

Sidedoor S7 Ep. 4 Light of Freedom Final Transcription

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: It's dawn on the national mall. Washington, DC is just waking up. The hum of traffic stirring, joggers shuffling by, and the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden is quiet in the sleepy morning light. But not for long.

Lizzie Peabody: A woman dressed in bright clothing walks slowly through the sunken garden, singing.

Lizzie Peabody: She circles the entire garden. Slowly, deliberately making eye contact with each person she passes.

Lizzie Peabody: And when she comes back to where she started, the air is still for just a moment. Until, on the southern edge of the garden we hear drums. Drums join on the east then the north, and the west. From the four Cardinal directions, the drumming echoes off the four walls of the sunken garden. I'm standing in the center with a throng of revelers, and art buffs, and curious commuters who've gathered in the garden. And as we listen, the drummers begin to move from the edges into the center,

Anne Reeve: Which was sort of its own crescendo in energy and sound.

Lizzie Peabody: Anne Reeve, Associate Curator at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, was there with me in the garden as the drummers closed in.

Anne Reeve: Being all together with a group of people on The Mall, as the sun is coming up, listening to this sound, felt incredibly powerful and also ultimately very, very uplifting.

Lizzie Peabody: It felt very joyful.

Anne Reeve: Yeah. Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: And then, we danced. Because, it wouldn't be a DC celebration without the city's native sound: go-go music. And that's why we're here, for a celebration. This ceremony called, "WAKE UP: Liberation Call at Dawn" marks the arrival of a new sculpture to the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn sculpture garden by artist, Abigail DeVille. Hirshhorn Director, Melissa Chiu put it best.

Melissa Chiu: When Abigail DeVille asks us all to get up at dawn, we come. Abigail, thank you so much, for in some ways, an awakening.

Lizzie Peabody: Abigail DeVille is an artist who wants to wake us up. Not just at dawn, which for the record I did for you my dear side door family. You're welcome. But also, to the stories we inherit as a nation. Her sculpture, Light of Freedom, asks us to take another look at American

liberty and lifts a lamp to a future where everyone in this country can breathe free. That's coming up, after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Abigail DeVille, who are you?

Abigail DeVille: Oh my God, Who's song just popped into my, (singing). Lord. Okay. I'm a visual artist.

Lizzie Peabody: Abigail DeVille is an accomplished artist.

Abigail DeVille: Hailing from Bronx, New York. What, what.

Lizzie Peabody: She's the sculptor of the latest piece to be installed in this Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden on the National Mall. And this sculpture does something that sort of boggles my mind.

Anne Reeve: I mean, it's unlike anything that has been made before and yet it is still immediately recognizable.

Lizzie Peabody: To help me describe it. I have the expert help of the Hirshhorn's own Anne Reeve. Simply put the sculpture is a torch, a famous one.

Anne Reeve: In fact, when we were installing the work and Abigail was up on the scaffolding, people were coming by and asking, is that the statue of Liberty's torch?

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Light of Freedom stands at around 13 feet tall and it's made mostly of metal. The torch is set at a slight angle and what catches my eye first is the flame. Leaning to the side as though it's blown by the wind, it's a deep royal blue.

Abigail DeVille: Blue is the color of the horizon. Blue is the color of the sky. And it's things that are intangible that we can't actually ever physically touch. And the hottest part of a flame is blue.

Lizzie Peabody: What was your original goal in creating this sculpture?

Abigail DeVille: I just wanted to make something in the height of 2020, you know, everything was reeling.

Speaker 7: ...come after the World Health Organization today declared the coronavirus a global pandemic...

Speaker 8: ...fast breaking developments in the coronavirus emergency in the U.S. and around the world.

Abigail DeVille: We're deep in early days of the pandemic. Nobody had any real information or answers.

Speaker 9: The Coronavirus, forcing millions more Americans into virtual lock down.

Speaker 10: Nationwide, the virus has prompted more than 1500 schools to close.

Speaker 11: The number of cases, soaring just today. More than 24,000 now, nationwide...

Abigail DeVille: Everybody's scared. People are dropping dead.

Speaker 12: For many, the death of George Floyd only piling on...

Abigail DeVille: George Floyd had been murdered. Breonna Taylor had been murdered before that, and Ahmaud Arbery.

Speaker 13: Chants of "Black Lives Matter" echoed from thousands of protestors in cities around the world.

Speaker 14: Paris, they marched as they did in Rome and Tokyo.

Lizzie Peabody: 2020 drew attention to structural inequalities that had always been part of American society. But with the pandemic and killings of black Americans at the hands of police became more visible and visceral to all Americans.

