

TRANSCRIPT

(Online) On Liberty: Artist Talk with Abigail DeVille

>> Anne Reeve: Good evening, everyone. My name is Anne Reeve, and I'm an associate curator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, and it is a pleasure to welcome you all this evening for this conversation with the artist Abigail DeVille.

The Hirshhorn has been and is honored to host her work, *Light of Freedom*, in our Sculpture Garden, which is open daily from 10:00 am to 4:30 p.m., and if you have not had a chance to visit yet in person, I strongly suggest and hope that you make the trip down to the National Mall to do so.

Perhaps tonight's conversation will provide a little extra encouragement.

By way of a brief introduction, Abigail was born in New York and received her MFA from Yale University in 2011 and her BFA from the New York Fashion Institute of Technology, FIT, in 2007. Recent exhibitions of her work include *Brand New Heavies* at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn, New York, which was open earlier this year in the spring, and the exhibition *The American Future* at the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art.

DeVile's work has been displayed widely in the U.S., including The Whitney, The Studio Museum, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and internationally at the Venice Biennale. She has also designed sets in this country at the productions for *La Mama's Pub* by Charlotte Braithwaite, has studied at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, won an OBIE award, and was nominated for a Future Generation Art Drive.

Also at the Venice Biennale, she was the Chuck Close fellow in 2017 and 2018, and currently teaches in Baltimore at the Maryland Institute College of Art and is also a critic at her Alma mater, Yale. As her bio suggests, she is an artist with a multidisciplinary approach. It is, however, always grounded in history, and she always minds the overlooked and often traumatic histories of Black and Brown Americans to spotlight cultural inequities and interrogate how we experience and interpret the work through our shared narrative histories. In the summer of 2020, in the immediate aftermath of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police, she was commissioned by the Madison Square Park Conservancy in New York to create a public art sculpture, and she ultimately created this work, titled *Light of Freedom*. It stands about 13 feet tall and consists of a metal armature in the shape of the Statue of Liberty's torch, which is in turn suspended from gold-painted scaffolding.

A flame of tangled painted mannequin limbs flickers out from the top, and a bell sits within the armature below this flame and is silent.

The work went on view in Madison Square Park in the autumn of 2020, and then it traveled to the Momentary at Crystal Bridges in Arkansas, and then last month, it made its way to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden on the National Mall. To mark its arrival in Washington, Abigail developed an original sunrise performance, which was called *WAKE UP: Liberation Call at Dawn*, alongside collaborators including the vocalist Jadele McPherson, the DC-based West African drumming group Farafina Kan, and the JoGo Project, a group that blends DC jazz and Gogo. For those who were there, it was a truly memorable experience, and we plan to share some video from that performance tonight.

This evening, Abigail and I are planning to speak about the work, *Light of Freedom*, and their performance, their genesis, what it mean to have them sited here on the National Mall, and if we have time, talk about her other works as well. The plan is for her and I to talk for about 45 minutes and then open it up to you all for Q&A.

So please, if you have questions at any time throughout the hour, please use the prompt at the bottom of the screen and share them with us.

For now, I will ask Abigail to turn on her camera.

Hello!

>> Abigail DeVille: Hey!

>> Anne Reeve: Hey. How are you?

>> Abigail DeVille: I'm good, I'm good.

>> Anne Reeve: Good good. Thank you for joining us tonight.

We have, I think you know that we have been so thrilled to bring this work here to DC where it can sit on the Mall alongside all of these other monuments and memorials. We're very grateful to our partners at Madison Square Park Conservancy for helping us to make it possible.

I hoped that maybe we would go back to this Fredrick Douglass quote. You can take us to this moment in the summer of 2020 when the ask first came through to develop a work for Madison Square Park, and how this quote maybe grounded your thinking in that moment.

>> Abigail DeVille: So, yeah, when Brooke initially contacted me, I was like, beyond thrilled. I feel like Madison Square Park is definitely a space that you dream about making something for, and I think it was around June 11th. But I needed more information about the history of the park, which they so generously provided.

And that's really how everything is grounded. It's about the specific things that happen within a particular location, and, anyway, okay, so, I will read this quote right now before I go any further!

(Laughter.)

This, also, this quote helped me think through what -- think through the moment, and actually what was possible in making for an engaged public. "Let me give you a word of the philosophy of reform. The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle.

The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. Without struggle there is no progress.

Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without the thunder and lightning, they want ocean without the awful roar of its many waters." That was from a speech he gave in New York on emancipation in 1857.

