Stephen Towns: Declaration & Resistance
June 11—September 18, 2022

Large Print Labels
Stephen Towns: Declaration & Resistance

Stephen Towns: Declaration & Resistance examines the American dream through the lives of Black Americans from the late 18th century to the present time. Using labor as a backdrop, Towns highlights the role African Americans have played in building the economy, and explores how their resilience, resistance, and perseverance have challenged the United States to truly embrace the tenets of its Declaration of Independence.

Towns created 35 new figurative paintings and story quilts that expand the historical narratives of enslaved and free people who toiled under the most extreme hardships, yet persevered through acts of rebellion, skillful guile and self-willed determination. Within this arresting body of work, Towns also shows the beauty and love that Black people possess beyond the grips of white supremacy.
Stephen Towns (b. 1980) was born and raised in Lincolnville, South Carolina, a small town outside of Charleston (Lincolnville was founded in 1867 shortly after the Emancipation Proclamation by seven African American men seeking an escape from racial discrimination). While art served as a tool for communication in Towns’s youth, it was not until he was a young adult at the University of South Carolina that he began to use art as a means to explore his own identity and simultaneously, the identity of his country.

As part of his process, Towns mines archival materials including photographs, publications, and oral histories, and from those sources creates magnificent and powerful portraits that celebrate African American experiences missing from the narratives of American history.

*The exhibition is organized by The Westmoreland Museum of American Art with Guest Curator Kilolo Luckett.*
Atrium Wall

Jermaine T. Bell

Stephen Towns in his Studio, 2021
The Healers & The Guardians
Throughout the history of the United States, Black Americans have performed military and public service with honor and courage. During the Civil War, Black nurses worked for the Union army and in segregated hospitals caring for the sick and injured.

At the turn of the 20th century, racialized apartheid and discrimination made it difficult for Black Americans to join the United States military and most other government service organizations. With the onset of World War I, a shortage of personnel created opportunities for African Americans to sign up for military service. Black and non-black personnel rarely served together, and the military remained largely segregated through the end of World War II.
Those African Americans who served overseas came back to a country that often did not welcome them or respect the sacrifices they had made. Returning Black military service members were subjected to threats and violence, and were frequently denied the veterans’ benefits afforded to their white counterparts. Nevertheless, Black veterans were proud of their service, and continued to fight for equal treatment in their home country. In the 1940’s, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, the country’s most prominent Black newspaper, coined the slogan Double V—victory over enemies from without, and victory over enemies within. The struggle for integration of the military continued until 1948, when President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9981, Desegregation of the Armed Forces.
Susie King Taylor, 2021
Acrylic, oil, metal and copper leaf on panel

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY

Susie King Taylor, a nurse and educator, served in the Union military without pay. In 1902, she wrote a book about her experiences titled Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33D United States Colored Troops, Late 1st S.C. Volunteers. In her book she says, “Justice we ask, to be citizens of these United States, where so many of our people have shed their blood with their white
comrades, that the stars and stripes should never be polluted.”

In this painting, Susie King Taylor is placed against a sky of copper leaf with a shimmering lake in the immediate background. Taylor stands among tall grasses in this vaguely biblical setting, and self-assuredly meets the gaze of the viewer. Her open jacket and matching headdress simultaneously suggest a temperate survivalist and saintly figure, with obvious references to her military service and icons of the Virgin Mary.
Stephen Towns  
b. 1980

*Brewster Hospital Nurses* (triptych), 2021  
Acrylic, oil, copper leaf on panel

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery,  
New York, NY

In *Brewster Hospital Nurses*, Towns renders each figure on a simple background of copper leaf reminiscent of Byzantine icons. The hammered halos and golden atmosphere evoke a state of sainthood for the nurses, whose dark complexions bear a striking contrast to their crisp white uniforms.
Stephen Towns
b. 1980

*Marcus Garvey*, 2021
Natural and synthetic fabric, polyester and cotton thread, crystal glass beads, wooden beads, wooden, metal and resin buttons

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY

Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) was a leader of the Pan-Africanism movement, which sought to unite and connect people of African descent worldwide. While living in the United States, Garvey, along with Amy Ashwood (who would later become his first wife), started the
Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The ideals of UNIA were advocacy for Black economic and political independence, and the celebration of the history and culture of the African diaspora.

Garvey and UNIA operated a steamship company called the Black Star Line. The goal of the Black Star Line was to become the hub of a global Black economy; Black Star would transport goods and materials among Black entrepreneurs in North America, Africa, and the Caribbean.

Often credited with creating the red, black, and green flag (known as the Pan-African flag), Garvey advocated for a universal symbol of Black liberation. Today, the flag symbolizes unity and pride for people of
African descent, and is an iconic emblem worldwide.

