

# Nari Ward: We the People

## August 16–November 30, 2019

**Contemporary  
Arts Museum  
Houston**

## WE THE PEOPLE

*We the People* (2011) depicts the first three words of the Preamble to the United States Constitution, which reads in full: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” With these simple words that introduce the country’s most foundational set of rights, Ward raises questions about what defines the United States and whose values it represents.

The phrase is spelled out in antiquated lettering using thousands of multicolored shoelaces inserted into and dangling from the wall. Over the past decade, Nari Ward has produced several works using this method, a process initially inspired by the common sight of shoes tied together by their laces and hung over power lines in city neighborhoods. While many of his shoelace works consider specific moments of historical conflict in the United States, *We the People* addresses the contradictions at the heart of American identity. The work reveals the idea of a uniform and unified nation to be a myth; instead, the country is made of a plethora of individuals with specific identities and histories—and varying experiences of the rights and protections the Constitution claims to provide.



**We the People**, 2011

Shoelaces

Speed Art Museum; Gift of Speed Contemporary

## NATURALIZATION DRAWING TABLE

Citizenship is often taken for granted by those who have possessed it since birth. Yet for many immigrants, American citizenship is something sought after and earned through years, often decades, of navigating the bureaucratic apparatus of the United States government. *Naturalization Drawing Table* (2004) crystallizes Nari Ward's ongoing concerns with forms of belonging and the infrastructures that enforce or deny it. Although he moved to the United States as a child, Ward did not become a citizen until eight years after creating this work, inspired by the intimidating process of applying for citizenship and by the country's hostility toward immigrants. *Naturalization Drawing Table* is activated on select Saturdays when the exhibition is on view.

The work offers a participatory bureaucratic environment: at a desk constructed of plastic safety panels from local bodegas, visitors can complete a modified version of an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) citizenship application and have their photograph taken; the photo is then attached and the form notarized. The documents join an ever-growing collection of completed applications, with a selection of them exhibited on the wall behind the desk. In return, participants receive a limited set of prints based on Ward's drawings. While the challenges of the immigration and naturalization process remain opaque to most Americans, Ward's installation reveals the vulnerable position of those seeking United States citizenship and the complex processes of exchange that citizenship entails.

*Naturalization Drawing Table* (2004) will be activated at the times listed below. Please note that we recommend coming early and participation is not guaranteed.

Saturday, August 17, 2019 | 3–5PM

Saturday, September 7, 2019 | 12–2PM

Saturday, October 5, 2019 | 12–2PM

Saturday, October 12, 2019 | 2–4PM

Saturday, November 2, 2019 | 12–2PM

Saturday, November 16, 2019 | 2–4PM



**Naturalization Drawing Table, 2004**

Plexiglas, crenellation table, and INS naturalization application

Courtesy the artist; Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul; and Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, and Havana

## AMAZING GRACE

Following his residency at The Studio Museum in Harlem (New York, New York), Nari Ward installed *Amazing Grace* (1993) in an abandoned firehouse (now the artist's studio) on West 141st Street from September to December of 1993. The work comprises approximately 280 abandoned strollers collected from the surrounding neighborhood, encompassed by a field of flattened fire hoses. As with other early works, Ward created *Amazing Grace* by accumulating and transforming materials that would otherwise be considered trash. A recording of singer Mahalia Jackson performing the popular gospel hymn "Amazing Grace" accompanies the installation, suffusing it with an uplifting, reverential tone.

The strollers, in various states of disrepair, speak to the lives of the children they once transported as well those of the homeless people who repurposed them as carriers for their possessions. *Amazing Grace* captures both the tragedy and the hopeful inventiveness that characterized New York in the early 1990s, a place and time marked by profound change. While Ward has frequently stated that the work was meant to evoke a womb, others have likened it to the hull of a slave ship or linked it to the sense of loss caused by the ongoing AIDS crisis. He welcomes these readings because they point to the deep individual and social histories that animate the work.



**Amazing Grace**, 1993

Baby strollers, fire hose, and audio

Private collection



**Resonance**, from the **Breathing Circles** series, 2018  
Oak, copper sheet, copper nails, and darkening patina  
Collection Erica Gervais and Ted Pappendick



**Correctional Circle 1802**, from the **Breathing Circles** series, 2018  
Oak, copper sheet, copper nails, and darkening patina  
Courtesy the artist; Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul; and Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, and Havana



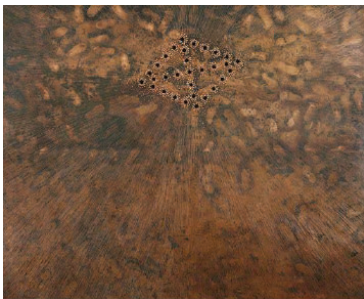
**Escape Velocity Blue**, from the **Breathing Circles** series, 2018  
Oak, copper sheet, copper nails, and darkening patina  
THE EKARD COLLECTION  
Courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, and Havana



**Nadir**, from the **Breathing Circles** series, 2018  
Oak, copper sheet, copper nails, and darkening patina  
Private collection  
Courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, and Havana

## BREATHING PANELS

For the *Breathing Panels* series (2015–ongoing), Nari Ward punctured Kongo cosmograms—African prayer symbols composed of a diamond bisected by a cross—into large sheets of copper. Ward first came across this pattern in holes cut into the floorboards of the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia, an eighteenth century church founded by formerly enslaved people, which served as a stop on the Underground Railroad. The holes allowed people fleeing to the North to breathe as they hid under the church’s floor; they also constitute a reminder of African cultural practices that the transatlantic slave trade sought to erase. Footprints subtly mark the surfaces of some *Breathing Panels*, echoing patterns of escape and migration.