>> Anne Reeve: How did you get to your work with the iconography of the Statue of Liberty and your preoccupations and concerns in that moment?

>> Abigail DeVille: I wanted to see what histories had already taken place in that land or embedded within that land of Madison Square Park. I think initially they sent me a couple of books about the history of the park, and then also I watched Rick Burns' New York documentary, which is about 7 or 8 parts.

In that documentary, there's a photograph of the Statue of Liberty's hand and torch in Madison Square Park when it was first installed in -- I'm dropping the years, but it was the 1870s --

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah, I think we have an image of that on the next slide. There we go.

>> Abigail DeVille: When I first saw that image, I was like, okay, the project is done!
(Laughter.)
I already know what I'm doing. History has done it for me.

>> Anne Reeve: So why was it there?

>> Abigail DeVille: Yeah, it was there as part of like a fundraising project. So the artist, the sculptor, Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi, who designed the Statue of Liberty, it took maybe from conception to completion about 20 years, it was a 20-year process.

And during that time period when the Statue of Liberty was being constructed in France, they were furiously trying to raise funds for Americans to contribute for the building of the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty. So this portion was sent from Paris to participate in a World Fair in Philadelphia, I think it was marking maybe the 100th anniversary of the United States itself. And then it traveled to New York and was installed in the park, I think, for a period of six years. So it was just to encourage people to give to this effort, because as, you know, then and now, certain things are unchanged, but this was all private money that went into the construction of this work of art.

Even though it's, like, completely founded and embroiled in political conversations and is used as an icon or tool to be pro or, you know, against immigration and different kinds of freedom mythologies that are embedded into the ways in which we think about American democracy. But, yeah, no government -- the French government and the American government did not fund this project whatsoever. So it was, like, working-class people of France that contributed their money to the building of it as a gift for Franco-American friendship. And then it was more working-class folks here on this side who contributed to the construction of the pedestal.

>> Anne Reeve: Uh-huh. I want to get to all of the material choices that you made as you developed the work, because they're so specific and intentional. But I guess before that, I am curious, just in general, about making work with such a sense of... immediacy? Because you speak about using history as sort of raw material, and clearly you're doing that in this case as well.

And it's looking to a very long arc of history, often back hundreds of years. This country's very often violent subjugation of many, many people. But in this instance, you were also working in

something of a reactive mode, right? Very much in real time, in relation to George Floyd, and the sort of energy of that summer, and urgency of that summer.

I was just wondering if it feels or does anything different when you're working in that way.

>> Abigail DeVille: I think maybe in terms of, like, the thoughtfulness of a response, like, how can -- and then I think that's where history aids, in that, like, in providing a kind of libertas icon that everybody associates with American democracy, and the ways in which this hypocrisy has been embedded in all of our icons, or the ideals that we put our trust and faith and belief in that could potentially be fully realized or real.

So I think, yeah, not saying that the Statue of Liberty was a safe bet! But, you know, it's something that we all understand. And if this was something that was to address a particular moment, then I didn't want anything that was going to be, you know, that anyone would need to be scratching their head about. But thinking about the contradictions that are already built into the form.

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah, yeah. And, I mean, the recognizability of it is, I don't think I fully grasped the universality of the way that that symbol is absorbed and sort of integrated to all of us until we were installing your work on the Mall. And before it was even fully up, people were walking by and immediately able to recognize what was in essence a completely disembodied -- (laughing) -- fragment of that overall image!

Just because it is so prominent and prevalent in the way all of us, especially in this country, I think, are socialized. Right?

It becomes, you know, sort of reinforced the power and the intensity of the image itself.

So what are we looking at here on screen?

>> Abigail DeVille: This actually was the restoration of the Statue of Liberty in the 1980s, and so the picture on the left is what the original install was of the torch. And so it wasn't -- in the restoration in the 1980s, they went more with Bartholdi's original design. So the first one, it was more of a lighthouse originally, when it was originally installed.

So that's why those glass windowpanes are there. When I saw these images, I was instantly struck by the beauty and the density of the scaffolding around the torch. That's how I got the idea for the scaffold around the torch to begin with. Because I'm just really hot for scaffolding in general!

>> Anne Reeve: Talk about that! Talk about what makes you hot for scaffolding!

(Laughter.)

>> Abigail DeVille: I mean, scaffolding is, you know, it's like ancient technology, right? We haven't thought of anything better since, you know, like, the ancient world, of how to construct things. And it's just this immediate thing that connects us to our ancient past.

