

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contemporary Artist Investigates Legacy of Danish Colonialism

La Vaughn Belle: A History of Unruly Returns is back on exhibition at the National Nordic Museum

SEATTLE, WA (01.24.24) The [National Nordic Museum](#) celebrates the return of [La Vaughn Belle: A History of Unruly Returns](#). The exhibition runs from January 13 – April 7, 2024. Multimedia contemporary artist, La Vaughn Belle, brings light to the truths of the colonial presence in the Caribbean and the transatlantic slave trade through the fragments of material culture it left behind. The exhibition includes paintings, prints, ceramics, and collages that investigate the legacy of colonialism in the US Virgin Islands (previously the Danish West Indies).

The exhibition was first presented at Nordic Museum at the height of the COVID-19 era restrictions in Fall 2020 and Winter 2020/21. The current exhibition has been re-envisioned and expanded into a survey of the artist's work from the last decade.

The initial presentation of *La Vaughn Belle: A History of Unruly Returns* displayed large-scale paintings from Belle's series "Chaney (We Live in the Fragments)". The term "Chaney" refers to ceramic shards found in the soil of Saint Croix – remnants of the transatlantic slave trade that surface during heavy rain. A combination of the words "china" and "money", children pick up the Chaney as they return to the open air and grind them down into coins. The unearthing of this patterned pottery evokes the past and its legacy.

"Coming first as plates, tea pots and cups from Holland, England, Denmark and North America as part of the vast transatlantic trade of the last centuries of the second millennium, they became its detritus, broken down into the soil, just like the traded bodies," Belle explains. Belle paints enlargements of different blue and white Chaney patterns and, when pieced together as a series, the images become a visual metaphor for the diverse origins and identities of Caribbean people today.

While the current exhibition includes works from Belle's Chaney series, a ceramic collaboration between the artist and the Royal Copenhagen porcelain manufactory complements her painted Chaney series. Recent works include the series *How to Survive Colonial Nostalgia*, challenging the colonial gaze and drawing upon Belle's research in photographic archives, and the *Storm* collages reflect the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in September 2017, which damaged contents of Belle's studio.

The National Nordic Museum's Chief Curator Leslie Anne Anderson, who first organized *La Vaughn Belle: A History of Unruly Returns* in 2019, saw an opportunity to share Belle's important work following the pandemic and the return of in-person gatherings.

"In our collaborations with contemporary artists, the National Nordic Museum seeks to tell untold and forgotten stories about Nordic history and culture. La Vaughn Belle's powerful work visualizes the legacy of Danish colonialism in the US Virgin Islands, and it must be seen by a wide audience to embed it in our consciousness and expand understanding," said Anderson.

In conjunction with *La Vaughn Belle: A History of Unruly Returns*, the Museum is producing a scholarly exhibition catalogue with contributions from Anderson, Dr. Ayana Omilade Flewellen of Stanford University, Michael C. Wilson of the African American Museum in Philadelphia, and Tiphonie Yanique of Emory University.

As part of the exhibition-related programming, Flewellen and Dr. Temi Odumosu of the University of Washington will speak on the topics of Belle's work and Danish colonialism on March 31, 2024, which is the day that marks the transfer of the Virgin Islands from Denmark to the United States in 1917. The in-person lectures will take place at the National Nordic Museum. Wilson will present a virtual exhibition-related lecture in early April.

For further details about the exhibition or to purchase tickets, please visit <https://nordicmuseum.org/exhibitions/la-vaughn-belle>. This exhibition is included in a paid General Admission ticket. On the first Thursday of every month, General Admission is free and tickets to *La Vaughn Belle: A History of Unruly Returns* may be purchased for \$5 at the door.