In the Marcus Garvey story quilt, Towns shows Garvey wearing his familiar uniform, with brass buttons on his military-style coat, and ostentatious plumage on his hat. He and his wife Amy hold the Black liberation flag while seamstresses dutifully tend to it. Detailed in sharp greys and speckled black fabrics, a ship of the Black Star Line sails through the background in deep blue water under starry skies.
Stephen Towns  
b. 1980

*I am the Glory*, 2020  
Acrylic, oil, metal leaf on panel

Collection: Gregory and Alyssa Shannon, Houston, TX

In *I am the Glory*, Towns paints a self-assured Black woman sitting on a rough wooden porch sewing the large quilt draped across her lap. The vibrant colors and thick folds of the quilt contrast with the tattered American flag suspended above; the quilt seems to represent the woman’s own efforts to find security and self-expression, while the flag stands for the rights and benefits of full citizenship that are still out of reach. The golden sky and lush landscape suggest hope for a better future.
Stephen Towns  
b. 1980  

*The Parade*, 2021  
Acrylic, oil, metal leaf  
on panel  

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery,  
New York, NY  

Stephen Towns  
b. 1980  

*The Crossing Guards*, 2021  
Acrylic, oil, metal and copper leaf on panel  

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery,  
New York, NY
Stephen Towns  
b. 1980  

*The Parade*, 2021  
Acrylic, oil, metal leaf on panel  

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY  

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Stephen Towns  
b. 1980  

*Sisterhood*, 2021  
Acrylic, oil, metal leaf on panel  

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY
The Nurturers

Under the racialized apartheid of the Jim Crow laws in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, black women used their positions as educators to push for liberation and full citizenship. On their own, or with the help of churches and Northern benevolent organizations like the Freedman’s Bureau, these women started schools that would serve black Americans who were excluded from educational opportunities due to racial segregation. Despite the constant fight for resources and the periodic threat of violence from white supremacists, their efforts played an important role in establishing independence and future prosperity for Black students. The institutions they created were also instrumental in the foundation of several Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).
Stephen Towns
b. 1980

left: *Two Roses*, 2021
Acrylic, oil, copper leaf on panel
Collection: Bill and Christy Gautreaux, Kansas City, MO

right: *The Educators*, 2021
Acrylic, oil, metal leaf on panel
Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY

In *Two Roses* and *The Educators*, Towns presents quietly sophisticated women who calmly and confidently engage the viewer. Flowering plants and rich colors suggest their future potential and upward mobility, while hovering butterflies represent freedom and continuity with the spirits of past and future generations.
Stephen Towns
b. 1980

Mary McLeod Bethune,
2021
Natural and synthetic fabric, polyester and cotton thread, crystal glass beads, metal and resin buttons

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY

Towns uses deep space and a dramatic sky to set the scene in the story quilt Mary McLeod Bethune. The line of students stretches metaphorically from their similarly uniformed teacher into a future of limitless possibilities. Each student assumes a unique posture, but their identical clothing suggests their common aspirations and their dedication to the community.
Stephen Towns  
b. 1980

**Birth of a Nation**, 2014  
Fiber, soil

Collection: Mark Bradford and Allan DiCastro

A self-taught quiltmaker, Towns created the exceptional Birth of a Nation—his first quilt and installation work—in 2014. In this image, the silhouette of a Black woman nurses a white baby. African American mothers were often relegated to nursing duties for wealthy and affluent slave owners. Dressed in what appear to be pieces of faded burlap, with somber graphics and blue and white striped fabrics with cut-out images of white women engaged in leisure activities, the enslaved woman tenderly cradles the child in her arms.
The uncanny clothing and an early version of the United States flag represent the young nation that is nourished by the black woman’s lack of freedom and forced, free labor. The flag is suspended just inches above a mound of dirt on the floor, suggesting the incessant soiling of the country’s legacy and the reluctance of many of its white citizens to acknowledge their appalling disregard for the rights of African Americans.
Ona Judge

Ona Judge (ca. 1773–1848) was born into slavery at Mount Vernon, Virginia. She was a talented and skilled seamstress and served as Martha Washington’s personal maid. While they were planning their return to the Mt. Vernon plantation for the summer, Judge escaped from President George and Martha Washington’s home in Philadelphia, PA, and traveled by ship to New England. Although she remained a fugitive for the rest of her life, she managed to marry, raise children, and live free.

Later in life, Judge gave an account of her escape, which was published in multiple abolitionist newspapers.