But -- and it's really beautiful to look at! I mean, like, the density and complexity of lines and thinking about the weight that it supports.

But, yeah, so, as soon as I saw that, I was thinking about, yes, this actual struggle or monumental effort to fully realize what freedom or individual freedom means in American

democracy, that is, like, this unfulfilled promise, which is, you know, which was the reactionary thing of, you know, the summer of 2020.

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah. Well, let's look at some images, I think we can maybe start to scroll through.

Of you starting to build out the work in New York.

So you mentioned the scaffolding and this armature is suspended from the scaffolding, and sort of tilting. Can you talk about the mannequin arms? How that came together for you? And the decision to paint them the color that they are painted?

>> Abigail DeVille: Well, I think... I think that was also in part, in thinking about how the Statue of Liberty was funded in the first place, or how this even operates as this icon for democracy. But thinking about all the kind of collective individuals that contributed, you know, their pennies to making this thing happen in the first place, right?

Like, this is very much a working-class icon, right? Even if it's, you know, based on this Greco-Roman goddess. Right? So it does represent this collective individual freedom, whatever democracy means and how that's played out from either country.

And I think that's what I was really thinking about, the individual contributions, but also our own individual contributions in real time, right, with people going out and linking arm in arm and protesting last summer. But the long tradition of protest and struggle for everything that, you know, everything has to be continually fought for in order to get anywhere, maybe in life, but specifically in this nation's history.

So I was thinking about that, right, like, actually the power of an individual and how hot the intensity of that effort can burn, and how those are things that are passed from generation to generation. That is the legacy of American democracy, that it's a struggle, and not actually that it's a given. So, thinking about that, thinking about showing these bodies, and then in terms of coloring them or painting them blue, like, blue is the hottest flame that exists.

And so that's why I stuck them in there within the flame. Because that's the thing that makes this engine keep running, right, is the collective belief in it, right? So thinking about that, that everyone buys into this belief, and so that's why it endures.

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah, the fuel!

What about the bell that is embedded within that armature? You can sort of see it in the middle of the... here on the left.

>> Abigail DeVille: Yeah, the bell is a decommissioned school bell from Illinois that I found on eBay, actually! And I was thinking about, you know, just the ways in which, that it is a call of freedom, but then also, it doesn't -- you can't actually ring it. So it's kind of like -- it's wedged within this thing, but it can't actually cry out. And thinking about the ways in which we think that education is, you know, like a basic right, or that it's a right of living within this nation. And so thinking about the ways in which that has also continually been compromised, I think from the very beginning. So that's why it's hanging out in there!

(Laughter.)

And also for the birds, right, for the birds.

(Laughter.)

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah, they're enjoying it! They're enjoying it.

And I guess the final question I have, just about the look of the thing is about the color of the scaffolding itself. Because it's painted gold.

>> Abigail DeVille: Yeah, so, I wanted the torch to have this, like, rusty kind of patina, thinking about this ancient idea that's, you know, continually being fueled, but then thinking about the construction, like the monumental effort that goes into, like, the upholding of this idea.

And the ways in which, like, thinking about these scaffolds that are built in which, you know, even with the Emma Lazarus poem, or 19th century rhetoric, or even thinking about 21st century conversations about immigration that are ongoing, the ways in which people can come here and then ascend this kind of scaffold, or going up and down this kind of scaffolding. So thinking about the ways in which immigrant or migrant bodies are valorized for their labor, but also dehumanized and have no value within American society. Right? Like, America wants your labor, but they don't actually want your body or your family or your descendants. Or thinking about the ways, I think Toni Morrison also talks about the melting pot, that Black people are actually the pot, that everybody else gets to get stewed into the mix of whatever America is.

Whatever that stew is. And that Black people are continually on the fire. So thinking about that Black people remain, you know, kind of at the bottom of the scaffolding... and it doesn't matter how long you've been here, within a couple generations, you know, you could be, like, president of the United States, like the Kennedys, I remember, James Baldwin has an infamous quote about that, right?

About, you know, I think Bobby Kennedy said in the 1960s that things are progressing so well, that, you know, within a few decades, there might even be a Black president! And he's like, well, y'all just got here! (Laughing) And you're telling us that if we're good, you know, then maybe in a few more decades, we too might ascend to the highest realms of power within this nation.

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah, no, the rise, that's part of the American ideal, right?

