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La Vaughn Belle Transforms St. Croix's Architectural Story into Art With Powerful Smithsonian Exhibition

Her life-sized fretwork sculptures, inspired by St. Croix's post-Fireburn architectural heritage, now stand at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York, celebrating freedom, resilience, and artistic innovation

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La Vaughn Belle's "The House That Freedoms Built" at the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York. By. LA VAUGHN BELLE

The story of artist La Vaughn Belle's latest project began in 2011, when she contemplated buying a piece of property in Christiansted on which two derelict houses stood. It has led, in 2024, to an exhibition at a prestigious museum in New York.

“They were so cheap it blew my mind,” said Ms. Belle, speaking of the houses she saw in the real estate listing on that fateful day thirteen years ago. She decided to check them out. “They were very damaged, which was why the price was like that,” she chuckled, speaking to the Consortium in an exclusive interview. “It was also in the area of the town that was pretty much abandoned. A lot of the other houses looked as damaged, if not more.”

Ms. Belle didn't pursue the purchase at the time, but said she came to regret it when she noticed the houses had been boarded up and cleaned. “I thought someone else bought it, and it's like my heart dropped. I felt like I missed the most important train in my life.” When she got a second chance at the property, she did not hesitate. “I just felt so compelled.”

Was that compulsion the force of history reaching out to the artist, whose work focuses on how the echoes of the past impact the present and the future? After purchasing the property, Ms. Belle connected with a historian who uncovered the extraordinary story of what she had come to own.



La Vaughn Belle at the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York, next to her "The House That Freedoms Built" exhibit. (Credit: La Vaughn Belle)

“He handed me a chronology that went all the way back to the 1700s,” Ms. Belle said. “The first registered owner was a woman named Elizabeth Gabriel.” Ms. Gabriel was a Benin woman who “survived the Middle Passage, survived slavery, and managed to find her way out of slavery in the

1700s, and then bought this house.” In fact, Ms. Belle disclosed, the first three owners of the property all had a similar story, as did the early owners of neighboring homes. “They had a section of the town where they were relegated to live by law,” Ms. Belle noted.

This new knowledge of the history of her property sparked something in Ms. Belle. “I just felt like it changed my view on the building, it might change other people.” She started a blog, [The House That Freedom Built](#), which documented the restoration of the property and the history of its East Street neighborhood. Her hands-on involvement with the restoration work led her to develop “a very intimate relationship between architecture and the story,” which then led her to notice the differences between Christiansted and Frederiksted when it came to the look and feel of the buildings in each town. “One of them is the preponderance of the fretwork design” in Frederiksted – something absent in its eastern twin.

“I learned that it's because of the Fireburn,” Ms. Belle told the Consortium. After the 1878 labor revolution caused the fiery destruction of much of Frederiksted, the Crucians who rebuilt the town used that distinctive fretwork to decorate many of the new structures. “These fretwork designs are the ways that people marked themselves in the town, marked their dreams, their hopes,” she said.

Noting the heavy restrictions placed on formerly enslaved people at the time – no public gatherings, banned from selling liquor or farming, prohibited from marrying whites, forced to carry their “free papers” with them at all times, restricted from wearing certain fabrics, forced to hunt runaway slaves as a condition of their freedom – Ms. Belle noted that “their houses would have been their only real free space.”

That realization led to the first iteration of the current project. “Constructed Manumissions” was a collection of three small sculptures – 2 foot tall wooden houses made entirely out of fretwork. Working in Denmark in 2017, Ms. Belle constructed the homes herself, by hand. She fitted the pieces together and attached them to each other with a system of metal pins, “almost like a Lego.” With no glue and no frame to provide structure, the sculptures were delicate.

“I wanted it to reflect that fragility of freedom,” Ms. Belle declared, connecting that fragility to contemporary developments. “Even though that's a historic project, we can see...even in the United States and many parts of the world...how our freedoms are constantly under threat,” she noted. “It's not like you win a freedom and it's done, it's like you have to keep negotiating them,” Ms. Belle argued, referencing the rollback of reproductive rights and the ongoing efforts to place restrictions on voting rights. “Even in the pandemic...we lost certain freedoms to be outdoors.”

