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# 'Invisible Bodies, Disposable Cloth'

## A new University of Rhode Island gallery exhibit explores the history of slavery in Rhode Island

- By Helena Touhey/Features Editor Feb 9, 2017

- Michael Derr | Staff photos

An installation by Deborah Baronas is a focal point of the 'Invisible Bodies, Disposable Cloth: Slavery in Rhode Island, 1783-1850s' exhibit at the URI Fine Arts Gallery in South Kingstown. The installation includes a panorama sketch of slaves working in a field, as well as sketches of slaves printed on scrim, a type of fabric, which has an ethereal quality, making the bodies both visible and invisible.

That Rhode Island played a key role in the slave trade is no secret to most people. The depth of the state's involvement, however, may not be as well known.

Conversations don't often veer into how Rhode Island's colonial success had everything to do with businesses rooted in slavery, or how Newport saw more slave ships than any other colonial port. People often talk about the state's many rum distilleries and their part in the Triangle Trade, but not about all of the slave ship captains who lived here and left from here on journeys east and south. And when people talk of the state's textile legacy, the deep connection of that industry with slavery is often overlooked, perhaps avoided.

A new exhibit at the University of Rhode Island is exploring the state's history with slavery, and not shying away from any truths. "Invisible Bodies, Disposable Cloth: Rhode Island and Slavery, 1783-1850s" combines art and historical facts to illustrate the role slavery played in the state's economic success.

"This exhibit brings out from the shadows the vibrant color of Rhode Island labor – from enslaved cooks and ropemakers, to indentured sailors, to semi-dependent or free weavers, coopers and washerwomen. It highlights the growing independence of local African-American and North American labor in the Rhode Island economy. Yet it also juxtaposes the new northern textile economy with its counterpart: the Southern slave economy which was both the supplier of cotton and a customer of Rhode Island textiles," reads a banner – printed on fabric – that is seen upon entering the exhibit.

"It was not just important for the show to be visually stunning, [but] also important for it to be historically correct," said Robert Dilworth, an art professor and a central organizer of the show. He said that a main purpose of the exhibit is to illustrate that, even after

emancipation, many Rhode Island families continued to profit from slavery by way of the textile mills.

The idea for the show first arose about a year ago and evolved over time. Dilworth and Karen de Bruin, associate professor of languages, are both part of the Rhode Island Middle Passage Ceremonies and Port Marker Project, which is striving to publicly note the locations of major slave ports in the state in Newport, Bristol, Warren and Providence. More than 60 percent of slave ships came from the state, and the project seeks to make that common historical knowledge through autonomous projects in each town as well as collaborative, statewide initiatives. The show at URI is a way to bring some of that historical knowledge to the university's campus, and also to South County, which played its own role through the success of its farms and, later, its textile mills.

De Bruin and Dilworth, along with other professors and historians, formed the Committee for Understanding Slavery in Rhode Island to develop the exhibit and its related programming, which corresponds with Black History Month.

"We wanted the story to be told on cloth, and through cloth. That was a very big deal," Dilworth said. With the help of students, the exhibit panels were printed on muslin on a large printer in the university's art department.

Cotton was sent to Rhode Island from the South, made into a fabric called kersey – a very coarse blend of wool and cotton that was inexpensive to produce – and then sent back to the South, where it was made into garments. "This business continued well after emancipation," said Dilworth, who noted that most think of slavery as a Southern institution but, in reality, mills in the North aided and benefited from slavery. And many of those mills were located not far from the university.

Peter Fay, a historian, did all of the research for the exhibit, and Marcus Nevius, a history professor, helped with the exhibit's narrative. Fay said he began research for the show last summer and it includes "lots of new stories that have never been uncovered before now."

According to Fay, Newport was the dominant slave port in the country, and Rhode Islanders launched the majority of all American-owned slaves ships, from the beginning of the colony to 1807. In total, he said, 100,000 Africans were transported by Rhode Island ships, from Africa to Southern colonies and the West Indies.

The exhibit is set up in such a way that, depending on if entered to the left or to the right, visitors can take two journeys. On the left side, the history of slavery in Rhode Island unfolds, while the right side of the gallery takes visitors through slavery in the South.

