

FORT GANSEVOORT

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Christopher Myers at Fort Gansevoort

By Essence Harden

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Christopher Myers, *Deadpan Buster* (2019). Appliqué fabric, 83 x 58.25 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.

In the 19th century, Samuel A. Cartwright espoused an anti-black theory that posited enslaved black people's desires and actions of escape as a kind of mental illness. The theory, called drapetomania, is the title of a solo exhibition at Fort Gansevoort by the New York-based multi-disciplinary artist, playwright, and author Christopher Myers. Cartwright's theory of drapetomania advocated for structures of bondage, diet, and bodily afflictions to cure enslaved black people of acts of emancipation. Myers has taken up the polemic of freedom and the quest for domination in a series of works—industrial sculptures and textile

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appliqués—that consider the notion of escape and the strategies of bound-ness, while also exploring the physical and conceptual realms between liberation and abjection.

Myers loads the gallery's walls with a visceral vernacular of mammoth proportions, all rendered through cloth, stitch, and embroidery: russet, canary, and red bodies punctured, bleeding, and layered atop each other; journeying figures parted by flames and rising waters; geometric helixes; and a lone figure attached to a rocket. The seemingly benign and ornamental quality of the quilt/quilter has allowed Myers to follow in a tradition of radical craft works wherein condemnation and paths towards liberation (e.g. the black American quilting tradition, the AIDS Memorial Quilt) are admissible by virtue of their balmy texture and domestic relation. In *How to Name a Famine, a Fire, a Flood* (all works 2019), Myers depicts figures surrounded by states of environmental disaster fleeing licks of flames and rising tides on foot or bikes. In *How to Start a Fire*, not included in the exhibition, raised fists, raised iPhones, and gas masks mark political turbulence, as does a resistant band of people. As Myers works with a community of textile artisans from Luxor, Egypt to produce each of these pieces, the weight of the global economic crisis, and political strife—along with the possibilities within community insurgence—are particularly significant.

The three sculptures installed in the center of the gallery in *Drapetomania* contrast the visual field of vivid colors and pliable textile works that boldly occupy the walls. In particular, *Shackle and Light* and *A Doubling of Cages* reimagine designs engineered for the restriction of enslaved black Americans. An obtuse collar of iron with extended tendrils has been made into a candelabra, with white candles leaving pools of wax on the floor below. A metal head cage with a taxidermied rodent inside the extended mouthpiece (presumably live in its original design) is made of laced golden steel. No site in the gallery lets us forget the material weight and consequence of demanding freedom or the haunting designs drafted towards the impossibility of being free. In a room abounding with historical references—where Du Bois infographics on black life are transformed into appliqué (*The Talented Tenth and the Beauty of Statistics*), share space with the bullet ridden silhouettes of black people murdered by police/vigilantes (*What Does it Mean to Matter (Community Autopsy)*)—Myers uses the layering inherent to quilting to fashion fervent overlapping emblems on freedom/subjugation.

Christopher Myers: *Drapetomania* runs from December 14, 2019–February 8, 2020 at Fort Gansevoort (4859 Fountain Ave., Los Angeles, CA, 90029).

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Christopher Myers, *Drapetomania* (installation view) (2020). Image courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.



Christopher Myers, *Drapetomania* (installation view) (2020). Image courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.

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Christopher Myers, *The Talented Tenth and the Beauty of Statistics* (2019).
Appliqué fabric, 144 x 144 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.

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Christopher Myers, *Drapetomania* (installation view) (2020). Image courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.

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Christopher Myers, *Monument to Shouting* (2019). Appliqué fabric, 85.5 x 59 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.