



Photo by LA VAUGHN BELLE

A 23-foot sculpture of Queen Mary, who led the Fireburn labor revolt against 19th century Danish colonial rule on St. Croix, was unveiled in Copenhagen, Denmark, in March. The statue, the brainchild of St. Croix artist La Vaughn Belle and Denmark's Jeannette Ehlers, is Denmark's and possibly Europe's first public monument to a black woman.

## Local artist La Vaughn Belle rings up string of successes

**By Curtis Walcott**

Daily News Staff

ST. CROIX — Several months after launching a groundbreaking public art project in Europe that garnered global attention, Virgin Islands artist La Vaughn Belle isn't resting on her laurels. She is bound for New York City.

The Crucian has been tapped for a prestigious two-year fellowship at Barnard College in New York City where she will serve as artist-in-residence at the Barnard Center for Research on Women's Social Justice Institute, which helps visionary feminists and scholars develop and disseminate their work. Barnard is affiliated with Columbia University, which is Belle's alma mater, so she will be at home — though she isn't required to live in New York City during the duration of the fellowship — as she pursues her research.

Belle is revelling at the opportunity the fellowship affords as it includes a financial stipend, a research assistant and access to Columbia's and New York City's substantial material resources.

"I am thrilled. I am very excited. I have come back full circle. I lived in Harlem and I attended Columbia University," she said recently, adding that it's gratifying as an artist based in a small community to get recognition, support.

Belle, while at Barnard, will explore what she termed the period of ambiguity created after the sale and transfer of the Virgin Islands from Denmark to the United States — the transfer occurred in 1917 but Virgin Islanders weren't granted U.S. citizenship until 1927 so during a 10-year period they were essentially nationless — as it relates to the Harlem Renaissance and Virgin Islanders who were stalwarts of the artistic movement, which took place in Harlem in the 1920's. She said she is also interested in what can be learned from the movement at a time when full U.S. citizen-

ship still elude Virgin Islanders.

Belle said that about 20,000 Virgin Islanders were living in New York City at the height of the Harlem Renaissance and they were politically active, but Virgin Islanders remain in the dark about their stories.

"It's an important period that we don't know much about," she said.

For instance, Belle said that it's not common knowledge that scholar Arturo Schomburg, a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance, has Virgin Islands ties. His mother hailed from St. Croix. Interestingly, Belle will surely benefit from Schomburg's largesse as his considerable collection of papers and artifacts about the black experience is the backbone of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City, which is part of the city's public library system. The center is named for the Puerto Rico native, and Belle is likely to be there frequently conducting research.

### Success aplenty

It's been a heady year for Belle. She has seemingly hit her stride. This past year, she has had a meeting with Queen Margrethe II of Denmark and the venerated Royal Copenhagen company commissioned her to design ceremonial porcelain plates and the figurine, an owl, for the Arets Harald Prize that's awarded annually to the University of Denmark's most distinguished professor. But her magnum opus was a 23-foot sculpture immortalizing Queen Mary, who led the Fireburn labor revolt against 19th century Danish colonial rule on St. Croix, that she and her collaborator, Danish national Jeannette Ehlers, unveiled in Copenhagen, Denmark, in March. The reveal coincided with the centennial of the purchase and transfer of the Virgin Islands.

The statue, titled "I am Queen Mary," is Denmark's and possibly Europe's first

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public monument to a black woman. Queen Mary, whose name was Mary Thomas, is seated upright in a wicker chair, torch in one hand and a knife for cutting sugarcane in the other, and the pose is reminiscent of the iconic image of Black Panther leader Huey Newton. The towering statue, a symbolic rebuke of colonialism and an embrace of African resistance efforts, dwarfs a nearby sculpture of the Italian Renaissance masterpiece, Michelangelo's David, a juxtaposition rich with irony.

Additionally, the statue is a hybrid of Belle's and Ehlers' bodies, using 3D scanning technology, and its base consists of chunks of coral stones harvested from Belle's property on St. Croix.

"We will not be forgotten," Belle declares, summing up the import of the statute. It serves as a counterpoint to the memory deficit that she says Denmark suffers from regarding their ex-colonies.