Much of the historical information is presented on fabric. The exhibit includes old pictures, paintings and newspaper clippings, as well as the words of slaves sharing their experiences.

One retelling, printed in large type on a panel, recalls the thoughts of Samuel Hopkins of Newport in 1800: “The slave trade and the slavery of the Africans, in which this town has had a greater hand than any other town in New England ... has been the first and chief spring of all the trade and business by which this town has risen and flourished. And there is no evidence that the citizens in general have a proper sense of the evil of this business, of the guilt which has been contracted by it, and of the displeasure of God for it, or that they have a just abhorrence of it; but there is much evidence of the contrary, and that there is little or no true repentance of it.”

Large drawings hang between historical panels, portraying people of color at work. These drawings complement a large installation, which runs the length of a back wall, depicting slaves at work in a field. Large, transparent strips of fabric hang in front of the panorama, but with enough room that visitors can walk between them. On these large pieces of fabric are additional drawings of workers, solitary figures, at once visible and invisible.

The art installation is the work of Deborah Baronas, a resident of Barrington, who was invited by university faculty to be an artist in residence for the exhibit. Baronas has long

worked in textiles, which is why she was asked to create a visual component for the show.

Baronas said she worked from writings and books, as well as the stories that were shared during group meetings for the exhibit, to create the installation.

“I want to give life to the subjects; I want them to be recognized, kind of render them as they were, but also bring them into the present, kind of as if you could have a conversation with them,” she said. “In some cases I choose to give them personalities ... [there is] one woman in the panorama that is very clearly angry, and [there is] a gaze of a child ... that’s just lost.”

Baronas said they are anonymous faces, some of which are expressive. She also said the scrims, or fabrics, are meant to play off the figurative drawings displayed on the walls. “[They] draw you in and I like that they make you feel a part of the story ... to feel that you were there or that you were experiencing their presence,” she said.

The ethereal quality of the installation has a way of showing that the slave workers were present, but also not; one can see them, but can also see through them, as if they are not real people, hard at work in the field.

“We choose to put them on fabric because, No. 1, in the North, [former] slaves worked in the mills, [and second] there is this relationship between the South and the North in terms of textile mills: they pick it, we weave it, they sell it,” Baronas explained. “We choose to put certain pieces on fabric to tie in the story of the cotton [and] fabric business ... but they also create this sort of ... less rigid way of displaying it.”

“It’s been really fascinating, and just appalling really,” Baronas said of working on the exhibit and realizing the full history of slavery in Rhode Island. The exhibit tells “an incredible story, and one that people don’t know and they should know about,” she said.

To help disseminate those histories, organizers have planned a selection of corresponding presentations and programs Saturday, as well as a keynote address and closing reception Feb. 17.

The keynote will be given by Christy Clark-Pujara, assistant professor of history in the Afro-American Studies Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has written a book on the history of slavery in Rhode Island, "Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island," and will speak on this topic.

"One of the things I talk about [is the] importance of public remembrance of the institution of slavery," Clark-Pujara said in a phone interview last week. "Rhode Island has a love affair with its history, but that history has been whitewashed." In fact, she said, she wrote her book because she couldn't find a single volume about the history of slavery in Rhode Island.

For example, she noted how, in the mid-1800s, 10 percent of the population in Rhode Island was enslaved, but the state was dominating the North American slave trade.

"An economic cornerstone of the state was slavery, coming and going, and people don't realize that," she said. "Public remembrance is critically important."

