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Virgin Islands Artist La Vaughn Belle Named Finalist for Billie Holiday Monument in Queens

The St. Croix-based artist's proposal places Holiday at the edge of a reflective pool, shifting attention away from performance and toward the private strength, sacrifice and self-fashioning behind her public voice.

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Rendering of La Vaughn Belle's Billie Holiday: Still, at the Crossing, a proposed Queens monument that presents Holiday in a quiet pre-stage moment, emerging beside a reflective pool. By. LA VAUGHN BELLE.

Virgin Islands artist La Vaughn Belle has been selected as a finalist to design a new public monument honoring Billie Holiday in Queens, New York, with a proposal that focuses on the

legendary singer's interior life, self-possession and emotional authority before performance.

Belle's proposal, *Billie Holiday: Still, at the Crossing*, presents Holiday emerging from the ground at the edge of a reflective pool, occupying a threshold between public and private self, memory and presence.

Rather than centering Holiday in performance, Belle's concept shifts attention to a pre-stage moment. The proposal imagines Holiday elegantly dressed for a public appearance while wrapped in a private garment, a figure held within herself. At that threshold, the monument honors the interior life, self-fashioning and emotional authority that shaped her voice and artistic legacy.

Belle said her proposal was shaped by archival images that revealed Holiday away from the stage, in moments where her private world seemed visible.

"When I started going through archival images of Billie Holiday, I kept returning to the quiet ones, not the performance shots, but the ones where a part of her interior world seemed visible," said Belle. "She was so intentional about how she presented herself, how she dressed, what she wanted to communicate about Black women and femininity and herself. And yet, she also sacrificed so much to keep singing *Strange Fruit*. I became fascinated by what lived inside of her that made all of that possible. That's what I chose to make visible. That's what I wanted to make monumental."

The commission is part of New York City's *She Built NYC* initiative, a public art program dedicated to honoring women who have shaped the city's history and cultural life. Belle was also a finalist in the inaugural *She Built NYC* competition honoring Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm.

Belle is the co-creator of *I Am Queen Mary*, the groundbreaking artist-led monument that confronted Danish colonial amnesia while commemorating the legacies of resistance of African people brought to the former Danish West Indies. The project was featured in more than 100 media outlets worldwide, including the *New York Times*, the *BBC* and *Le Monde*, and was named one of the most important artworks of the decade by the Danish national paper *Politiken*.

Members of the public can view the finalist proposals and submit feedback through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs public feedback process.

Belle is a multidisciplinary artist whose work explores the production of history through the making of archives, myths, monuments and maps. Her work creates layered narratives from fragments found in the material culture of the colonial period, often merging them with her own body and experiences.

Her work is held in the collections of the National Gallery of Art, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and institutions in Denmark, Germany and Puerto Rico. Her studio is based in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands.