

Kenturah Davis Stenton Proposal

Inequality in Bronze: Monumental Plantation Legacies

The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage

Every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor.

- Saidiya Hartman, "Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval"

Concept

Referencing American miniature paintings of the 17-18th centuries, I will design a memorial portrait on oval-shaped, faceted glass, which will sit like a jewel on a stone plinth.

The portrait would be rendered by layering text on several layers of glass. Additional coloring will be applied to achieve a jewel-like tone to the object. The glass will be laminated together to produce a solid object and cohesive image.

Image: preliminary text drawing;
see next page for example of a fully
rendered text drawing (for
reference only).



Image: example of text drawing, for reference only



It's a kind of literary archaeology: on the basis of some information and a little guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply...So if I'm looking to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it (which doesn't mean that they didn't have it); if I'm trying to fill in the blanks that slave narratives left - to part the veil that was so frequently drawn, to implement the stories that I heard - then the approach that's most productive and most trustworthy for me is the recollection that moves from the image to the text.

Toni Morrison, "Sites of Memory"

Narrative

My work centers around understanding our relationship with language. It acknowledges that who we are and how we see the world around us is inextricably tied to how we use language. I make portraits that activate the intersection of image and text. By writing a text in repetition the image exists as a metaphor for the ways we all inhabit ideas conveyed through language. It remarks on the ways that we make histories. The Dinah monument offers the opportunity to envelope the presence of Dinah and other enslaved individuals into the history of the Stenton site in fuller way.

My proposed artwork pursues a strategy around honoring the specificity of an individual person (Dinah), while also acknowledging that she was one of many enslaved people at the plantation. The sculpture will present the back of a young, African-American woman's head, composed by suspending layers of text in glass. The prose will both ascribe her with individuality, but also convey a narrative that remarks on the shared history of other African Americans. I especially want to liberate Dinah, and us, from the limitations of the archive. I will craft a text that will move beyond the records that remark on her utility as an enslaved women. In the tradition of writers like Toni Morrison and Saidiya Hartman the drawing will consider the nature of her interior life. Inevitably the portrait would exist as both fact and fiction, while blurring the distinction between the two.