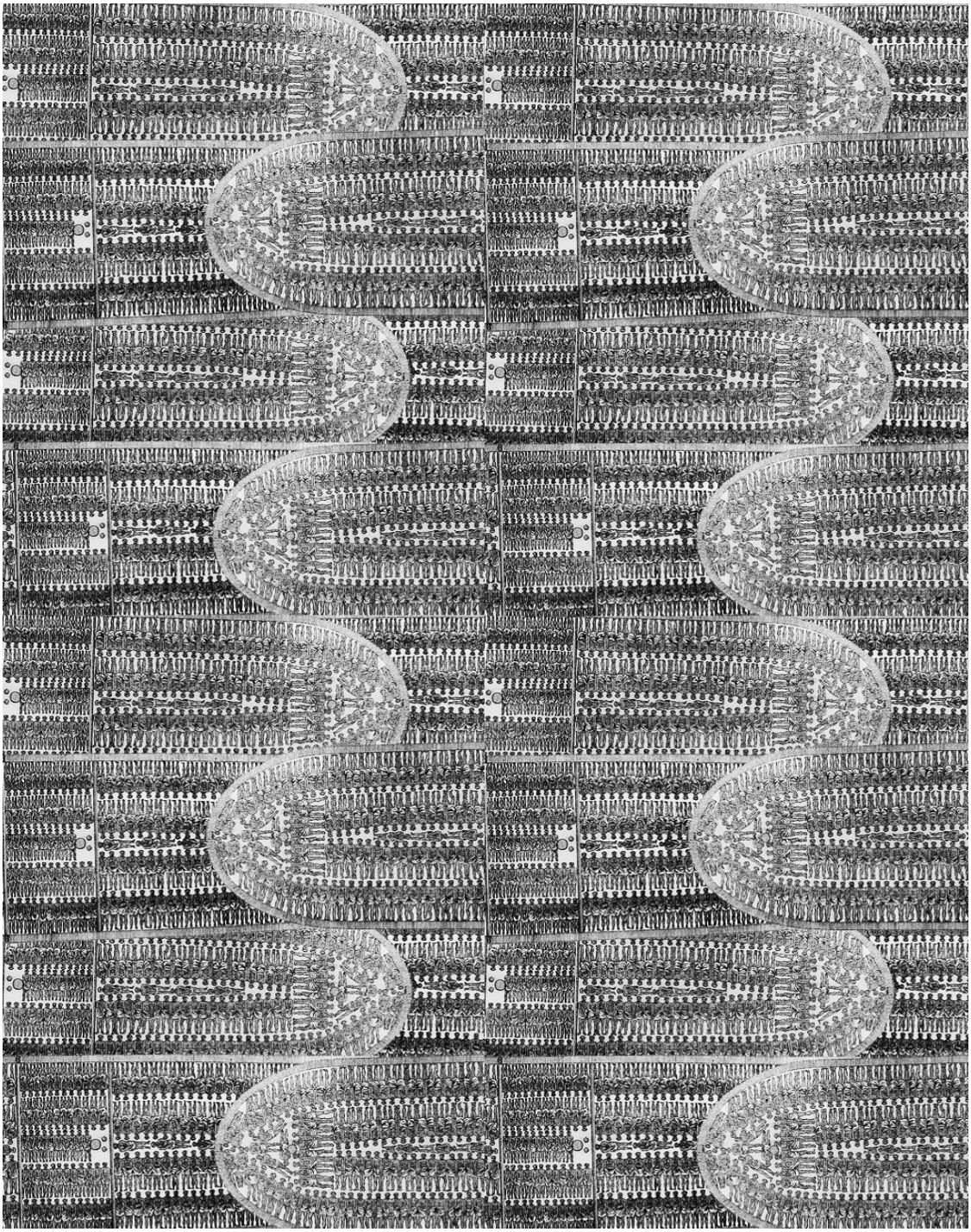
*artsliving@independentri.com*

Contributed image from Deborah Baronas (above)

Pictured at left is a drawing by Deborah Baronas that is included in the 'Invisible Bodies, Disposable Cloth' exhibit at the URI Fine Arts Gallery. Pictured above is a print by Baronas of slaves on slave ships, repeated over and over again, and printed on muslin fabric.

Contributed image

Elleanor Eldridge of Warwick in 1799 was celebrated as a 'competent and fully accomplished weaver' of ornamental cloth at the age of 15.



This print by Deborah Baronas is of slaves on slaves ships, repeated over and over again, and printed on muslin fabric.


Michael Derr | Staff photographer

An undated photograph taken on Whitehall Street in Atlanta is included in the 'Invisible Bodies, Disposable Cloth: Slavery in Rhode Island, 1783-1850s' exhibit at the URI Fine Arts Gallery in South Kingstown. The exhibit allows visitors to take two journeys: One through slavery in the South, and another through slavery in the North, focusing on Rhode Island.