Abigail DeVille: It was an interesting moment to see how people had to be hurting. Everyone's life changed and affected in order to have empathy for the black liberation struggle that has never stopped. That is continually ongoing. And the fact that you could have contracted COVID and died in the face of that, I think is incredibly powerful and meaningful. But that was like the climate in which I'm thinking about, how do I make a public sculpture?

Speaker 15: There's people everywhere from New York to London to Beirut gathered...

Speaker 16: ...Black lives matter, a powerful new international rally and cry.

Lizzie Peabody: In June 2020, Abigail DeVille was invited to create a public sculpture for Madison Square Park in New York City. While doing some archival research she came across a photo of the park with the Statue of Liberty's torch plunked right there in the middle of it. It was installed there from 1876 to 1882 while funds were being raised for the statue's pedestal.

Abigail DeVille: So, I just thought that that was just the perfect thing. Like history already did it for me. I don't need to look any further.

Lizzie Peabody: And so, Abigail DeVille took a symbol of the American freedom we hold high for the world to admire and created it anew.

Anne Reeve: There was just so much color and texture. It holds so much information as an object. And you can sort of start to piece together all of these elements. I think it becomes a puzzle. And each element is very intentional.

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Lizzie Peabody: Take the torches flame, for example, remember it's blue. But as you get closer to the sculpture, you see it's actually made up of blue mannequin arms. So why arms? Why not legs or torsos or...

Abigail DeVille: You think of your arm or your hand specifically as being tools. Thinking about the ways in which people like linked arms in protests last summer. Thinking about outstretching your arms towards something.

Lizzie Peabody: The arms all seem to tangle together, reaching upward. There are some hands that it's like, you can see the fingers silhouette against the sky

Abigail DeVille: Clamoring or reaching out to something unknown, but trying to grasp it anyway. I feel like the definition of freedom is abstract and we don't really know what it means. We only know when we see it, it's opposite. Like we know what is, we know what it's not.

Lizzie Peabody: The handle of the torch is made out of welded steel bars. So, you can see into it and inside you can just make out a rusty metal bell dangling silent. Tell me about the bell.

Abigail DeVille: It's, specifically, a decommissioned school bell that I got from someone on eBay from a small town in Illinois. So, it actually did use to call children to order.

Lizzie Peabody: DeVille frequently uses found materials and repurpose them in her art to deliver a message. In this case, about the role of public education. Abigail who attended public school herself, knows firsthand the significance of a really great teacher.

Abigail DeVille: The best teachers are the ones that are the most loving. And they want to see you thrive in the world, but they're charged with a responsibility to let you know about all of the things that are in play in the society that you're about to enter into.

Lizzie Peabody: In fourth grade, she got a teacher who would permanently change the way she saw the world.

Abigail DeVille: Ms. Hammond, I loved her. She played the Martin Luther king. 'I Have a Dream' speech for us. And she had a record player in the classroom. She played the record for us and it was nine-year olds. You could hear a pin drop in that classroom.

Martin Luther King Jr.: ...rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be...

Abigail DeVille: And his voice was like suspended over all of us, and I was holding my best friend's hand under the desk. I felt his words were speaking to me specifically, like when he talks about his children. As a nine-year-old, I thought he was speaking straight to me.

Martin Luther King Jr.: ...will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.

Abigail DeVille: There were many instances where she made history come alive for me. And I think because she planted that seed, I was able to start questioning, the very next year in fifth grade, the ways American history was being presented to me that I didn't appreciate. And I knew that there was information that was missing. Because I remember, I just remember the ways in which indigenous history was a speed bump or slavery was a speed bump.

Martin Luther King Jr.: When you say a speed bump, you mean something that you kind of cover up.

Abigail DeVille: Glossed over. Right. It was like a paragraph on a page and a whole chapter in a unit. You know what I mean? It wasn't anything in depth. It was nothing. And feeling like, or knowing that, in a strange way, because I don't know how much you really know at nine, but I felt it in my gut that I was a descendant of these people. I want to hear more about these people.

Lizzie Peabody: There's a final element of the sculpture that I haven't mentioned yet, but it might be the most important. The entire torch, the handle, the bell, the flame is surrounded by construction scaffolding. Metal poles, anchored in cement blocks with wooden planks laid across. It's so realistic that when I first saw it, I just assumed the installation wasn't complete yet. And that's intentional.

Anne Reeve: She has rendered this emblem of freedom as a construction site. As a work in progress.

Lizzie Peabody: Talking with people at the opening ceremony, the symbolism comes through as loud and clear as the go-go music in the background.

