

*****CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS*****
On Procession:
The Donkey, The Jackass, and The Mule
A project by Allison Smith

My artistic practice revisits the past in hopes of better understanding the present. Many of my artworks utilize historical craft techniques in a form of neo-Living History, where folk traditions are preserved but also re-imagined for a contemporary audience.

For my project in the upcoming Indianapolis Museum of Art's *On Procession* exhibition and April 26th parade, I am working with Herron sculpture students and faculty to create three large-scale wooden pull-toys: *The Donkey, The Jackass, and The Mule*. In order to bring these sculptures to life, I have partnered with Freetown Village Living History Museum, an organization whose mission includes educating the public about African American lives and culture in Indiana through living history performances. Freetown Village depicts a symbolic community of composite characters representing approximately 3,000 African American men, women, and children identified on the Indianapolis census of 1870, just five years after the American Civil War ended.

As a result of the war, the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution brought four million people out of slavery. The Fourteenth Amendment conferred citizenship upon former slaves, and the Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, abolished racial restrictions on voting. Collectively, these Reconstruction Amendments are the post-Civil War legislative measures that effected a paradigm shift in American civil rights.

For the *On Procession* parade, historical interpreters from Freetown Village will perform a protest advocating for women's right to vote, which had not yet been gained in 1870, despite the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. Participants will rally at Fountain Square at noon, then take to the streets, chanting and carrying placards with slogans such as *Sojourner Truth for President, Amend the 15th*, and *Marching on to Victory*. This is a reenactment of a reenactment performed by Freetown Village during Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign in the 1980s. Conceived as fiction based on fact, it will provide a pocket of history within the parade, and the signage will connect the past to

the present through references to the Civil War, the Civil Rights movement, and the current presidential election campaigns.

In conceptualizing this project for *On Procession*, I wanted to make reference to an archetypal procession, the Biblical story of Palm Sunday, in which Jesus rode on a donkey through the gates of Jerusalem as a political gesture of peace and humility toward onlookers who waved palms as a symbol of military victory and heroism. For Indianapolis, a city that hosts the Indy 500 parade and more war memorials than any other U.S. city outside of Washington, D.C., I envisioned donkeys being pulled through the streets as a playful response to both Indiana's car culture and the sculptural legacy of militaristic equestrian statuary. I also researched the donkey as a Democratic Party symbol, which originated during Andrew Jackson's political campaign of 1828, when his opponents called him a "jackass" and he claimed it as his campaign symbol.

Since Civil War-era Democrats were pro-slavery, the donkey would not have been a positive political symbol for African Americans in 1870. As a "beast of burden," it may have represented their toil and the heavy load they had born under slavery, or the broken promise of "40 acres and a mule" made by Major General William T. Sherman as compensation to freedmen at the war's end. It could also have represented the stubbornness and ignorance of Southern whites who would attempt to deter their freedom.

I am interested in the ways that symbols are unfixed and can carry multiple and often-contradictory meanings that change over time. This project is intended to resonate with our current political climate, the particular ways that race and gender come together in the ongoing presidential elections, and the tremendous paradigm shift that is possible now. The word donkey translates to "easel" in several languages, and I am interested in making sculptures that are literally a support for ideas and dialog.

--Allison Smith March 2008

VOLUNTEERS ARE NEEDED to participate as parade attendants in the April 26th parade, to pull and assist with the sculptures and to carry signage. Please contact Natalie McCabe at (317) 972-7922 for information.