

For Immediate Release

“Barnard College welcomes version of groundbreaking monument I Am Queen Mary”

On October 15, 2019, “I AM QUEEN MARY (A Hybrid of Bodies, Nations, and Narratives)” (2019), a seven-foot original sculpture memorializing Black and African-descent resistance to Danish colonial rule by collaborating artists La Vaughn Belle (BCRW Artist-in-Residence) and Jeannette Ehlers, will be installed in Barnard Hall at Barnard College.

The sculpture features two key elements, among others, that transform the statue into something beyond representation to include an allegory and an invitation for viewers to consider their relationships to colonialism. The first is the sculptural figure of the St. Croix Fireburn labor revolt leader Mary Thomas, one of four women who led the largest labor revolt in Danish colonial history on October 1, 1878. As its name suggests, the revolt involved burning most of Frederiksted town as well as sugar cane mills and fields on over 50 of St. Croix’s plantations in protest to the contractual servitude that continued to bind workers to the plantation system, and enabled the continuation of abusive and violent working conditions, 30 years after slavery had been abolished in the Danish West Indies.

Although the revolt did not result in real improvements to working conditions, it is remembered as a powerful moment of workers’ resistance to capitalism and colonialism, and a defense of their dignity. Thomas, Salomon, McBean, and Abrahamsson are venerated in U.S. Virgin Islands cultural mythology as the Queens of the Fireburn. There are folk songs dedicated to Queen Mary and a highway named in her honor. “Queen Mary” was not a posthumous title created by the artists, but, according to Belle, “the title bestowed upon her by the people for her leadership.”

The second and equally critical component of this statue is the plinth, comprised of coral stones encased in plexiglass. These materials, excavated from Belle’s property in Christiansted, St. Croix, were, hundreds of years ago, cut from the ocean and constructed by enslaved Africans into the foundations of colonial buildings. These buildings were literally whitewashed with burnt lime, covering up any resemblance to their origins. Drawing attention to the coral foundations constructed by people whose lives and labors were systematically erased, Belle and Ehlers call to mind the hidden inner workings of colonization, and refuse the erasure of colonial theft and violence, as well as work and resistance.

“Lowering the gaze and entering the piece first through the acropodium, one begins to see the plinth as a quiet signal to the foundational labor of the enslaved and the other often invisible colonial infrastructures,” Belle says.

Separately and together, Mary Thomas and the coral plinth make visible the colonial extraction, the colonizer’s debts, and the labor of those who worked and those who resisted.

"I Am Queen Mary" is also making symbolic references to histories of Black resistance in modern history and their representations in culture. Mary Thomas's pose, seated in a chair and holding a scythe in one hand and a flaming torch in another, mirrors a famous photograph of Black Panther Party leader Huey P. Newton seated in a chair with a shotgun and a spear. The title of the work makes reference to the clarion call "I AM A MAN," printed on protest placards in the infamous 1968 sanitation workers strike in Memphis, Tennessee. It also recalls Spike Lee's 1992 film "Malcolm X," which ends with children around the world chanting, "I am Malcolm X." Centering Mary Thomas, this statue acknowledges the historic erasure of Black women and their centrality to resistance struggles throughout the African diaspora.

"I AM QUEEN MARY" is a scale iteration of the original 23-foot monument, which is currently on view in front of the West Indian Warehouse in Copenhagen, Denmark. It has received [international press coverage](#) since its unveiling in March 2018, including articles in the BBC World News, New York Times, and Le Monde. On long-term loan to the College, it will be on view in Barnard Hall, open to the public.

The College community will welcome the sculpture in a brief ceremony on Tuesday, October 15, 2019 at 6pm. There will be a public event scheduled early in the spring semester where the community can interact with the artists to discuss the important questions the sculpture raises about public art, representation, and the place of "I Am Queen Mary" at Barnard College.

"As a professor of Africana Studies who walks through the space of Barnard Hall everyday, I am excited to think with this powerful statue of Queen Mary as I teach the literature and cultural history of the black diaspora," says Monica L. Miller, Associate Professor of English and Africana Studies at Barnard College. "The questions we are already asking about race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation, the politics of decolonization, art and memorials, among many other topics, will be re-animated and deepened with the presence of the Queen Mary statue."

Ehlers says, "What's unique about this sculpture is not only its size and thematics but that it was not commissioned. It is we, two artists, who are pushing into the public space." The project represents a "bridge between the two countries," Belle explains. "It's a hybrid of our bodies, nations and narratives. It extends the conversation beyond the centennial year and gets people to really question what is their relationship to this history."

The version of the sculpture that arrives at Barnard was funded by the Ford Foundation Gallery for an exhibit in June 2019.

**BCRW Artist-in-Residence La Vaughn Belle** is known for her work on colonialism in the Virgin Islands, the past relationship to Denmark and the present one to the United States. Her disciplines include painting, installation, photography, video and public interventions. She has exhibited her work in the Caribbean, the USA and Europe in institutions such as the Museo del Barrio (NY), Casa de las Americas (Cuba), the Museum of the African Diaspora (CA) and

Christiansborg Palace (DK). Her art is in the collections of the National Photography Museum and the Vestsjælland Museum in Denmark. Her studio is in St. Croix.

**Jeannette Ehlers** is a video, photo and performance artist based in Copenhagen, Denmark. Her work explores questions around ethnicity and identity, and Denmark's role as a slave nation, inspired by her Danish and Caribbean background. She has exhibited and performed in such institutions as LACE, Los Angeles; AROS, Åarhus, Denmark; the Museum of Latin American Art, Los Angeles; the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool; Museo del Barrio, New York; Autograph ABP, London; Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, Copenhagen; and, the Pérez Art Museum, Miami.