>> Abigail DeVille: Yeah.

>> Anne Reeve: It's not -- it doesn't take place in a vacuum, right? People aren't floating up.

They're pushing others down! Or historically, right, and have been climbing on the backs of the labor of others.

And then painting it gold?

>> Abigail DeVille: Yeah, like I -- I think --

>> Anne Reeve: Was that -- I think of the gold on the flame of the torch of the Statue of Liberty itself. Was that in there at all?

>> Abigail DeVille: I think that was in there, but I think, yeah, I was really thinking about... like, the valoration of monumental effort.

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah.

Well, let's scroll through to some images of it newly installed on the Mall, in the Garden, because I -- it was sort of born out of such a specific relationship to the history of Madison Square Park and that particular site, but it does seem to take on new energy, or a different kind of energy, on the National Mall itself.

Sort of alongside all of these other monuments and memorials, and you actually oriented the flame when you were onsite to face the U.S. Capitol. So I was just hoping to hear a little bit from you about what the site does here, and what it does with and for the site, in your mind.

>> Abigail DeVille: Well, I think, I mean, I think it's really important that it's there, aside from the events of January 6th, but thinking about how the Mall represents all of these different kinds of -- I don't want -- not vacuums, but vast repositories of knowledge, like how America envisions itself, or what you need to know about history, and the things that we think are important.

And it's free to go to, right? (Laughing). I mean, it's not really free to go to museums anywhere else in the United States. So I think how it's really, like, it's a Cliff Notes into how we envision the best of ourselves, aside from, you know, aside from the events that happened.

And then thinking about its position to the Capitol, and how Thomas Crawford's sculpture on the top of the Capitol dome was originally modeled after the Roman goddess Libertas. So there's a direct connection to that in thinking through these personified bodies of women that are, you know, can confer freedom in how we envision ourselves.

>> Anne Reeve: I think of the Mall sometimes as an arena where, like, America is performing itself?

>> Abigail DeVille: Uh-huh.

>> Anne Reeve: For others, right? And it's very glossy and it's very, you know, like muscular and shiny. And this, having this here, and sort of, you know, insisting that we all acknowledge the sort of slippage between the way we like to perform our ideals as a nation, and our actions as a nation, and the way that those ideals manifest very messily on the ground, to me was sort of especially -- it was especially sort of powerful to see and experience on the Mall.

I like that it's in there! I like that it's punctuating everything else on this field at the moment.

Well, maybe that's a good -- speaking about the Mall, speaking about its arrival on the Mall, maybe that's a good segue into talking a little bit about the performance. And before we do, maybe, Amy, I know you need a little time to make a transition to a short video clip that we have that is cut together from the performance, which took place at sunrise in the garden on October 15th, which was a Friday morning.

And, yeah, we'll get into it, but let's watch this first.

[Video starts]

(Percussion and vocalization)

I woke up this morning...

Oh, Hallelujah, mmm...

(Drumming music)

that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What is happiness? Happiness is the ability to call forth the names smudged out of history's ledger.

(Gogo music)

Abigail!

I got a little Abigail in my heart, I gotta sing a song just to do my part.

[Video ends]

>> Anne Reeve: Thanks, Amy. That makes me smile. Seeing your dress makes me smile, and reliving some of those moments! Because there were a LOT of people in the garden that morning. There was a lot of energy, and it was pretty spectacular to sort of feel that, and feel, you know, it's a sunken garden, and to feel kind of enveloped by that sound as it was sort of building and wrapping around all of us as the sun was coming up. So, why sunrise?

>> Abigail DeVille: Why not?

(Laughter.)

>> Anne Reeve: You were like, drama.

>> Abigail DeVille: Yes, I'm all about the drama!

(Laughter.)

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah, yeah.

>> Abigail DeVille: Yeah, I mean, I think, like, making, again, that correlation, like, oh, it's a new day, but also, it's kind of the same as yesterday! Maybe it's not as bad as yesterday. Maybe there's new light, or there's always new light to kind of stretch forward towards. But, yeah. I mean... yeah.

Thinking about, you know, the rising of the sun in correlation to, like, an internal flame, burning, as is represented in the mannequin arms in the torch.

>> Anne Reeve: So, how did your thinking first start to kind of germinate and develop when you were thinking through how to approach this performance in the first place?

>> Abigail DeVille: I was thinking about, I guess, the composition of the garden and how it was structured and where people could perform, and there are symbols that come from the Congo that African Americans have used for centuries, like embedded in yard work, in yard gardens, and architecture.