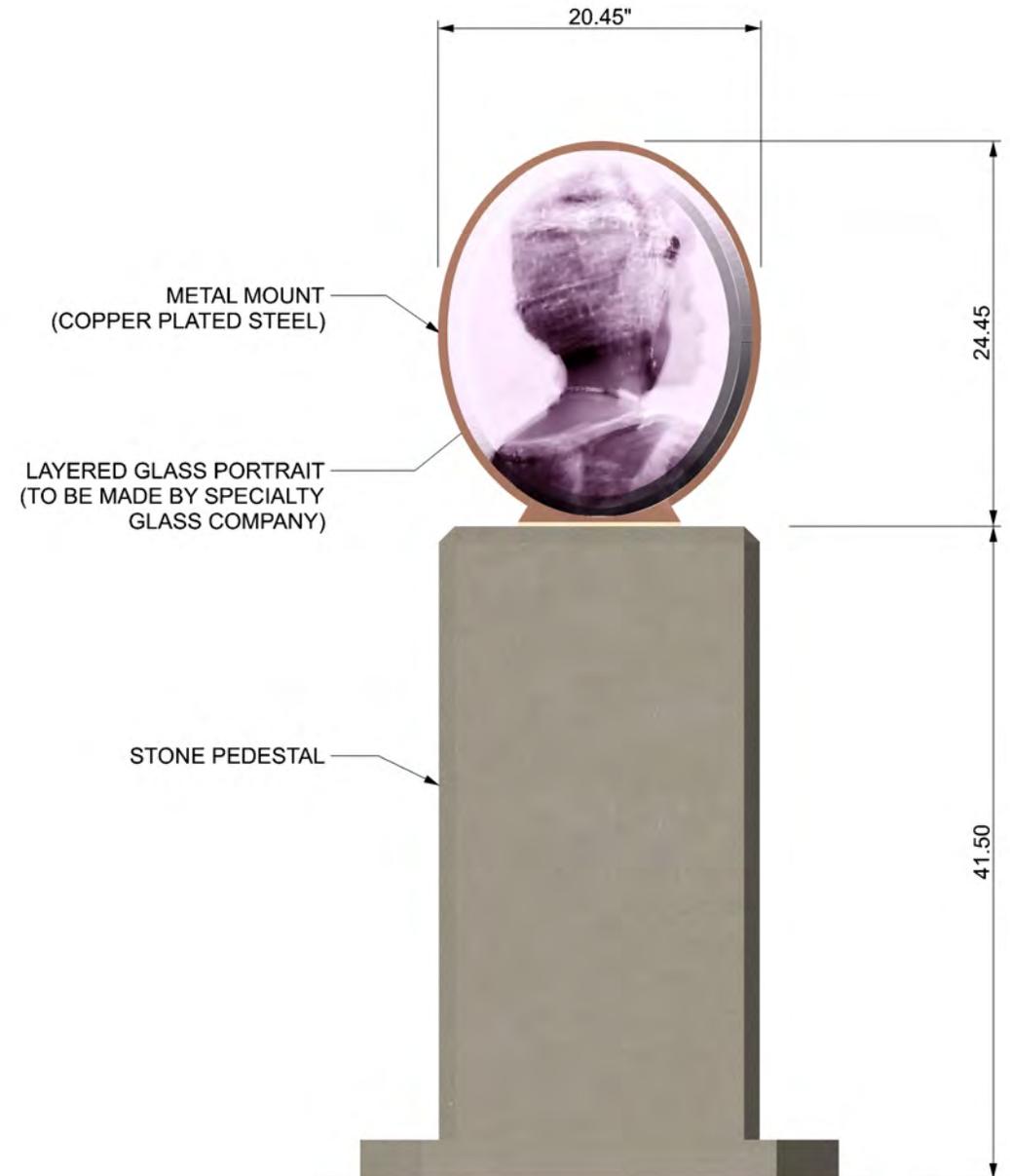
Specifications

Glass Fabrication: Mayer of Munich
Weight: 100 lb

Plinth Fabrication: Russell Stone
Weight: 1500 lb

Metal Frame Fabrication: Vuro Industries

Installation: Vuro Industries



Process

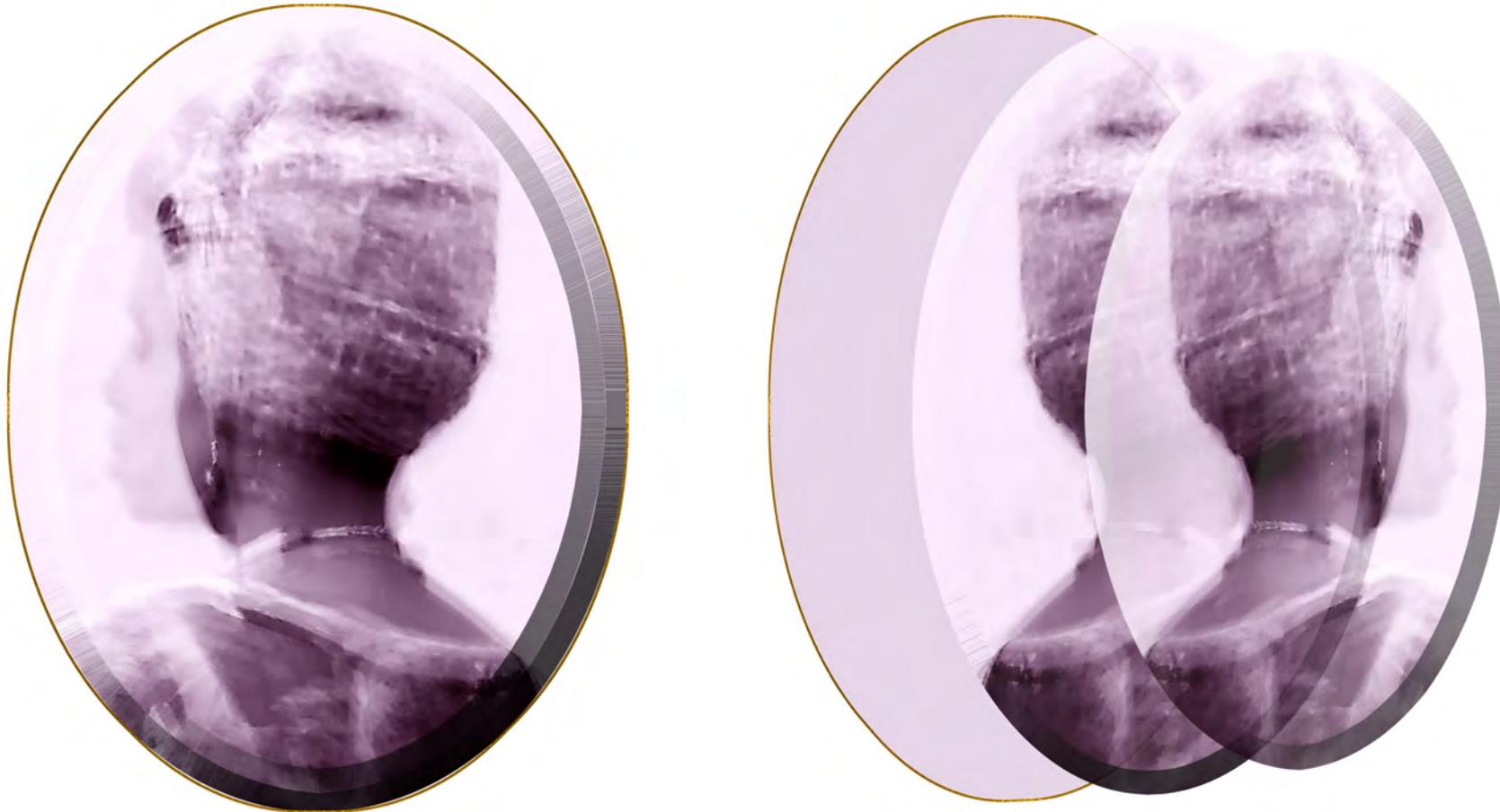


Photography: I will create a long-exposure photograph of the back of a woman's head turning, resulting in an image that who's features evade us.

Drawing: I will translate the photograph into 5 layers of text that will be reproduced on 5 layers of glass at the Mayer of Munich workshop.

Fabrication: Each layer of 12mm thick glass will be laminated together and framed in a copper-plated steel frame and cradle. The cradle will connect the glass sculpture to a sandstone plinth that will be locally sourced in Pennsylvania.

Process (cont.)



Recto: view showing outer two layers of 12mm beveled glass laminated together with metal frame attached to middle layer

Verso: exploded view of opposite side showing outer 2 layers of 12mm beveled glass and middle layer.

All five layers would be laminated together into on solid mass (approx 2.5" thick) to resemble a beveled jewel.

Both verso and recto will show the back of the figure's head, one side showing the reverse of the other side.



Red star indicates desired position of monument.

Placement

I would like to propose installing this object at the forecourt of the house. As I consider how the physical nuances of the site communicate to us, such as the lack of doorknob on the outside of the entrance, I am struck by the likelihood that Dinah attended the front door to greet countless visitors at the Stenton house throughout her life. On the one hand, this placement of the sculpture at the forecourt