

ARTFORUM

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Cameron Rowland
Essex Street/Maxwell Graham



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

The dehumanizing logic that regards Black people as equivalent to property was most legibly enshrined in the institution of chattel slavery, but this order of racial domination persisted after abolition and remains indelible in property relations today—albeit in more diffuse forms. But regardless of its degree of abstraction, this brutal arrangement has always been secured by the force exerted upon predominantly poor Black populations by the police.

In “Deputies,” Cameron Rowland considers enforcement, an inexorable feature of racial capitalism, through a charged presentation of readymade objects. *Lynch Law in America* (all works 2021), a blue-light emergency-call tower—ubiquitous on university campuses all over the US—stands dormant. The structure is a conduit through which white citizens wield state power against Black people, firmly in the tradition of the murderous statutes after which the piece is titled. Nearby are five TrunkTracker V UHF radio scanners for all of New York’s boroughs. One of them is routed into a speaker; intermittently, the crackling sound of a dispatcher’s voice pierces the gallery’s air.

Two nineteenth-century Chatillon cotton scales, each one titled *Price per pound*, hang on the north wall of the exhibition space, directly evoking the plantation. In profile, they also look like muskets: The empty mounting hooks attached to the scales resemble a gun’s trigger. The manufacturer’s engraved brand preens with the legitimacy of capitalist enterprise; indeed, a number of the works here bear some sort of wordmark or logo. Their authoritatively ordinary appearances are inextricably tied to the violence they perpetuate.

The exhibition’s coda takes the form of five benches surreptitiously placed in Manhattan’s Seward Park, which is a short walk from the gallery. They are indistinguishable from other benches nearby except for the fact that they aren’t bolted down. Each one is titled after an unmarked Black burial ground in the city, all of which have been built upon through development. These works have a memorial function, mourning Black lives destroyed by America’s racist structures. But a thread of potential reprisal is woven into the sadness, as Rowland designates the seats as sites “for resting or remembering or plotting.”

— Vijay Masharani