One symbol in particular is called a diamond star. So it just looks like a diamond, but it's thinking about the all-seeing eye of God, and it connects you to the ancestors. So thinking about having the drummers being at those four cardinal points also in a way made this diamond star.

So continually thinking about those kinds of simple geometries and structures that, like, harken back over centuries.

And then, so I knew we needed drumming, also, because I was originally thinking about the Stono Rebellion of 1739, but thinking about the kinds of rebellions in conjunction with the actions of January 6th, or thinking about the ways in which we're taught American history in early education and elementary school, and the ways in which this information is presented to us, and then in other ways in which we never hear about these other kinds of freedom struggles, where people were either fighting against colonizers for their ancestral lands and indigenous history, or, you know, Africans pushing back and emancipating themselves through different rebellion.

And actually in the 1730s there were numerous rebellions in the Caribbean and in the United States against people who were being enslaved and fighting against that. And in particular, this one that I was really taken with, the Stono Rebellion --

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah, let's talk about that.

>> Abigail DeVille: Yeah, like, that one -- so, those people -- I mean, the thing that got me about them is that it happened on a Sunday in September of 1739, and --

>> Anne Reeve: In the Carolinas, right?

>> Abigail DeVille: Yeah, yeah, I think in South Carolina. So they -- somewhere very close to Charleston. But they took guns from a general store, murdered the store owner, murdered other families in the town, and then started moving southward on, I think it's U.S. Highway 17 today, but it was Kings Highway in that moment. And they were drumming as they went down the highway, and they were holding a banner that said "liberty".

So the ways in which we think about the liberty for the colonists who were being, you know, overtaxed or abused by, you know, the British government, versus actually people being stolen from where they were from, and then being enslaved for generations and forced to labor for free.

But them moving along, it was the call of the drum, right, that brought other people from other plantations to join them, until maybe it started out with a group of about 20 people, until it was about a group of about 100. And they kept moving down. They spared people who actually were considered to be kind masters.

And everybody else were killed.

It didn't last very long. But thinking about -- that's actually a freedom struggle that I was not taught! You know? Growing up. Like, that's a freedom struggle they're not going to tell you about. That's another alternative kind of hero to -- I kept mention earlier, like Paul Revere's Midnight Ride, things that were actually taught.

But actually Paul Revere's midnight ride was popularized by -- what's this guy's name? Henry something -- what's his name, let me look at my notes.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem about Paul Revere's ride in 1861, and it was published in the Atlantic in 1861, and he was an obscure figure then, in 1860. Like, he was a local folk hero in Massachusetts, no national familiar whatsoever. So this artist that brought it into, you know, the culture, like into this kind of mythological space of revolutionary hero.

>> Anne Reeve: Right.

So, the performance itself lasted about 45 minutes, and it kind of had a three-part structure. But there was this beat, right, that was a throughline, and that was sort of started with Jadele, who was vocalizing a capella in the garden, and making a noise with a shaker. And then that transitioned to the beat with Farafina Kan, and then finally to the beat with JoGo. Can you talk about those three phases, and why it was important to have that -- them all together forming that throughline for you?

>> Abigail DeVille: Well, for me, I collaborated with Jadele before. We worked together on some other projects, but this was the first time we actually really worked together, which was really nice. I didn't realize that, actually, when I asked her, she had been doing her own research and went down a rabbit hole about someone who wrote about the last... attack on the Capitol, which was in 1812.

And it was an enslaved servant at the White House, I think, in Madison's White House. And he actually wrote a book about what happened. And that ends up being one of the only documents that documented what actually happened in that particular sacking of the Capitol. So she was already thinking about making, or writing music for this. And so then when I asked her to participate in this, it was just, like, it was like meeting of the minds, right? Thinking about, how can we call forth history into the present, or the contributions of ancestors into the present.

And she's saying --

>> Anne Reeve: So what was the brief that you gave her? Like, what did you --

>> Abigail DeVille: I was like, can you just do what you do?

(Laughter.)

I mean, when you hear her sing --

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah.

>> Abigail DeVille: You feel things. Like you feel parts of yourself open up that you don't -- you didn't even know that you knew were there. Like, you feel something.

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah, yeah!

>> Abigail DeVille: That -- I can't put it into words.

>> Anne Reeve: I had this feeling that she was... maybe, building space for all of us, and kind of building it out and holding it, and grounding it in that history, right --

>> Abigail DeVille: Exactly.

