

Art in America

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All Rise: Cameron Rowland at Essex Street

By Maya Binyam



Installation view, Cameron Rowland, *Deputies*, Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, New York, 2021

In spring of 2020, at the tail end of a season when city dwellers, unable to exercise their rights as consumers, fled to far-flung territories typically reserved for vacations, Black insurgents fled inward. Like a flare, the burning of the Minneapolis Police Department's Third Precinct served as a signal. A short drive away, a group of volunteers commandeered a Sheraton hotel, whose 136 rooms became sites of nourishment and rest for upward of three hundred unhoused people. Meanwhile, in Seattle, protesters broke into a Cheesecake Factory and left with enough dessert to share; in San Leandro, they looted some seventy cars from a dealership. The public spectacle of commerce was replaced with one of broken windows, and in a flimsy attempt at retrospection—or relevance—the art world curated an assortment of representations. In August, the Whitney Museum announced (and then quickly canceled) a show called “Collective Actions: Artist Interventions in a Time of Change.” Much of the work, whose display, curators promised, would illuminate “the critical role of artists in documenting moments of seismic change,” had been obtained, unbeknownst to many of the artists, through fundraisers intended to benefit Black communities, and had been donated or priced low to encourage a range of individuals to contribute.

Black art is too often deployed to serve as evidence—of good morals, cultural sensitivity, and “diverse” curatorial impulses. Like any promising empathy machine, it can be leveraged to turn a profit—unless, of course, the artist restricts its commodification. Throughout their career, Cameron Rowland has coaxed exhibition venues away from their self-ordained

ethically neutral positions and, through a series of contractual stipulations, forced them to become sites of entanglement. For “91020000,” the artist’s 2016 solo show at Artists Space, they used the exhibition budget to purchase nearly \$10,000 worth of shares of Aetna, a health insurance company that at one time peddled slave insurance policies. The shares continue to exist in the name of Rowland’s Reparations Purpose Trust, and will be liquidated only if the federal government pays reparations, at which point the funds will be given to the agency responsible for distributing the reparations. Until then, the shares will remain an indictment. (Meanwhile, those who wished to acquire some of the other works from the show were permitted only to lease them, a process that Rowland considers endemic to the work.)

At first glance, the artist’s new show, “Deputies,” on view through June 19 at Essex Street, a subterranean white-cube space on the Lower East Side, seems comparatively uncomplicated. Of the ten works, only five appear in the one-room gallery: an emergency call tower resembling those stationed in subways, unwired; a clipping from an 1803 copy of the *New York Herald*, sun-blotched and worn, which announces a ten dollar reward for the return or imprisonment of Jerry, an enslaved man on the run; two cotton scales, originally produced by John Chatillon & Sons Company, a subsidiary of Ametek, an international manufacturer of electronic devices; and a quintet of bleating police scanners. As representations of or allusions to policing and its histories, the works are literal—Rowland tends to deal in things themselves.

Because the show is also accompanied by a matter-of-fact historical text describing the shape-shifting, omnipresent structuring force of slave patrols, and by lengthy captions describing the objects’ social and economic significance, Rowland’s impulses might seem expositional. But the works on view are also cathected, especially those outside the gallery. In a shady stretch of Seward Park are the remaining five pieces: benches that are unrecognizable as artworks without instructions to view them as such. Even then, I found them difficult to identify; I walked in circles before realizing they had been in front of me the whole time. Each is a replica of the nineteenth-century benches lining the park’s walkways and is framed as an intervention: named after the locations of five unmarked Black burial grounds in the city, they puncture the legacy of the park’s namesake, former Secretary of State William H. Seward, who identified as an abolitionist but campaigned to compensate slave owners for the loss of enslaved property. “Seward’s vision of reunification allowed for emancipation,” writes Rowland, “but foreclosed the recognition of Black people as human.” The memorials are not authorized by the city; as insurgents, one imagines, they might, one day, be rounded up and carried away.