Speaker 19: I like that it's under scaffolding to show that we have to work hard towards freedom and that freedom isn't given. That you have to constantly work at it.

Speaker 20: Unfortunately, unfinished and not perfect is for everyone. Still waiting for Liberty and justice for all.

Lizzie Peabody: The scaffolding reminds us that even though the statue of Liberty was built over a century ago, we're still working to build the society that lives up to the ideals it stands for. Or at least what it stands for today. Because even the national icons that have been around for so long, it feels like they've always been there. They were each constructed with a specific purpose and a certain meaning in mind. But over time that meaning can change. And in fact, the Lady Liberty who holds her torch a light in New York Harbor today, has come to stand for something completely different from the sculptor's original intention. Coming up after the break, the under told story of the Statue of Liberty and how Abigail DeVille asks us to reexamine the histories we've inherited as a nation through visual art.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you ask most people today about the Statue of Liberty, they'll probably tell you it stands for the freedom promised to immigrants who journeyed to America from far away lands. But today's interpretation has very little in common with the statue's original purpose. It all started back in France in 1865 with a French guy called Édouard de Laboulaye. Édouard was a writer, thinker and abolitionist. In fact, he was the head of the French anti-slavery society. He

was a big fan of American democracy. And when the Civil War brought an end to slavery in the United States, he wanted to send a gift to the U.S. on behalf of France to celebrate this monumental achievement. So, the gift it had to be big. And the French government was on board. See, at that point, nobody really knew what the future of the young country would be. But after helping the American rebels fight the British, the French wanted to make sure the U.S. kind of remembered who its buddies were.

Abigail DeVille: France is like, "Yeah, we're friends, don't you forget it. We're giving you this thing." But it was also really just an artist wanting to make a project and then figuring out how to get it done.

Lizzie Peabody: The artist, or artiste, was a young French sculptor called Frederic Bartholdi. He was keen to try making something really big, a giant sculpture, after visiting Egypt and being inspired by what he saw there. So, he proposed a lighthouse for the Suez Canal in the shape of a woman holding up a lantern to light the way. But that project fell through. So, when abolitionist Édouard de Laboulaye came to him like, "Hey, you want to help design a gift for the Americans to celebrate emancipation?" He said, "Mais oui. And I have just the thing." And he dusted off his old lighthouse drawings and turned this Egyptian beacon into a sketch of Libertas, the Roman goddess of freedom.

Abigail DeVille: But that's the other thing that I think is really interesting is that the United States it's core mythology is that it has this idea of Liberty or Libertas. Using this Roman goddess to exude American ideals of Liberty. But Libertas, she freed slaves in Roman society, and she was the goddess that freed slaves.

Lizzie Peabody: Libertas was the personification of Liberty. She's traditionally portrayed holding broken shackles and wearing a felt cap, which in Roman society was given to an enslaved person when they were freed. So, when Bartholdi traveled to the U.S. with an early model of his gift for America, she looked a lot like that.

Abigail DeVille: And it got reframed, repackaged. I mean the iconography is there, it's just been like watered down.

Lizzie Peabody: In an America that was trying to unify post-Civil War, a statuesque reminder of the thing that had split the country apart was a hard sell. So, Lady Liberty got a makeover. Instead of a felt cap, she wore a crown and the broken chains...

Abigail DeVille: Originally, I think it was in her hand and one of the early drawings.

Lizzie Peabody: But in the finished version, the chains peak out from beneath her foot. So basically, it's invisible unless you're in a helicopter. What you can see from almost any angle is her torch and the tablet inscribed with the year 1776. By the time the statue was ready in 1886, the U.S. had just celebrated a hundred years as a country. The American Civil War was already 20 years in the past and leaders wanted to leave it there. In the postwar reconstruction, slavery was replaced by discriminatory Jim Crow laws across the south. And Liberty still felt so far out of reach for most African Americans that when the statue took its place in New York Harbor, the African American newspaper, the Cleveland Gazette, printed an op-ed that read

Speaker 21: Shove the Bartholdi statue, torch and all, into the ocean until the Liberty of this country is such as to make it possible for inoffensive and industrious colored man and in the

south, to earn a respectable living for himself and family without being Klu Kluxed, perhaps murdered, his daughter and wife outraged, and his property destroyed.

Lizzie Peabody: The statue of Liberty, went from a celebration of the abolition of slavery to a bitter reminder of where black Americans would stand in this post-slavery nation. At the bottom of a hierarchical society. In the 20th century, Lady Liberty would become a beacon, welcoming immigrants to America, European immigrants that is. Who, within a generation or two, would be considered white.

