other responses. We're not offering the one solid solution. It's just a proposition. There needs to be several other propositions of how to deal with (problematic artwork) for us to move forward.”

That, perhaps, may be “re:mancipation’s” greatest impact.

“As a sector, we actually have not been good at experimenting and being open to new voices and also finding ways of incorporating solid research and analysis within a responsive space,” Gilman, who came to the Chazen in 2017, said. “It’s about researching what it means to be a museum and challenging and experimenting and taking risks and doing things that other places might not do so that we we’ll learn something that we can then bring out to the field. The staff here have already started talking about how this is changing the way they're looking at their own work. How can this change the way we think about the exhibition process?”

There isn't a single museum of any size in America that doesn't have at least one cringe-worthy object from an earlier era. As a result, there isn't a museum in America that can't learn from "re:mancipation."

"When these objects come up for future contestation, (I hope 're:mancipation') creates at least one roadmap of how to engage," Biggers said. "This is a roadmap that can be expanded upon, it's an offering, it's part of what I think is the generosity of artists, that we put these ideas out there for someone to build upon. I hope that it impacts institutions that way, artists that way, historians that way and so on."

For that to occur, a significant institutional mindset will need alteration.

"I also think about museum and exhibition agendas and practices and that ('re:mancipation') shows museums that are stewards of this type of work aren't just curating and moving dead objects around—their history is done and they're just showing documentation and new configurations—not at all," Biggers said. "These objects are still alive and very much part of the contemporary conversation and museums and institutions have the ability to recontextualize those works and have them reengage in contemporary conversations. It's a challenge to institutions to adopt that approach."

The "re:mancipation" exhibition will be on view in Madison through June 25, 2023. *Lifting the Veil* will join the Chazen's permanent collection.