The small sculptures, “were kind of combining these two architectural legacies and histories,” Ms. Belle explained - shaped like the homes owned by freed women in Christiansted but made of the fretwork free people used in the rebuilding of St. Croix's western town. But the small sculptures weren't enough. “The first version, to me, was like a mockup,” Ms. Belle shared. “I always dreamed of doing a bigger version.”

In pursuit of that dream, Ms. Belle began to explore grant opportunities, which led her to connect with Frandelle Gerard, executive director of Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism (CHANT), a non-profit that focuses on heritage and sustainable tourism on St. Croix. Ms. Belle found that her restoration project was being challenged by the lack of workers skilled in the old craft trades. At the time, CHANT was running a program to teach young Crucians exactly these craft and trade skills that had faded from the population over time. So the artist and the organization joined forces, and Ms. Belle led a workshop where she taught people how to design fretwork similar to what adorns so many historical buildings in Frederiksted. “They designed their own patterns, and

actually, I've used some of them in this new project,” she noted.

Approximately 18 months ago, an invitation from the Cooper-Hewitt Museum would put all that planning and preparatory work to the test. The design museum was inviting Ms. Belle to reproduce her fretwork houses on a larger scale for their Making Home – Smithsonian Design Triennial. “I couldn't believe it, because I'd applied at least three times to different foundations and gotten rejected” even with Ms. Gerard's able assistance, she recalled. The Cooper-Hewitt invitation “really was a dream come true.”

A life-size sculpture of that nature, however, was beyond Ms. Belle's individual capacity to produce. She teamed up with Powerhouse Arts, a New York non-profit focused on helping artists realize projects that they may not have the resources or skill set to execute on their own. The larger sculptures, intended to be mounted outside the museum, had to be fit for purpose – wind rated to a Category 3 hurricane blast and fireproof, among other requirements from Cooper-Hewitt. The challenge for Ms. Belle was to comply with the museum's stipulations while still maintaining the integrity of her artistic vision. “That's where the exquisiteness of working with digital illustrators and designers really helped,” she told the Consortium. “They came up with such a brilliant solution...it was the perfect combination between art, science and technology.”

The work was exacting, at times almost painfully so. Each panel of each sculpture was meticulously designed in a digital format and sent to Ms. Belle for approval. “They created a digital rendering as if I could walk into the building.” The intricate digital files created by the team in New York allowed Ms. Belle, who resides on St. Croix, to inspect and manage the execution of her vision down to the most minute details. Once the design was approved after several months, fabrication began – another painstaking endeavor. Constructed out of polycarbonate, the panels had to be hand weathered in order to look like wood. “They had people beating it, stripping it, cutting into it, painting it, stripping it, sanding it, painting it again,” the artist said, describing the laborious process. Eventually, the small team was ready to assemble the three sculptures, and Ms. Belle flew to New York to oversee the final stage of the work, and place the finishing touches on the over 300 pieces of fretwork that comprised the final design. The pressure was on that final week, with the small team putting in 16-hour days to ensure that everything was completed on time.

The almost ethereal feeling of the finished sculptures, Ms. Belle explains, is the result of ingenious engineering and design choices. The normal structural elements that keep a building standing – metal frame and foundation – are either absent or cleverly hidden, so that all an observer sees is really the fretwork houses and the small legs they are standing on.

With the exhibition successfully opened and the sculptures now on display at the entryway of the Cooper-Hewitt museum until August 2025, Ms. Belle must now focus her attention on what comes next. When the exhibit is over, she explained, she will be responsible for what happens next with these 9-foot, “human-sized” sculptures. Currently, she is exploring opportunities for the pieces to travel to other exhibitions on the mainland, but ultimately, she wants the fretwork homes to come home – to St. Croix.

On the Big Island, Ms. Belle believes the sculptures, beyond just being beautifully crafted objets d'art, will serve to remind Crucians of the resistance and resilience of their forebears, and the value of creating spaces where one can be truly free.