

VISUAL ART

Rights and Wrongs Exhibition Examines the Ongoing Struggle for Suffrage

On view at the Peale at Carroll Mansion

November 16, 2020

Words: Suzy Kopf



It took four days after the November 4 election for the presidential race to be called for Joe Biden. At another point in time this might've been unthinkable, but in 2020, eight months into a pandemic that has killed more than 235,000 Americans and ushered in the deepest economic depression since the Great Depression of the 1930s, it seems no news story can surprise me anymore. Call it numbness, but trying to locate joy about the Biden victory feels like reaching for the storage space in the cupboard above my fridge—with effort, I can peer into it, and I certainly prefer to have it than not, but it is too small and out of the way to hold anything essential.

Even so, this election was historic for other reasons. Namely, more people participated than ever before: a projected 159.8 million voters to be exact or about a 66.8 percent voter turnout rate among eligible citizens (<https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/04/2020-election-sees-record-high-turnout-with-at-least-159point8-million-votes-projected.html>). These numbers are exciting, and progressives have to hope that this is a sign of better times to come, with a more engaged citizenry demanding better and more inclusive policies for all Americans. This pursuit of a better life for “all” citizens has always been the qualified purpose of our democracy, awarded first only to white, property-owning men. Over the course of a few hundred years and in a process that still continues (<https://www.tampabay.com/news/florida-politics/elections/2020/10/07/florida-ruled-felons-must-pay-to-vote-now-it-doesnt-know-how-many-can/>) with fits and starts, other groups of Americans have fought for and won these rights.

Currently installed at the Peale Museum at Carroll Mansion, the exhibition *Rights and Wrongs: Citizenship, Belonging, and the Vote* (<https://www.thepealecenter.org/events/rights-and-wrongs-citizenship-belonging-and-the-vote/>) examines the central question of which American citizens have gotten suffrage, when, and how closely their right to vote has been protected. Securing grant funding from The Awesome Foundation (<https://www.awesomefoundation.org/en/projects/126127-rights-and-wrongs>) and the Maryland State Arts Council

(<https://www.msac.org/>), artist and educator Lauren Adams worked with local artists Erin Fostel, Antonio McAfee, and McKinley Wallace III who each worked within archives to create new artworks about the injustices that marginalized people have historically faced in Baltimore.

Fostel used archive sources to create a two-dimensional drawing that viewers can walk around. McAfee has filled a room with his manipulated film-like portraits of African Americans, working at a larger scale than his recent exhibition at the Walters Art Museum (<https://thewalters.org/exhibitions/time-and-place/>). Wallace has created two paintings for the show, which he recently (<https://bmoreart.com/2020/11/art-and-mckinley-wallace-iii.html>) told me about in great detail, that delve into the personal history of Augusta T. Chissell and Margaret Briggs Gregory, two Black Baltimore suffragettes.



Rights and Wrongs: Citizenship, Belonging, and the Vote. Art by Antonio McAfee, Photo by Joe Hyde



Erin Fostel and Jason Patterson's art in Rights and Wrongs: Citizenship, Belonging, and the Vote.
Photo by Joe Hyde

On a bright November day, my husband and I were the exhibit's only visitors, our footsteps echoing up the three floors of the mostly empty mansion. Built for Richard Caton, a son-in-law of the famously long-lived founding father Charles Carroll, who in his lifetime was the wealthiest man in the colonies thanks to his sizable landholdings and the 1,000 people of African descent that he enslaved. The sole Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence—who later introduced a bill in Congress promoting the gradual abolishment of slavery but did not free his own slaves—Carroll spent winters of the last decade of his life in this mansion, hosting important dignitaries until his death in the house in 1832.

After the last of the Catons passed on, the home served many functions, including operating as a vocational school, a boarding house for immigrants, and off and on as a museum run by the city of Baltimore. The choice of venue for *Rights and Wrongs* is significant, as this crumbling, nationally landmarked, Federalist-style building—like

so many other house museums across this country that sit as quiet reminders of our continual mistreatment and suppression of BIPOC people—is currently filled with a number of BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and female artists.

Alongside the work of Fostel, McAfee, and Wallace, Adams invited Stacey Kirby, Julia Kwon, **Precious Lovell**, JoAnne McFarland, Gina Gwen Palacios, Jason Patterson, and Sarah Paulsen, artists from across the US whose work is concerned with “personal and political dimensions of citizenship and belonging,” according to the exhibition’s press release. Installed in the mansion, the works are loosely grouped thematically by floors and rooms, tackling themes of segregation, women’s rights and suffrage, colorism, voter suppression, immigrant rights, and white supremacy.



Art by Julia Kwon, photo by Lauren Adams



Art by Julia Kwon, photo by Lauren Adams



Art (detail) by Julia Kwon, photo by Lauren Adams

On the first floor, Foster and Maryland Eastern Shore artist Jason Patterson's works are paired, each presenting dualities of history. Foster's work draws the viewer's attention to the nearby Preston Gardens, which were built in 1914 by Mayor James H. Preston, who used zoning to impose racial segregation, displacing an entire neighborhood of mostly Black Baltimoreans.