Abigail DeVille: I think thinking back to the black experience in America, the ways in which. I think Toni Morrison has a really beautiful quote about the melting pot.

Toni Morrison: There's always a bottom that you could be hostile too. And that was useful and bringing the country together into the melting pot.

Lizzie Peabody: This is author, Toni Morrison, in her documentary, "The Pieces I Am."

Toni Morrison: What was the basis? The cauldron. The pot. Melting pot. Well, black people were the pot and everything else was melted together. And what? American.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Abigail DeVille's *Light of Freedom* takes the essence of the Statue of Liberty, and reimagines it through a modern lens. She takes what's immediately recognizable at first glance, the torch, and says, "Look again. Look closer. And do it right here on the National Mall."

Anne Reeve: The National Mall, it's this great symbolic field where all of these icons and emblems of American power live. And a place that emblemizes the stories of American history as they have more traditionally been told.

Lizzie Peabody: Curator, Anne Reeve says, "Light of Freedom with its blue arms, its bell that doesn't ring. And its scaffolding is a reminder that the more people we have telling the story, the clearer a picture we get."

Anne Reeve: And it's a reminder to look at the stories that we've been told in school and through history at the stories of the founding of our nation and the stories that we like to tell ourselves about American ideals and American liberty, because the way that those stories are told often leaves a lot out. To me this object sort of insists that we acknowledge that gap.

Lizzie Peabody: Anne says, "That's the power of contemporary art. To help us see differently."

Anne Reeve: You know, the work of artists reflects the world in which they're living and making work. And I think they're offering us ways to see.

Lizzie Peabody: What is the role of an artist? what does it mean to you to be an artist?

Abigail DeVille: Well, for me, I always think about the James Baldwin creative process essay from 1962 and where he ends with talking about that the role of an artist with his society is the lovers war.

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Lizzie Peabody: Baldwin writes, "Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself, and with that revelation to make freedom real."

Abigail DeVille: I'm always thinking about love. And then if you love someone then you're not actively lying to them. Or you're trying to uncover some kind of deeper truth.

Lizzie Peabody: I love that framing because I think sometimes you can look at artwork that's critical of society and think, "Oh, throwing stones at the institutions." or something like that. But really it comes from closeness, intimacy. There's a tenderness there. It's almost your duty to hold the mirror up to the thing that you...

Abigail DeVille: That made you. It made you. It framed your world. It's like the heavens and the earth. It's the ground you walk on, it's the air you breathe. You didn't have any choice you were born. You didn't ask to be, but maybe you should be asking questions about the world and why it is the way it is specifically around you. And you can start with your family and your neighborhood, your community, institutions that you're a part of. I think we should be questioning everything.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

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Lizzie Peabody: You can see Light of Freedom at the Gershwin Sculpture Garden from now until April 2022. And if you can get to DC, I recommend it. For more on the work of Abigail DeVille, including photos from the opening celebration, WAKE UP: Liberation Call at Dawn, subscribe to our newsletter. We'll all also include more information about the performers you heard: soloist Jadele McPherson, West African percussion group Farafina Kan, and DC's own go-go band, The JoGo Project. You can subscribe to the newsletter at si.edu/sidedoor.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks this episode to Curator Mary Elliott at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, for her support with historical research. As well as to Fleur Paysor. Thanks also to historian Tyler Stovall for his behind the scenes help uncovering the history of the Statue of Liberty's iconography.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Thanks to our friends at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden for making this episode happen. Anne Reeve, Kate Gibbs, Amy Bahr, and Maddy Feller. Thanks also to the Madison Square Park Conservancy. And of course, big thanks to Abigail DeVille for taking the time to speak with us about her work.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is James Morrison, Nathalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tammy O'Neil, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, and Sharon Bryant. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder. If you want to sponsor our show, please visit sponsorship@prx.org.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody:

I also had a fourth-grade teacher who, she just was the grown up that we knew would tell us the truth. And we all got together one day and we just sat her down and we were like, "Mrs. Winstead, is God real?" And this was public school, so she's looking up at the speakers to be like, "Who's listening in on this conversation?"

Abigail DeVille: That's hilarious.

Lizzie Peabody: But she didn't, she couldn't not answer our question, so she kind of got real, we were on the ground, she got real low and her voice got so quiet. And we were thinking, "Wow, God must be dangerous." This is, what is going on? And she basically told us that nobody knows. So then, but because she said it, we believed. Okay, Mrs. Windstead doesn't know if there's God, then really nobody knows if there is God. So anyway. Yeah, fourth grade teachers. That is, it's an amazing...

Abigail DeVille: That's an important moment, I think.