>> Anne Reeve: In the history of where we were physically standing.

>> Abigail DeVille: Yeah.

>> Anne Reeve: And then, Farafina Kan was stationed at the cardinal points that you mentioned, north, south, east, west in the garden. And then they start drumming in those points, sort of calling to each other and with each other. Then they slowly merge into the center.

So, yeah, talk about what they brought to this, in terms of your thinking about the project.

>> Abigail DeVille: I mean, I was really thinking about, what does a liberation call sound like in West African drumming? And I think they said that they specifically chose Congolese war drumming to use for this particular performance, and the people that emancipated themselves in Stono Rebellion were from the Congo and Angola. So I think it was a direct reference to that particular history, and trying to bring back sounds of the past into the present.

>> Anne Reeve: And then JoGo. Why was go-go important consider.

>> Abigail DeVille: I mean, go-go is DC! Yeah, go-go is DC, and that beat is a continuing beat. From Jadele opening up and inviting ancestors that are ever-present to be with us in this space, and acknowledging the words and the history of the 1812, you know, sacking of the Capitol. And then thinking through different kinds of ongoing moments of liberation within American history for Black and Brown people. Then through this music, right? Like, the music, or the beat holds the history. And so then, what is the history of go-go in DC? And how is it such a local, hyper-specific music that is a continuation of all of these cultures, like a conglomeration, configuration of all of these things.

>> Anne Reeve: It's in its own way, very much linked, or can be, in some moments, to calls for freedom too.

>> Abigail DeVille: Uh-huh.

>> Anne Reeve: I mean, in the summer of 2020 in DC, go-go was a rallying point and became a rallying cry of a lot of the Black Lives Matter marches and protests that took place here in the city. It ended in a super-joyful way, it felt like, that part. And then you also ended with a statement, which I will not make you repeat today word for word, but I did want to just sort of ask what it was important for you to acknowledge in that moment, and in that statement.

>> Abigail DeVille: Well, I think that -- that was also one of my original thoughts about the potential of this sculpture, that with each place it would go to, I could bring forth more names from history. The names that will never make it into the hallowed halls, or have portraits of these unknown names of people who actually pushed the dial of freedom forward. I think Martin Luther King says it in his last speech, that we just want you to be true to what you said on paper.

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah.

>> Abigail DeVille: The press release is a beautiful thing, but in its action, it leaves a lot -- it leaves us wanting a lot!

But, so, in the Madison Square Park version, I found the names or discovered the names of the first Black people in New York City, which came, I think in 1626 or something. So, like, very early on, Black people are a part, and they were actually also Angolan. Part of New York history, period. And then saying their names and how they were able to purchase from the Dutch East India Company their partial freedom.

So they were kind of free and kind of still enslaved. But then when the British came and took over New York, that was the end of that. And they had owned lands in that moment, and all of their lands were confiscated within a period of maybe a couple decades.

But that's why -- I mean, that's why I said what I said, in trying to name the few names that we have of the actors within the Stono Rebellion, because to me, they're the Paul Reveres.

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah. I do want to encourage anyone out there who has questions to make sure you ask them, and in the meantime, I'm just going to keep peppering Abigail with my own! But, since we have a little bit of time, maybe let's go to The Observatory, because you've spoken about the Capitol, the relationship to the events of January 6th, what it means to have, like, a freedom-sharing space with the Capitol and oriented towards it.

But, it turns out that all the while, and even before January 6th of this year, you'd been developing this piece that we're looking at right here. So can you talk to us about what it is that is on the screen?

>> Abigail DeVille: Sure. So The Observatory was part of that Brand New Heavies exhibition at Pioneer Works this spring. But I had been thinking about the Capitol dome somewhere in the middle of the Trump administration, and particularly thinking about the Libertas that was on top. And then, actually, then finding out all of this -- this history around the development, or how that Liberty figure, I think, I don't remember what her original, her actual name is.

But that the artist actually wanted there to be a Libertas, but somebody who was big in the Confederacy who was, like, weighing in at the moment said that that's not possible. That Americans actually aren't enslaved, so we're not going to have a Liberty, Libertas at the top of the Capitol dome building. But she can get a helmet of war, like the goddess of war, Minerva, and then she was conflated with an Indian princess.

So I think that collage of ideals actually speaks to the heart of this democratic struggle. That it's predicated upon the subjugation and obliteration of other people, and taking of lands, and war.