In the story quilt *Ona Judge Escapes*, the young woman is portrayed in flight under the stars and radiant moonlight that help illuminate the path to her freedom. Behind her are the blackberry-purple and cobalt-blue silhouettes of the people who helped arrange for her escape.
Stephen Towns
b. 1980

**Ona Judge Escapes**, 2021
Natural and synthetic fabric, polyester and cotton thread, crystal glass beads, resin buttons

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY

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Stephen Towns
b. 1980

**Ona Judge and Her Family**, 2021
Natural and synthetic fabric, polyester and cotton thread, crystal glass beads, metal and resin buttons

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY
Stephen Towns  
b. 1980

*The Fisherman*, 2021  
Natural and synthetic fabric, polyester and cotton thread, crystal glass beads, wooden buttons

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY

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Stephen Towns  
b. 1980

*The Rice Workers*, 2021  
Natural and synthetic fabric, polyester and cotton thread, crystal glass beads, wooden, metal and resin buttons

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY
Stephen Towns
b. 1980

*The Chain Gang*, 2021
Natural and synthetic fabric, polyester and cotton thread, crystal glass

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY
Construction of Labor: Enslavement, Convict Leasing, and Chain Gangs

In its formative years, the economy of the United States was built on chattel slavery. While the Thirteenth Amendment effectively abolished slavery, it still allowed for forced labor as punishment for crime.

Racism and criminality were deeply linked in post-Civil War America. Convict leasing, essentially a new form of slavery, emerged as a means to sustain an economy that was previously based on unpaid labor. Under these practices, African Americans were subjected to Black Codes—laws that allowed for the criminal prosecution of any Black person for minor “offenses” like vagrancy or loitering. Once imprisoned, convicts were leased for profit to plantation or factory owners. In the 1920s, leased convicts were replaced with government-sanctioned chain gangs—groups of
imprisoned people forced to work in enterprises like farming or road construction. These crews were policed by brutal overseers, and were literally chained together to prevent any attempt to escape.

Town’s monumental paintings feature laborers, both young and old, in potent, lush landscapes. These works combine the lucid color and ingenious arrangements of Monet with skillful brushwork and fresh, luminous paint. The paintings have a vibrant, sketch-like quality that softens the figures and attempts to capture their emotions and dignity.

In his story quilts, Towns depicts Black life in the rural South in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Bucolic, dreamlike landscapes are juxtaposed with figures engaged in physical labor. The scenery seems to caress and console the workers, whose attitudes range from fluid motion to steadfast defiance.
Stephen Towns
b. 1980

*Tending the Flock*, 2021
Acrylic, oil, copper leaf
on panel

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery,
New York, NY

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Stephen Towns
b. 1980

*On the Hill*, 2021
Acrylic, oil, metal leaf
on panel

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery,
New York, NY
Stephen Towns  
b. 1980

*The Workers and the Photographer*, 2021
Acrylic, oil, metal leaf on panel

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY

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Stephen Towns  
b. 1980

*We Will Be Our Own Leaders*, 2021
Acrylic, oil, metal leaf, mica, glitter, graphite on paper

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY
Stephen Towns
b. 1980

*Carolina Gold*, 2021
Acrylic, oil, copper and metal leaf on panel

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY
The Coal Miners

Between 1870 (during Reconstruction) and 1930, Black people moved from the South for employment and found work in the coal fields of West Virginia. By the early 1900s, African Americans made up over a quarter of West Virginia coal miners. The vast majority of Black coal laborers were relegated to the most dangerous and arduous jobs.

For The Coal Miners series, Stephen Towns creates six distinctive mixed-media paintings that feature miners of West Virginia. These men are portrayed as weary yet stoic, and are surrounded by black mica to symbolize the mines in which they worked. The flag, suspended at the edge of each portrait, represents the miners’ dedication to the American promise of a better life. Ancestral spirits in the form of yellow canaries protect each miner from the toxic conditions and constant threat of injury or death.
Stephen Towns  
b. 1980  

*The Pioneer*, 2020  
Oil, acrylic, fabric, buttons, Bristol paper, mica flakes, graphite, glitter, charcoal on panel  

Collection: The Westmoreland Museum of American Art, Gift of the William W. Jamison II and the Thomas Lynch Art Acquisition Fund  

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Stephen Towns  
b. 1980  

*Underneath the Mountaintop*, 2020  
Oil, acrylic, fabric, buttons, Bristol paper, mica flakes, graphite, glitter, charcoal on panel  

Private Collection
Stephen Towns
b. 1980

*Built of Rich Earth*, 2020
Oil, acrylic, fabric, buttons, Bristol paper, mica flakes, graphite, glitter, charcoal on panel

European Collection

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Stephen Towns
b. 1980

*Before the Dust Setsl*, 2020
Oil, acrylic, fabric, buttons, Bristol paper, mica flakes, graphite, glitter, charcoal on panel