would reclaim this subservient role and elevate the memorialization of Dinah into a position of prominence at the site. On the other hand, the sculpture would sustain tension in the way the portrait resists us with her turned head. It would remind us that the nature of subjugation robs us of a more thorough understanding of people in the past. It is a piece that is as delicate and appealing as it is complicated and challenging. This placement also feels valuable for bridging the Stenton plantation with the local community. By creating an figure that keeps us perpetually standing behind her, we acknowledge that there is a path forward and stories like Dinah's can be our guide.

Notes on Collaborators

Mayer of Munich:

Atelier for architectural glass and mosaics, founded in 1847 and renown for major public art fabrication.

<https://www.mayer-of-munich.com/werkstaette/index.shtml>

Russell Stone:

Sandstone specialists with quarry in Pennsylvania.

<http://www.russellstoneproducts.com/index.html>

Vuro:

Fabrication studio specializing in welding and museum installation

<https://www.vuro.co/>

Image: example of 7-layered laminated glass, made by Mayer of Munich



Visual/Historic References



Portrait miniatures were a popular art form in the 17th and 18th centuries (during Dinah's lifetime), however examples of paintings of African American people were rare. They were usually made as intimate mementos, given to loved ones.

Image: Sarah Goodridge (American, 1788–1853), *Rose Prentice* (1771–1852), ca. 1837–38. Watercolor on ivory, 4 x 3 in. (10.16 x 7.62 cm).

Visual/Historic References



Images: Other examples of miniature paintings, oval pendant shapes, and beveled jewels reference for the design of the sculpture