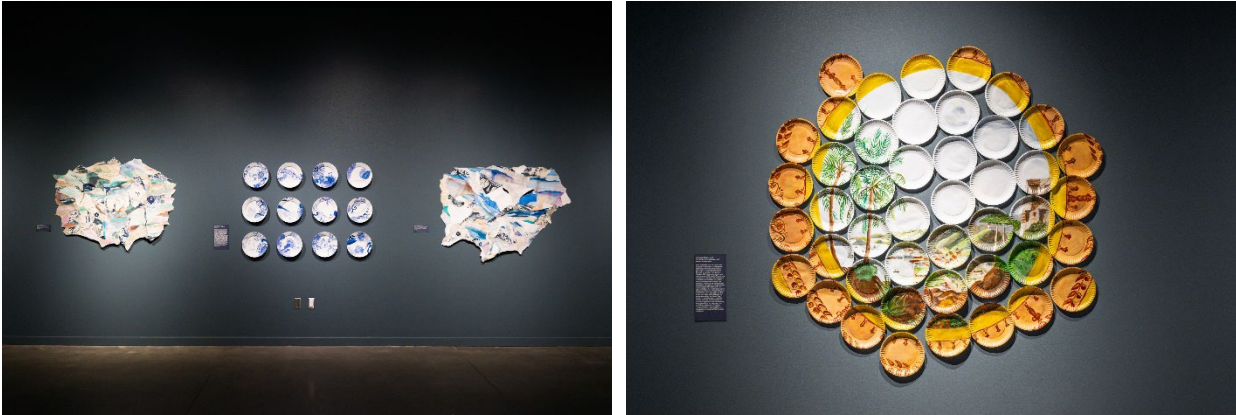


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MORE ON DANISH COLONIALISM AND SLAVERY

In the mid-17th century, Denmark established a colonial presence in the Caribbean and participated in the transatlantic slave trade until the early 19th century. During this time, approximately 120,000 people from present-day Ghana were brought to the Danish West Indies to plant and harvest sugar cane. Denmark abolished the transport of enslaved Africans in 1792, becoming the first European country to do so. The emancipation of slaves on the Danish West Indies occurred in 1848, and the Danish West Indies' former plantation economy collapsed. In 1917, Saint Croix, Saint John, and Saint Thomas were sold to the United States and introduced into yet another national narrative.

SPONSORS

La Vaughn Belle: A History of Unruly Returns at the National Nordic Museum is made possible by the Scan Design Foundation. Additional support has been provided by ArtsFund, Arts WA, Seattle Office of Arts & Culture, and 4Culture.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

La Vaughn Belle makes visible the unremembered. By exploring the material culture, looking for hidden stories and connections, Belle creates narratives from fragments. Working in a variety of disciplines, her practice includes painting, installation, photography, writing, video and public interventions. Her work with colonial era pottery led to a commission with the renowned brand of porcelain products, the Royal Copenhagen. She has exhibited her work in the Caribbean, the USA and Europe in institutions such as the

Museo del Barrio (NY), Casa de las Americas (Cuba), the Museum of the African Diaspora (CA) and Kunsthall Charlottenborg (DK). Her art is in the collections of the National Photography Museum and the Vestsjælland Museum in Denmark. She is the co-creator of I Am Queen Mary, the artist-led groundbreaking monument that confronted the Danish colonial amnesia while commemorating the legacies of resistance of the African people who were brought to the former Danish West Indies. The project was featured in over 100 media outlets around the world including *The New York Times*, *Politiken*, *VICE*, the BBC and *Le Monde*.

Belle holds an MFA from the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, Cuba and an MA and BA from Columbia University in NY. She was a finalist for the She Built NYC project to develop a monument to memorialize the legacy of Shirley Chisholm and for the Inequality in Bronze project in Philadelphia to redesign one of the first monuments to an enslaved woman at the Stenton historic house museum. As a 2018-2020 fellow at the Social Justice Institute at the Barnard Research Center for Women at Columbia University she researched the 'citizenless' Virgin Islanders in the Harlem Renaissance. She is currently working on a manuscript entitled *How To Survive Colonial Nostalgia*. Her studio is based in the Virgin Islands.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL NORDIC MUSEUM

The National Nordic Museum is the only museum in the United States that showcases the impact and influence of Nordic values and innovation in contemporary society and tells the story of 12,000 years of Nordic history and culture, across all five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) as well as three autonomous regions (Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Åland) and the cultural region of Sápmi. The Museum shares Nordic culture with people of all ages and backgrounds by exhibiting art and objects, preserving collections, providing educational and cultural experiences, and serving as a community gathering place.

The National Nordic Museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10am to 5pm. General Admission is \$20 for adults, \$10 for youth, and children 4 and under are free. Discounts are also available for college students and seniors. Further information is available at www.nordicmuseum.org.