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Photo: Ani Gavino

Performing Activism at the Barnes Foundation

by Ani Gavino

On November 13th, Philadelphia-based artist [Sherman Fleming](#) premiered *Glean*, a performance art work inspired by Jean-François Millet's painting, [The Gleaners](#). This performance launched the Barnes Foundation's latest exhibit, [30 Americans](#), a collection by notable African American contemporary artists such as Kara Walker, Kehinde Wiley, Nick Cave, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Barkley L. Hendricks, and others.

A digital installation of this 1857 French painting served as the backdrop to Fleming's multidimensional work. The audience sat around the perimeter of the lofty gallery space, and a panoramic image of wheat fields was projected on one side of the wall. Over a period of 45 minutes, Tamara Suber walked slowly from one end of the hallway to the other, hunched over as she balanced a 25-pound box on her back. Suber wore an African-printed headwrap and a simple white dress. She stumbled as she carried a box colorfully painted with the scenery of wheat fields. Her presentation made me think of forced labor from the slavery era. Simultaneously, looped audio recordings recounted scenarios of police harassment, sirens, cries, and angry dialogue. In the talk-back, Fleming discussed how viral YouTube videos of police brutality against Black bodies was the initial impetus of the work.

Voice 1 on audio: Don't touch me!

Voice 2 on audio: I could have gone to jail if I responded differently!

The audio insinuated racial profiling, police brutality, mass incarceration, bigotry, fear, and injustice, making me think that Suber's character was not only showing the struggles from the American slavery era but also the burden that she continues to carry to this day.

Following this section, Fleming took the mic and announced Vessna Scheff, who sang "Lift Every Voice and Sing," known as the [Black National Anthem](#)

. Perhaps, this section was a protest against "[The Star-Spangled Banner](#)," which some critics associate with racism. Scheff urged everyone to sing along, but only a few audience members participated, even though lyric sheets were passed to the audience prior to the performance.

In the intimacy of this performance space, I found myself noticing how the audience became part of the performance. I witnessed a row of people gaze the other way as Suber walked, stumbled, and hauled the box on her back. When Scheff, juxtaposing Suber's character, entered the space effortlessly, draped in tulle-like fabric, I noticed the audience bring out their phones to capture her image. As Fleming described later, Scheff's presence brought a feeling of lightness, an exhale to a highly tense section, ending the work with fervent hope.

During the talk-back, Fleming expressed his connection to *The Gleaners*, correlating the painting with African Americans' struggle against structural racism. However, isn't there a difference between classism and systemic oppression brought about by racism? While classism and slave trade reached many parts of the globe including France, the [cruelty and barbaric treatment of slaves](#), the dehumanizing and hanging of bodies supported by [lynching laws](#), the segregation of people by color through the [Jim Crow laws](#), and its current forms—[police brutality](#) and mass incarceration of Black people—are sadly unique to the United States. I believe that Fleming may have left the audience with a message that supports the [conflation of slavery and indentured servitude](#).

As an Asian American who was always told not to disrupt the system, I have found African American artists influential to my own political art. Works like Fleming's inspire me to find the courage to use art as a tool for protest. The Black presence in the museum is in itself a statement, a radical presence. I applaud the Barnes Foundation for its efforts to dismantle the notion that museum spaces are exclusively for the wealthy, "high-brow," usually white museum goers. I give kudos to its curatorial team for commissioning artists from underrepresented voices, and for creating a more inclusive civic realm in a typically white dominated space. The Barnes Foundation seems to be successfully diversifying their audience through this event and through the exhibit, *30 Americans*.

I enjoyed the simplicity and directness of *Glean*. The work served as a reminder that African Americans' enslaved labor was one of the principal engines to the nation's economic progress. However, I wished Fleming had highlighted an African American visual artist to go with his performance, especially since his work launched an exhibit that distinctively showcased African American works.

[Glean](#), Sherman Fleming, The Barnes Foundation, Nov. 13.

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