

FORT GANSEVOORT



Christopher Myers

Drapetomania

Opening: Saturday, December 14, 6 – 8 PM

On View: December 14, 2019 – February 8, 2020

Fort Gansevoort is pleased to announce *Drapetomania*, the gallery's first exhibition in Los Angeles, presenting new works by critically admired author and playwright, Christopher Myers (b. New York City, 1974). Comprising monumental textile works and sculptures, the exhibition will explore ways in which cherished narratives of freedom are constituted by converse notions of bondage. The exhibition takes its title from a debunked pseudoscientific theory of mental illness promulgated by American physician Samuel Cartwright in 1851, describing a form of mania – an irrational desire to flee – that caused enslaved Africans to attempt escape.

In a recent visit to a juvenile detention facility in Texas, Myers asked an incarcerated 13-year-old girl what she wanted after she was released. She replied, "Same as everyone wants, just y'know, to live my life and be free."

Myers has been visiting juvenile detention centers for the past 15 years, as an author and illustrator whose work for young people has garnered acclaim. He has been thinking a lot about children like this one and the countless other young people he has met behind bars. The United States currently imprisons an excess of 50,000 children, all with the same dreams of freedom that have been fed to them by a culture obsessed with the signifiers of liberty and bondage; that echo in contemporary debates, from civil rights to gun rights. Such topics have become the subject of Christopher Myers' appliqué quilt work. *Every Temporary Hero* depicts the recent surge of tearing down confederate monuments on a global scale. Included in the group of monuments within the piece are Saddam Hussein, Cecil Rhodes, and Vladimir Lenin. All of these conversations are framed around a foundational myth of freedom, which carries with it the shadow of bondage. Slavery, the displacement of indigenous peoples, colonialism, gender oppression, the children in jail today – all of these histories play out against a consistent dialogue around freedom. Myers' appliqué quilt works each touch on one or more of these topics on a global scale, their imagery and size depicting this international range. *How to Name a Famine, a Fire, a Flood* illustrates the many results of the climate crisis throughout the world, highlighting the growing effects on marginalized and impoverished communities. In this piece, Myers reflects on how these crises will live on within the collective memory.

In *Drapetomania* at Fort Gansevoort Los Angeles, Myers tackles these thorny issues, focusing upon the interdependent narratives of freedom and bondage, and their currency in contemporary culture. In several new large-scale quilted tapestries, the artist explores texts that take freedom as their subject. The works on view are rich with references to history, films, novels, and myths, including such sources of inspiration as Senegalese film 'Touki Bouki' (1973), directed by Djibril Diop Mambéty; Sun Ra's Afrofuturist film 'Space is the Place' (1972), Teinosuke Kinugasa's 1926 silent horror movie 'Kurutta Ipeji' (A Page of Madness); and 'Sultana's Dream', a 1905 feminist utopian story written by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. In "The Talented Tenth and the Beauty of Statistics", Myers depicts WEB DuBois's data visualization developed for the Paris Exposition of 1900. Here the data sets are beautified while also thinking through DuBois's desires to explain the position of African Americans to a global audience. In this body of work, Myers thinks globally about the ways in which notions of freedom are built in colonial and contemporary contexts, and channels his revelations into material form.

Drawing upon his experience as a researcher, and his own family's history in the United States, Myers will also present in *Drapetomania* a series of sculptures inspired by the craftsmanship inherent to the slave trade – both the physical craft metal work and the narrative work that is inherent to the project of freedom in the United States.

Myers remarked, "The goal of the work is to show how both these concepts, freedom and bondage, are interrelated and inseparable, constitutive of each other. In the West, the obsession with this matrix of signifiers erases the many ways that one's freedom is dependent on the bondage of others."

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Christopher Myers is a multimedia artist, author, and playwright from New York City born in 1974. Myers earned his B.A. in Art-Semiotics and American Civilization with focus on race and culture from Brown University in 1995. His work has been exhibited throughout the United States and internationally at venues including MoMA PS1, The Art Institute of Chicago, The Mistake Room at Paos GDL, Akron Art Museum, Contrast Gallery Shanghai, Goethe-Institut Ghana, Kigali Genocide Memorial Center Rwanda, San Art Ho Chi Minh City Vietnam, and The Studio Museum in Harlem. Myers is represented in the public collections of The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Mead Art Museum at Amherst College, MA, and JP Morgan Chase Collection. Myers won a Caldecott Honor in 1998 for his illustrations in the book Harlem and a Coretta Scott King Award in 2016 for illustrating Firebird with Misty Copeland. Fort Gansevoort will present Christopher Myers's work at UNTITLED, ART San Francisco 2020.

Above Image: Christopher Myers, *Arms Wide as the City*, 2019, Appliqué fabric, 85 x 59 inches.