

## ARTFORUM

### Abigail DeVille

BRONX MUSEUM OF THE ARTS

Abigail DeVille's exhibition, appropriately titled "Bronx Heavens," begins by offering visitors an invitation to board *Lunar Capsule* (all works cited, 2022). The quirky *Mork & Mindy*-style spacecraft, with its gilded interior and Rococoesque chair—an item of furniture that conjures an elder's sitting room, where family history is often passed down—has traveled to many cultural events and festivals, collecting stories from people of all ages that have now become treasured records of daily life on Earth.



**Abigail DeVille, *Lunar Capsule*, 2022, steel, aluminum, fabric, gold leaf, found chair, recorder, acrylic paint, approx. 75 x 82 x 82".** Photo: Argenis Apolinario.

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# eric firestone gallery

A voice-activated microphone within *Lunar Capsule* captures our narratives, which are eventually broadcast through a media player connected to the headphones of a separate work, *Black Monolith*, a telephone booth-like object that glows with numinous blue and purple lights. A direct refutation of the idea of a singular experience of Blackness, *Monolith* operates like an inverse of Adrian Piper's *What It's Like, What It Is #3*, 1991, a rectangular white cube containing a series of videos in which a Black man plainly states, among other things, that he is “not shiftless,” “not childish,” and “not evil” in order to challenge any stereotypical ideas a white and presumably liberal museum-going audience might have about Black people.

An otherworldly blue radiance suffuses the exhibition, representing the universe. Outer space has been a prominent theme in DeVille's work since 2008. Take *Cosmos Gate*, a pyramid of repurposed television sets on which video loops of old home movies made by Bronx residents play. (The artist, who works in the borough, was also born and raised there—her deep affection for this section of New York, and for the city as a whole, is absolutely clear throughout this show.) DeVille even reorients Gotham's origin myths in her sculpture *Halve Maen*, a salty reconfiguration of the eponymous ship on which the English explorer Henry Hudson sailed. The vessel traveled on the river—the one he likely died in or around—that now bears his name. The object, which calls to mind a precariously tilted-looking hobbyhorse, is twisted up in damaged clothes and a tangled United States flag, all of which is topped off by a fiberglass effigy of a deer's head. The work is a funny yet bleak meditation on colonial rapaciousness and the brutal histories of antique regimes, but it is also a monument to better futures forged by someone who wants to build a brighter and more expansive tomorrow. *Ascension (meditation)*, a stratospheric installation comprising Masonite panels painted in blast-off shades of violet blue and punctuated by salvaged bits of home fixtures—windows, a screen door—seems as if it is somehow reflecting the light bouncing off the ancient seafloor (which can now be seen up close, thanks to recent advances in imaging technology). Or perhaps the work is a rendering of an older, moribund version of our galaxy.

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In a lot of ways, “Bronx Heavens” functions as an open-source archive that honors and energizes the lives of those who occupy the titular borough—including family members, scholars, and other artists who have vitalized DeVille’s own existence for decades. Her show takes the idea of going “uptown” as a way of entering a divine realm, but one grounded in and nurtured by the goings-on of everyday life.

While New York is giving us a lot of exhibitions by Black artists with work that seems as though it was inspired by the American South or the Caribbean, it is refreshing to experience art that channels the joy and curiosity of living in a place that could only be expressed by a lovingly devoted “city kid.” Whether we consider the multiple generations of Southern Black families that moved to the Bronx in waves during the Great Migration or those immigrants from all over the world who are still arriving in the borough today, we might ask what those roots constitute, given the ways they have been dragged across the sea and continue slipping through the universe. For some viewers, DeVille’s exhibition could be a metaphor for the Bronx itself—a place that belongs to myriad interconnected systems that may only now be coming into view, like the light of exploding stars from eons ago.

—*Darla Migan*

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