

La Vaughn Belle Inauguration Speech I Am Queen Mary, March 31, 2018

Greetings!

My name is La Vaughn Belle and I am a visual artist from the Virgin Islands. I have noticed that in the city of Copenhagen there are many sculptures. There is a sculpture of King Frederik V, King Frederik VI, King Frederik VII, King Christian X, Princess Marie, Andreas Peter Bernstorff, Emil Christinas Hansen, Hans Christian Andersen, [Søren Kierkegaard](#), Peter Griffenfeld, Joan of Arc, Salvador Allende, David, Thor, Diana, Aphrodite, Moses, Neptune, a drunken faun, a neapolitan fisherman, a blind girl, a blind boy. There are sculptures of mermaids, a cyclops, elephants, two lions, polar bears, a walrus, a snake and a troll. Quite a cast of characters. Not one of these sculptures have represented the African people who were brought to colonies in the Caribbean whose labor and lives helped to build this city. Not until now.

I Am Queen Mary has been an ancestral calling to remember. They called and we responded. Each in our different ways. My journey into this project took a turn when I was sitting on the steps of my studio three years ago and I noticed some coral stones on the ground near the ruins of an outhouse. They were beautiful, but I wondered about why they had straight edges as if manipulated by someone's hand. That is when I had a sudden remembrance of the history of these stones. I recalled how the enslaved Africans would be sent into the ocean during the low tide to cut them out of the reefs. The corals were then used to form the foundations of many of the colonial era buildings in our towns. However their labor was invisible. We often look upon this buildings as Danish, because of the Danish bricks imported from Flensburg that are the most visible. But these structures are not Danish alone and this history is not Danish alone. These coral stones in the base of I Am Queen Mary made a journey similar to those were taken from the African continent to get here- in ships, over the course of months and across the Atlantic. These stones are their testimony.

Although Mary Thomas was a real person, it is unknown today what Queen Mary actually looked like, so with many icons we have projected our imagination unto her. As artists we created an allegorical representation of her in which the figure is a hybrid of our two bodies modelled using 3D scanning technology. In doing so we have created a new woman that can serve as a bridge between our bodies, nations and narratives. The torch and cane bill in each of her hands reference the weapons used by the colonized in their struggles for freedom. Her seated pose recalls the iconic 1967 photograph of Huey P. Newton, founder of

the Black Panther Party. The plinth incorporates coral cut from the ocean by enslaved Africans gathered from ruins of the foundations of colonial era buildings on St. Croix. Together these symbols create a multilayered, new narrative that promotes the idea that whether enslaved or free the colonized were agents of their own humanity. They fought, they resisted in small and large ways that are often invisible and unaccounted for in the colonial records. They demanded that the colonial system acknowledge their humanity and to be honest, they didn't always win. Queen Mary herself, along with the three other women that she fought with, were imprisoned for several years in Denmark for protesting against unacceptable living and working conditions. Many people died under those conditions. Some were worked to death or were killed for defying being worked to death. Their labor paid for an immense amount of wealth that was generated for the Danish kingdom which throughout time has encompassed colonised territories in Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland, and parts of India, Germany and the Caribbean. Despite the vast effects of Denmark's colonial impact in the Caribbean, the visual reminders in Denmark are few. "I Am Queen Mary" will serve as a reminder to that history. They called and we responded.

"I Am Queen Mary" is a project that came out of two individual artists, but just like Queen Mary and the other women of the Fireburn labor revolt, we came together to work on making a change. We were not invited or commissioned to do this monument. We pushed into the public space and claimed it to transform the narrative around the colonial histories that impact all of us. The ancestors called and we responded.

It is a great honour to welcome the new Queen in town.