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ARTS

'We Are Still Standing': 're:mancipation' and its reclamation of the Black American voice

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The “re:mancipation” project, unveiled recently to public viewing on Feb. 6 in the Chazen Museum of Art, resounds immediately like a reclamation — its morphology suggests something redone or revised. And indeed, the exhibition anchors the flawed and disingenuous historical fixture as both its spatial and thematic center: the marbled sculpture of a supposedly freed slave kneeling at Lincoln’s feet.

The exhibition is a collaborative project between the Chazen Museum of Art, artist Sanford Biggers and MASK Consortium, a coalition of artistic and cultural institutions working in digital preservation of art and artifacts. “Emancipation Group” (1873), the ostensive sculpture by Thomas Ball, has been in the Chazen Museum of Art collection

since 1976, displayed without “contextualization or opportunity for visitors to respond,” the exhibition statement explained.

Ball originally designed and sculpted the statue to commemorate the Emancipation Proclamation shortly after President Lincoln's assassination in 1865 — Lincoln's left hand here is raised like an invocation, his distantly-gazing figure looming over a crouching nude slave as the other hand grasps the scroll of his Emancipation Proclamation.

What began as a curatorial inquiry into Ball's sculpture has, over the span of two years, bloomed into a larger artistic response to the image's implications of systematic violence and institutional racism. “[re:mancipation's]” critique frames the statue's composition as a larger metonym for racial subjugation in America. The “emancipation” commemorated in Ball's original image is purely symbolic, cast ceremoniously in bronze or sculpted in marble as a patronizing visual artifact of white virtue, stripping away Black American agency through the deprivation of voice. The statue's supposedly heroic and celebratory spirit lives in the fixture of a disturbing contrast: a standing white man and a crouching Black freedman, between whom not a glance is exchanged nor any kind of acknowledgment.

The exhibition's very name even strips itself of any ceremony. The title “re:mancipation” feels at once punctual and stifled — uncapitalized and splintered by a colon — as if ruminating on the horrifying quietude of American violence, the unacknowledged holocaust of Black Americans through centuries of imperialism and genocide.

But “[re:mancipation's]” title also suggests introspection, the “re:” urging our response to this collective amnesia. In the opening ceremony for the exhibition on Feb. 4, Biggers implored a crowd of attendees to consider the gallery and its surrounding dialogue a “blueprint for the nation,” an impetus to reckon “with problematic works as opposed to just pushing them away or trying to bury the past.”

It's in this respect that “re:mancipation” seems especially significant — Chazen's undertaking of highlighting the marginal voice through direct response reflects at least an institutional effort to restore agency and historical truth. The exhibition revisits and confronts the narratives of white superiority housed within its museum's own walls through direct engagement with problematic art, an alternative that tries to grasp against the roots of social tensions rather than simply ignoring them.

“We have to address and we have to dialogue [about these monuments],” Biggers said. “Otherwise we will just keep repeating and repeating [the past].”

“re:mancipation” will remain open until June 25, 2023.