### Worldwide acclaim

Belle said she was overwhelmed by the international buzz the IAQM project engendered.

"When our sculpture was being commented in The Guardian in a conversation about Winnie Mandela. When we were mentioned in Time magazine. It was just shocking, even though we hoped for it. Then we were contacted by people from all over the world — from Poland to Uganda. We realized how a little island in the Caribbean in which this act happened could inspire people because it was telling a story that was big, it was related to colonialism, which everyone is impacted by in the world," she said.

Belle added, "It was about women empowerment, which half of the people in the world are women and no matter your race or background was you could relate to a story of about women stepping up and being leaders. There were a lot of points for people to connect — and we were women artists. That's why I think it inspired global attention."

The spotlight, though, has been at times been harsh, even at home in the Virgin Islands. Backlash. Criticism. Acrimony. But Belle said the response to the project has been "mostly positive."

"There will never be a consensus regarding a public art project of that magnitude. Not everyone will like it and if everyone likes it that would tell me it's weak," Belle said.

In fact, Belle says that art is unique in that at its finest it provokes thought — it creates conversation. That's her aim. Creating new knowledge, dialogue.



La Vaughn Belle

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— La Vaughn Belle regarding the "I am Queen Mary" project

The Crucian's work is noteworthy in that she focuses on the coloniality of the Virgin Islands as it relates to its past relationship with Denmark and its present one with the U.S., but she shifts from medium to medium seamlessly, depending on the project. She paints, utilizes video, engages in public installation, and photography too is in her repertoire.

"I think about the work and what is the best way to approach it," she said about her methodology.

### Special calling

The daughter of the Rev. Rawle Belle, an Episcopalian priest, the younger Belle's decision to become

an artist wasn't youthful whimsy.

"My father had his calling at 14 years old and I see my practice as a calling. I don't see it just as a profession or a job. I also see it as a calling, an ancestral calling in the same way," she said.

The St. Dunstan's Episcopal School graduate was on a pre-med path at Columbia University when she took a painting class as a junior and was hooked. Destiny. So, after teaching briefly — she has a master's degree in education — Belle decided to return to school to acquire the technical skills essential for any practicing artist. That led to four "life-changing" years at the Instituto Superior de Arte

in Havana, Cuba, where she earned a master's degree and mastered Spanish in the process.

Belle's focus on colonialism is unsurprising.

"Our greatest challenge, what affects every aspect of our lives is our colonial history," she said, adding that the territory's visual iconography — from the sugar plantations to the towns bearing the names of Danish kings — "makes it impossible" for Virgin Islanders to ignore their Danish connections.

But Denmark is afflicted with amnesia regarding its colonial past, she said. She met a Danish man in Cuba, purely by chance, who knew little of the Virgin Islands and during her first visit to Denmark she looked for reminders of a nexus with the Virgin Islands but they didn't exist. That angered her. She felt insulted.

"That's how I started on that path," Belle said.

### The future

Belle has resisted the urge to be an artist in exile, choosing to work out of her studio in Christiansted, not far from St. Dunstan's Episcopal School where she first clasped a paint brush and was mentored by noted local illustrator Leo Carty. She faces special challenges as a full-time artist in an island community in which art is devalued and as a mother of three school-aged children. But she wouldn't have it any other way.

"Because I have a very full and complex life. I am very focused and disciplined about my work," she said.

Belle added, "I make my studio practice as important as eating. I eat every day. I deal with some aspect of my studio practice everyday."

As for motherhood, the Crucian says her children invigorate her.

"My children inspire me. They are in the studio with me a lot. They think every thing I do is great, everything is wonderful. They give me confidence that way," she said.

Other than the fellowship, what's next for Belle?

She is involved in the "Fireburn Network Files," a joint project combining oral histories and court records that aims to paint full portraits of the 1878 Fireburn and the women who led the uprising. It's slated to be launched Monday, the 140th anniversary of the revolt. The work is necessary because Queen Mary, despite her heroic stature, is still a figure clouded in mystery.

Also, Belle and her IAQM collaborator Ehlers are leading a campaign to bring Queen Mary home. The hope is to have a replica of the statue in place on St. Croix by 2020.