

## **Jeannette Ehlers' speech:**

Greetings everyone and welcome to the unveiling of I Am Queen Mary. My name is Jeannette Ehlers and I'm a visual artist based in Copenhagen.

We're so thrilled to finally be able to show you the result of our fruitful collaboration which has been on its way for many years and it is a great honour to welcome the new Queen in town.

The long period in Denmark's History preceding the sale of the country's Caribbean colonies is generally perceived in Denmark as a closed chapter. We're here to open it and to rewrite it.

Throughout Denmark there are beautiful mansions that are traces of a bygone era. They are seen as symbols of greatness and wealth, but in each brick hides brutal stories of colonialism, slavery and oppression.

One of these buildings is West Indian Warehouse, where we stand today, at Toldboden in Copenhagen. It currently houses the Royal Cast Collection.

A bronze replica of Michelangelo's sculpture "David" adorns the harbor in front of the building. "David" who represents the biblical hero who fought against Goliath and won, came to symbolize the defense of civil liberties within the western canon. The sculpture has become one of the most recognized works of Renaissance sculptures, a symbol of strength and youthful beauty. BUT he also represents the "white gaze" and European hegemony.

Today I AM QUEEN MARY, is placed as a counterpoint to "David", as well as a tribute sculpture to rebel forces in the former Danish colonies. The rebel Queen, Mary Thomas, represents a true s-hero and reflects the power of resistance towards the dehumanization of her people, that has been taken place since the first black body was captured in Africa and deported to the new world.

Over many years my work has covered issues such as Colonialism, slavery, counter culture and resistance. My point of departure is my affiliation with the African diaspora as well as the Danish participation in the transatlantic enslavement trade.

I had worked with The West Indian Warehouse/ The Royal Cast Collection as a site in one of my previous projects.

I used this significant location where we stand, since it is very important to me and to the Danish colonial History, as the site played a central role in the enslavement trade. The space is filled with the reminiscence of black labor, invisible to the eye though, but the spirit is hidden in every element of the building. At the same time this building now contains a large collection of white plaster sculptures of European iconic art.

The space embodies narratives of colonialism and eurocentrism, of violence and silencing, literally as well as symbolically. It symbolizes the foundation of modernity and mirrors the current society we live in, shaped by colonial structures.

I was born and raised in Denmark as an Afro Dane, where whitewashing of History is dominant and the lack of representation of black and brown people is enormous.

I grew up with this erasure of our colonial inheritance internalizing the racist structures that came with colonialism. It has shaped me as an individual and for a while alienated me from my afro-caribbean ancestry. But it has also brought me closer to myself and made me strong in my belief that there's an urgent need for identification and for rewriting History.

Basically it's about identity. And art can lead and guide.

This sculpture is one in many ways to create representation; it is a way to shed light on hidden narratives and it is a way to take up a space that was not given. Just like the Queens of the Fireburn took their space in 1878.

So my aspiration of I Am Queen Mary's intervention in public space is both a personal one but also a communal one that I hope will inspire greater sensitivity to colonial history in ALL of us.

The monument is a tribute to the rebellious narrative of the Fireburn and other resistance stories and it forms a common pan-African voice.

Like Michelangelo's "David", it speaks to and symbolizes the defense of civil liberties; physically as well as spiritually. In the past, in the now as well as in the future.