That you continually maintain power through war. And not this idea about, you know, liberty being granted to everyone because this is a free place where you can live and breathe and, you know, whatever.

>> Abigail DeVille: Yeah, yeah.

So, you built out this armature of the Capitol. What is it made out of?

>> Abigail DeVille: It's steel and it's -- I'm trying to remember the scale. It's definitely less than half. I mean, it's like a baby version of the Capitol dome. I mean, it's very baby. Maybe it's like 20 feet high. But in keeping in relation to proportions.

And then thinking, also trying to make this connection to the universe, and thinking about patterns of the universe and how that's embodied within ourselves, but also the ways in which power architecture has been, or Federalist architecture has been developed within this country, in terms of looking specifically at Thomas Jefferson, who was one of the original people who weighed in on the Capitol dome and how it should be constructed and how it should be modeled after a Roman temple, thinking about the Greco-Roman relation of this idea of democracy and what it is, and how we can legitimize this effort. So, yeah. So then it's covered in chicken wire! So it's kind of like a chicken coop. But it has all of these, you know, holes, cut into it all over the place.

So I was thinking about portals and slippages of time, and thinking about the ways in which -- I think the early part of the universe was just pockets of gas, and all of these --

>> Anne Reeve: You're talking about LONG history!

>> Abigail DeVille: Yeah, but you know how black holes helped in the early part of the creation of the universe, and a computerized simulation of that, it just looked like spider webs. So thinking about spider webs or our fingertips or chicken wire, how all of these sorts of patterns are embedded within us, but there's a longer kind of timeline that we're functioning on that harkens back to the origins of the universe, and not necessarily contemporary struggles of power.

>> Anne Reeve: And then what are we looking at -- so, and then there are these flat-screen monitors that are sort of attached within the interior that you can see here and you can kind of make out some of the imagery that's controlling on those monitors. But can you tell us what's on there and why?

>> Abigail DeVille: Yeah, so, some of the images are actual black holes, but then others are a collection of videos that I had shot when I went on a 10-day Road trip with some friends in 2014. The summer of 2014, which, actually, during that road trip, Mike Brown's murder happened. Because I'll never forget it, because we were on a plantation tour, a 10-day plantation tour in the South.

>> Anne Reeve: 10-day...

>> Abigail DeVille: Yeah, it was my first time actually really going down South. But, so we started in DC and ended in Jacksonville, Florida, and stopping along the way on these, like, on main stops on the Seaboard Airline Railroad, which was a main thoroughfare that people took during the Great Migration. But, yeah, I just wanted to see it for myself.

To see what was standing, to feel what it would feel like to be in those spaces. So it was the first time that I went into a still-standing barn that was constructed by an enslaved architect, like, designed and constructed in 1860 at a plantation outside of Raleigh, North Carolina. Or being in some, you know, there's very few, but there are still-standing slave quarters.

And feeling what those spaces felt like. Or looking at the smudge of fingerprints on some wooden boards. Or people constructed their homes out of reject bricks that had fingerprints embedded within them. So then you could see this laborer's fingerprints inside the brick. So I think about all those different kinds of textures and patterning that link us through time. Those are the kinds of things that were being shown on the monitors. And then also, you can see here, kind of, that that's one that has water on it. That was at Sullivan Island, which was like a main port, where, I can't remember what the actual statistics are, but, like, a large... it's almost like an Ellis Island of Black people in this nation, yeah.

>> Anne Reeve: So, did anything, because you were developing this work before January 6th, did anything about the events of January 6th adjust or tweak your thinking about the work, or the way that the work eventually came together and took shape?

>> Abigail DeVille: I think I didn't know what to do with that. I was just like, oh, no, people are going to think this is going to be because --
(Laughter.)

People are going to think this is like an immediate response to January 6th! And I think... because it felt like such a circus, or, it was like such pageantry that was going on, like, simultaneously with this violence, that it was hard to reconcile those two things and insert that within this space.

Because I'm thinking maybe about a larger spectrum of time that we're operating on, versus, you know, the last 5 years with the Trump administration and the fallout from that. So, no, I don't think any of that actually made it in here.

>> Anne Reeve: But, you know, people bringing their own... I mean, certainly it's front of mind for a lot of people coming into that space and walking into that armature. And feeling that. We do have a couple of questions. One is very straightforward. It asks where the work is headed from DC, after DC, and I don't think that that is... I don't think that we know yet what its next phase of life is.

