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3 Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now: Cameron Rowland



Installation view of “Deputies,” featuring a custom-made emergency-call tower and a framed page from an 1803 newspaper seeking the return of an escapee. Credit: Cameron Rowland and Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, New York; Charles Benton

Cameron Rowland is the rare artist who’s received much attention for making conceptually difficult work. In his 2016 breakout show at Artists Space, he presented seemingly innocuous objects made by people incarcerated in New York state prisons and purchased by the nonprofit gallery; his accompanying pamphlet traced a line from slavery to contemporary prison labor. This is Rowland’s model: a spare aesthetic focused on everyday items, accompanied by research into their roots in racial capitalism and sometimes, interventions into the system that upholds whiteness.

His new show, “Deputies,” continues in the same vein, explaining in a 16-page booklet how the protection of white people’s property served as the foundation of American policing. The objects that occupy the gallery, all arranged on its perimeter, tell a story that’s evident even without the booklet: A custom-made emergency-call tower is an echo of the mounted and stacked scanners and recording device that Rowland has programmed to capture police radio communications, many of which relate to vague suspects. The descriptions reverberate across the space, and centuries, to a framed page from an 1803 newspaper that contains an ad offering \$10 for the return of a “Negro man,” while two refigured cotton scales hang on an adjacent wall, eerily reminiscent of shotguns.

The artist has also covertly placed five benches in nearby Seward Park to honor unmarked Black burial grounds throughout the city.

Rowland’s work can be intimidating because it’s simultaneously enigmatic, didactic and demanding. If you spend time with it, though, his argument unfolds clearly: The infrastructure that many people take for granted was built out of slavery and racism. That won’t be news to everyone, but there’s still something meaningful about sitting on an unauthorized park bench and considering how it shapes the world around you.

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