

Redwood Library & Athenæum acquires a clock sculpture by contemporary artist Nari Ward



Nari Ward, Anchoring Escapement; Ithaca (2021), installation shot paired with Thomas Claggett, Tall Case Clock (ca.1775) in Redwood Library's historic Harrison Room, America's first purpose-built library.

NEWPORT, RI.- [Redwood Library & Athenæum](#), the nation's first purpose-built library and interdisciplinary 'think space,' has acquired a clock sculpture by contemporary artist Nari Ward. Entitled *Anchoring Escapement; Ithaca*, the work is from a limited series of tall case clocks radically transformed by Ward not only to address race, the repressed histories of slavery, and the reframing of Western time, but also to interrogate the shifting meaning of materials and motifs through a sculptural practice reliant on the adaptive re-use of divergent objects.

The work is particularly suited to the Redwood given that Newport was home to the Claggett dynasty of colonial clockmakers, master craftsmen who from the early eighteenth century to the American Revolution built tall case clocks that are today regarded as the high point of American horology. The Redwood houses no less than three Claggett clocks, and in particular the masterpiece arch-dial, eight-day, quarter-striking clock with japanned case made by William Claggett in the 1730s for the Stanton family of Newport. The acquisition of Ward's sculpture serves as an addendum to—and a critical gloss of—the Redwood's 2018-19 Claggett retrospective exhibition *The Claggetts of Newport: Master Clockmakers* in

Colonial America, which featured the greatest number of Claggett clocks ever assembled.

Anchoring Escapement; Ithaca is composed of a traditionally-styled tall case clock made by the Ithaca Clock Co. (NY), the stately shell of which camouflages a series of covert operations that has transformed its interior: the clock's generic "Western" face has been replaced by a copper plate upon which Ward has drilled a Kongo cosmogram—an arrangement of holes forming a cross within a diamond—edged by copper-headed nails and set amidst a multitude of incised lines radiating out as a sunburst across the cerulean patina of the copper surface. The clock's internals have been removed save for the pendulum trapped in the body, which has been filled with an image of historical trauma: wooden West African sculptures tightly piled one upon another, with the vertical pendulum weighted by its circular bob trapped in their midst.

Benedict Leca, Redwood Executive Director and co-curator with clock specialist Gary Sullivan of the 2018-19 Claggett exhibition commented, "Claggett clocks have always held a special place in the American horological tradition for their artistry and technical sophistication, but Nari Ward's clock has given us the obverse—the underside of eighteenth-century politeness and refinement epitomized in the work of the Claggetts. Claggett clocks were luxury items created for colonial elites, whose wealth, as we know, derived from the slave economy that underpinned eighteenth-century society."

Accordingly, Ward's clock will be exhibited back to back with a Claggett clock in the Redwood's historic eighteenth-century library space, designed by Peter Harrison and built during the late 1740s. In this way the display exemplifies the Redwood's commitment to bring the past in critical dialog with the present while simultaneously acknowledging the Redwood's own fundamental connection to the Triangle Trade, given that founder Abraham Redwood was one of the largest slave holders in colonial America and owner of a sugar plantation in Antigua. The work also exemplifies the RCAI's (Redwood Contemporary Arts Initiative) politically-engaged reassessment of the Enlightenment's manifold legacies, founded on the conviction that contemporary art has an unmatched power to question the Enlightenment ideals of universalism, progress and rationality.

According to Leora Maltz-Leca, the RCAI's Curator of Special Projects, Anchoring Escapement; Ithaca reveals how contemporary regimes of time are indebted to Enlightenment values, even as Ward's work exposes the violence embedded in colonial modernity's notions of progress and labor, rationalization and control. "The brutal contradictions of the Enlightenment are materialized in the paradoxes of this sculpture: it's a clock where time is arrested. And it's a container that critiques the idea and practice of containment by collapsing past and present to underscore the continuity between American histories of enslavement and the contemporary carceral state." At the same time, Maltz-Leca noted that this is a work which the Redwood is pleased to install during Black History Month: "The work centers African history and experience in a way unprecedented in the institution's 275 years. By celebrating the richness of Bakongo space-time – reprised throughout the Americas in the form of the Kongo cross – Ward's sculpture not only counters universalist conceptions of time but also affirms the essential role of African peoples, and of the Bakongo especially, in the formation of the US's culture and economy."

Building on past RCAI exhibition projects, starting with Pascale Marthine Tayou's Remember Bimbia (2018), a memorial to a Cameroonian slave transit point; Per Barclay: House of Oil and Water (2019), an ecocritical rumination on the extractive legacies of colonialism, and last Summer's Jocelyne Prince: Library of Amorphous Matter (2021), an address to notions of mastery and to the limits of positivist science, the purchase of Ward's clock is the first of a new program of acquisition. The RCAI will each year direct the addition of a major contemporary artwork to the Redwood collection that will engage with pressing issues of civic import and the history of the Redwood itself.

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