But I do know and can say that it will be on view in the garden through the middle of April, 2022. So up until that point I'll make a push for coming to visit often, and of course, if and when we know where its next life shall be, we will make sure that that information becomes available.

Is there a location or space that you would like it to go to?

>> Abigail DeVille: Nah, I mean, I'm kinda down for it to go everywhere. And I think -- I mean, I think I've heard things, but nothing is definite. There's a possibility of it going to St. Louis, Missouri. So maybe, hopefully, fingers crossed.

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah!

And then another question about, which I think is interesting, I'll be interested to hear your thoughts on this, but I was wondering about -- and this is from Regina Anderson -- I was wondering about Abigail's thoughts on borderlands and borders in general when we think about the continent, North and South America, and the way that borders are constructed to maintain power.

And are there thoughts, colors, music, or ideas?

>> Abigail DeVille: About borders?

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah, I think that's the --

>> Abigail DeVille: Colors, music, or ideas...

>> Anne Reeve: Yeah.

>> Abigail DeVille: I mean... well, actually -- I mean, we know these borders are all made. They're not real. I guess they're real, because people are being killed because of them. So the bloodshed is what makes it real. But I feel like in, maybe the performance, I'd try to touch on that a little bit. Or, thinking about the ways in which all of these cultures have shaped this one culture, right?

Like, that American culture isn't actually just consumerism or this imperialist kind of stretch for power. But I think it's also all of the people that have provided the texture and color and interesting things, right? Like the interesting or better parts of whatever American culture is, I think it's been through these other voices that have sometimes existed at the margins. And I think there was something else that I was thinking about, which, I don't know if this relates to your question at all, but there was a Washington Post article that I think was published September 7th in 2019, but talking about before 1619, there was 1526. So, you know, when the 1619, you know, the 400th anniversary of enslaved Africans brought to Jamestown, Virginia. In 1526, the Spanish brought maybe 100 captive people to somewhere between Georgia and South Carolina.

And that was a failed situation very quickly. But it's unknown as to what happened to the Africans that actually rebelled. That was the first -- that's the first kind of rebellion that happened, of enslaved people on this continent. And potentially, maybe, you know, in the ether, I don't know, but there could have been a collaboration with Brown people that were, you know, Indigenous communities that were there at that time.

Nobody knows what happened to those Africans. They went into the woods and were never seen or heard from again.

So I feel like there are all these other mythologies or true stories that exist that are outside of our understanding and just color the ways in which we think about these borders. Like, I feel

like the "official" kind of line drawing, we know is not true, we can feel in our hearts is not true. But, I don't know, I'm still trying to figure out how we can have a fuller or deeper understanding of ourselves.

>> Anne Reeve: Mm, thank you for that.

For the question and the answer both.

We have time for one more, so I will make it this one from Rita Cognion, and please forgive me if I've mispronounced that name. She says she's eager to see the work in person and asks, aside from sunrise, which time of day shows the work to its best advantage? I'll be interested to hear your answer, but also, it's interesting to consider the sculpture of light in relation to the light of day and various times of day, and lack of light.

So maybe you can speak to that.

>> Abigail DeVille: I mean, yes, of course, sunrise was really beautiful. Just being there in the quiet. I just love sunrise anyway. I love sunrise and sunset, two best parts of the day!

>> Anne Reeve: Drama!

>> Abigail DeVille: I think maybe evening is nice. Maybe if you can be there around sunset so you can get the drama of the fireball going down. But also, you know, then it's actually lit with a blue light from within, inside the arms, and then it's lit from underneath. So I think nighttime might be one of my favorite.

>> Anne Reeve: Nighttime is very beautiful, especially since daylight savings over the weekend, the sun is down when the garden closes, but you are still able to see in and down the garden, and when the sculpture is illuminated, it really... it becomes a definite beacon. It's got a lot of presence!

Abigail, is there anything else you want us to know in closing before I thank you again, profusely?

>> Abigail DeVille: Let me see here... is there another question? Oh, yeah. No! No, I'm good! (Laughter.)

>> Anne Reeve: Okay! Well, then, I will thank you. I thank my colleagues, Amy and Rebecca. Thanks to Maura and Claire for their assistance with interpretation and captioning tonight. Thank you all for joining us. Thanks to Madison Square Park Conservancy and Brooke Rapaport in particular.

And we look forward to seeing everyone for our next live online artist talk, which will be on November 23rd.

So, thanks again to one and all, and have a great night, and thank you, Abigail!