Collection: Donnalynn Patakos and Victor Hugo Sandoval
Stephen Towns  
b. 1980  

**Black Gold, 2020**  
Oil, acrylic, fabric, buttons,  
Bristol paper, mica flakes,  
graphite, glitter, charcoal on panel  

Collection: Jim Spencer and Michael Lin  

Stephen Towns  
b. 1980  

**After the Shift, 2020**  
Oil, acrylic, fabric, buttons,  
Bristol paper, mica flakes,  
graphite, glitter, charcoal on panel  

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery,  
New York, NY
Stephen Towns
b. 1980

The Steel Worker, 2021
Acrylic, oil, metal leaf on panel

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY
A New Generation
Towards the middle of the 20th century, Black Americans began to achieve an unprecedented level of economic power and the ability to wholly participate in American society. In Black communities across the country, African Americans built financial wealth, educational institutions, and cultural capital, affording them greater opportunities through self-determination and perseverance.

With the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act in 1964 and 1965, Black American resistance had moved the United States much closer to true democracy. The liberties it afforded became a springboard for the generations of Black Americans who followed.
Stephen Towns  
b. 1980  

*Dressing Up*, 2021  
Natural and synthetic fabric,  
polyester and cotton thread,  
crystal glass beads, buttons  

Collection: Dawn and Chris Fleischner  

Music, including Negro Spirituals, the Blues,  
Gospel, and Jazz, helped Black people  
transcend racialized violence and provided a  
means of economic support for countless  
African Americans. In the story quilt *Dressing Up*, Towns honors early 20th century female  
Blues singers including Gertrude “Ma” Rainey,  
Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters. These women  
constantly fought against invisibility and a lack  
of social status. The central figure in the image
wears a strikingly patterned dress and elaborate hat, and is attended by multiple young men who appear to be carefully adjusting her clothes. The scene signifies both the power of the Black female figure, and her calling to engage in performance to achieve equality and opportunity.
Stephen Towns  
b. 1980  

*Hair Lessons*, 2021  
Acrylic, oil, metal leaf on panel  

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY
Stephen Towns  
b. 1980

*A New Generation*, 2021  
Acrylic, oil, metal and copper leaf on panel

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY

In *A New Generation*, Towns portrays three weary Black youths positioned in front of a phalanx of older, stern-looking white men in grey suits. The public building in the background and the flags carried by the youths suggest an official photograph in which the organizers are determined to demonstrate the dedication and loyalty of the Black participants. The sole African American
adult in the image stands ambivalently to one side, and carries his flag alongside his hip. The composition conveys the difficulty and uncertainty of integration, as reflected in the youths’ recalcitrant gazes and a tightly clinched fist.
Stephen Towns  
b. 1980  

*Ms. Elsie Henderson*, 2021  
Acrylic, oil, metal leaf on panel  
Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY

Over the course of her career, Elsie Henderson (1913–2021) used her culinary skills to nourish several wealthy Pittsburgh families, including the Kaufmanns, owners of the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Fallingwater in Mill Run, PA.

Ms. Elsie Henderson lounges on an ornate chaise near an unseen swimming pool. Towns paints her in a luxurious purple pinstripe play suit that emphasizes her beauty and charm,
which contrasts with the more formal attire she undoubtedly wore in her working life. In the background are the rolling hills and bucolic landscape of Southwestern Pennsylvania, the dramatic and
Stephen Towns
b. 1980

Charles “Teenie” Harris, 2021
Acrylic, oil, copper leaf on panel

Courtesy of the Artist and De Buck Gallery, New York, NY

Legendary photographer Charles “Teenie” Harris (1908–1998) documented African American life in Pittsburgh for The Pittsburgh Courier, one of the most prestigious Black newspapers in the country during the 20th century. Teenie, as he was fondly known, photographed a wide range of public and private activities in daily life, including church gatherings, educational events, military assemblies, sporting events, weddings, and social clubs.
Towns paints a handsome, stylish Teenie relaxing in an oversized brown leather chair while hugging a small, white Samoyed dog. He casually meets the gaze of the viewer with a subtle but emphatic intensity. Teenie reflects the dignity and grace of the thriving Black communities he photographed, and conveys the sense of comfort and confidence enjoyed by its flourishing community members.
Stephen Towns
b. 1980

*The Bakers*, 2021
Acrylic, oil, metal leaf on panel

Collection: Michael Elitzer and John Smith-Ricco

Stephen Towns
b. 1980

*Shaping Up*, 2021
Acrylic, oil, metal leaf, silver leaf on panel

Collection: Siham Khalid
Njaimeh Njie

Stephen Towns: 
Declaration & Resistance, 2022
Film documentary
Video, 15:00 minute loop

Courtesy of the Artist
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