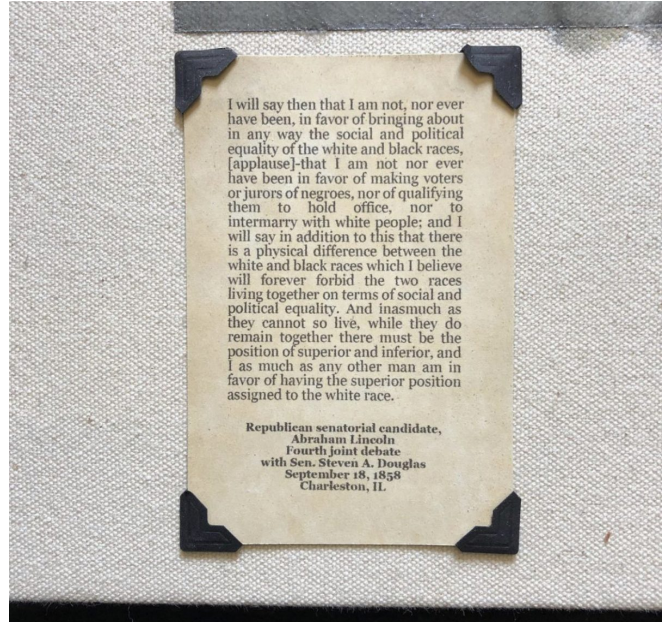
Foster has drawn the now-leveled neighborhood twice from an archival photo and underneath placed quotes from the white-run Baltimore Sun and the Black-run Afro-American to contrast how the two newspapers interpreted the same place for their respective readerships. "I want to highlight how perspective shapes what we see. And I want to show that the perspective of those in power literally shapes the landscape that we all inhabit," Foster explains.

One of Patterson's two works in the show addresses the legacy of Abraham Lincoln, the beloved president most often credited with Emancipation and ending the Civil War. As with Foster's work, Patterson depicts his subject twice, pairing Lincoln's

familiar profile with text that reveals, for all the positive work Lincoln accomplished, he was still unquestionably a person who reinforced, benefited from, and participated in white supremacy. The quotes that Patterson pairs with his painting reveal Lincoln's paternalistic attitude towards African Americans which existed simultaneously with many claims throughout his lifetime that he was "anti-slavery."



Jason Patterson, photo by Lauren Frances Adams



Jason Patterson, detail photo by Lauren Frances Adams

On the second floor, a pair of Washington, DC-area artist Julia Kwon's airy fiber works hang lightly against an orange wall, symbolizing "what it means to be 'Korean,'" the artist explains. Her silk works, which look like miniature quilts, often use safety pins to form text such as "United" or "11/3/20" and are pieced together as Korean wrapping cloth called bojagi.

While Kwon's work is chiefly about her experience of being othered as a Korean American, she says that the work is not just about representing herself in this space "but rather a commentary on the dehumanizing, problematic process of being identified, reduced, and categorized." She hopes that

this work, presented in this new context, will help shift the larger cultural conversation from the search for authenticity and classification and instead allow future dialogues to be about the “hybridity and intersectionality” between cultures.



Gina Gwen Palacios in Rights and Wrongs, photo by Joe Hyde

Most public areas of the empty museum have been filled with the exhibit. In the hallways of the second and third floors, Texas-based Gina Gwen Palacios has reclaimed two American flags in paint, turning the symbol of “colonial and capitalist power,” as she refers to it in her artist’s statement, into a banner emblazoned with the information to contact an immigration lawyer and a “help wanted” sign.

In the two smallest rooms on the second and third floors, Sarah Paulsen's two animated collage works, "White by Law" and "The Racial Matrix," unpack the ways American history has sought to exclude and limit the freedoms of people based on the color of their skin. Paulsen's work consists of brightly colored water-media paintings and archival imagery that has been animated to function as a "re-education of things that aren't learned in school," drawing attention to a number of unsung heroes in the battle for civil rights.



Stacey Kirby in Rights and Wrongs, photo by Lauren Adams



Art by McKinley Wallace III, photo by Lauren Adams



Art by JoAnne McFarland, photo by Lauren Frances Adams

Adams conceived of this show more than a year ago and secured funding to commission the new works right before COVID took hold in Maryland. Fostel says that being compensated to make new work this year “is significant, especially during this time of instability.” Other artists feel especially fortunate to be included in an exhibition that tackles a litany of weighty issues. Brooklyn, NY-based artist JoAnne McFarland says that voting is “a declaration of agency. I’ve voted in every election since 1973 when I turned eighteen. I’m aware of how much some people have suffered in order to vote, so I do so with a sense of reverence.”

I’ll leave you with this final thought. However you feel about Joe Biden, he is the person in American history to receive the greatest number of votes. The person to receive the second-most votes in American history? That would be Donald Trump. It is irrefutable that there remains so much work in the battle for our civil rights and for equity. *Rights and Wrongs* functions as a good reminder of this fact. As Kwon summarizes, “I hope the exhibition will allow viewers to consider the continued

struggle for equality as well as their own role in sustaining our democracy. We, as voters and engaged citizens, together have the power to shape the future of our country for the better.”



Art by Precious Lovell, photo by Lauren Adams

Rights and Wrongs
 (<http://www.rightsandwrongs.info/>):
Citizenship, Belonging, and the Vote is on view through December 6, 2020, at the Peale at Carroll Mansion, 800 E. Lombard St., Baltimore, MD. The exhibition is open Saturdays and Sundays, noon to 4 p.m. Masks are required.