**Breathing Panel: Oriented Center, 2015**

Oak, copper sheet, copper nails, and darkening patina

Collection Oya and Bulent Eczacibasi

## GROUND (IN PROGRESS)

*Ground (In Progress)* (2015) comprises over 700 masonry bricks covered in copper sheets, resembling the patterns sewn into quilts and used to covertly guide former slaves to stops along the Underground Railroad and, ultimately, to freedom. Inspired by an encounter with Robert Rauschenberg's prints on copper during a residency at Rauschenberg's former studio in Captiva, Florida, these works also reference the traditional use of copper in many cultures as a tool for healing the body.



**Ground (In Progress), 2015**

Copper, brick, and darkening patina

Collection Jorge Jellicic



## UNTOLD

*Untold* (2013) is one of several works that reference the bottle tree, a ritualistic form designed to ward off evil spirits by trapping them inside a glass bottle, where sunlight would eventually destroy them. Historians like Robert Farris Thompson have traced the history of the bottle tree from the Congo westward via the transatlantic slave trade, through which it became a common folk tradition in the United States and the Caribbean. Nari Ward has cited this diasporic history, and Thompson's work in particular, as an influence, noting that it embodies a larger history of trauma, survival, and resistance.

Ward began making his own bottle works in the early 1990s using bottles salvaged from the trash, which he would suspend in networks of yarn. The delicate three-dimensional patterns in these sculptures recall both the form of the bottle tree and American quilting traditions. In *Untold*, green and blue bottles hang from a metal infinity loop in a quilt-like pattern; each contains a rolled-up sheet of paper, its message unsent and unread. Like many of Ward's works, *Untold* evokes Paul Gilroy's concept of the black Atlantic, a space of black diasporic culture that unites Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Caribbean.



### **Untold, 2013**

Bottles, paper sheets, metal, and wire

Courtesy the artist; Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul; and Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, and Havana



**Glory, 2004**

Oil barrel, fluorescent and ultraviolet tubes, computer parts, DVD, parrot, audio recording, Plexiglas, fan, camera casing elements, paint cans, cement, towels, and rubber roofing membrane

Courtesy the artist; Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul; and Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, and Havana

## IRON HEAVENS

*Iron Heavens* (1995) was one of two works created by Nari Ward for the 1995 Whitney Biennial (New York, New York), along with the no longer extant *Peace Keeper* (1995), a hearse covered in tar and crowned with rusted car mufflers. *Iron Heavens* takes on issues of violence, transformation, and healing. It consists of a mountain of charred baseball bats gathered in front of a wall of overlapping metal cooking pans. In its abstract composition of repeated forms, *Iron Heavens* recalls the work of Post-Minimalist artists from the 1970s like Jack Whitten and Lee Bontecou, whom Ward came to know while at art school in New York.

To create the work, Ward charred each bat, then adorned the bats with sterilized cotton balls that had been dipped in sugar, ironed, and dried so the edges hardened, transforming them into small amulets. Aside from their athletic function, baseball bats evoke the threat of violence—specifically violence toward marginalized groups. The cotton and sugar, too, bear weighty associations, with their historical ties to the brutality of chattel slavery. In spite of these traumatic connotations, Ward understands the careful application of cotton amulets as a process of healing in response to the destructive act of burning that preceded it. The bats rest in front of the sprawling field of metal to create an installation that resembles both a ritual shrine and a celestial landscape.



**Iron Heavens, 1995**

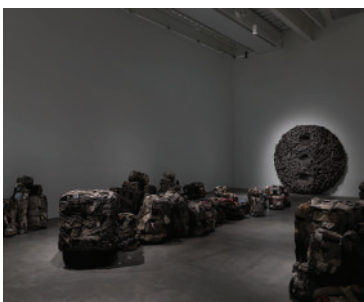
Oven pans, ironed sterilized cotton, and burned wooden bats

Collection Jeffrey Deitch

## EXODUS

Nari Ward's first major international exposure was at the 1993 Venice Biennale (Italy), an event that signaled a new global awareness in contemporary art. Alongside other emerging artists including Janine Antoni, Matthew Barney, Gabriel Orozco, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, Ward presented a major installation titled *Exodus* (1993), a mandala-like object surrounded by dozens of enigmatic bundles of fabric and fire hoses.

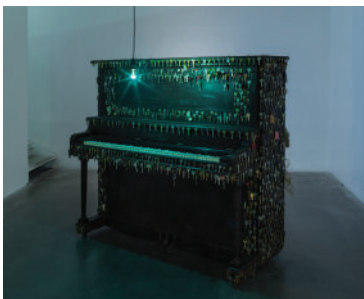
With *Exodus*, Ward reflected on experiences of displacement in Harlem, a neighborhood defined by historical patterns of migration from the American South and enriched by subsequent waves of newcomers from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa. Ward has described the dislocated forms in his work as "vessels": unmoored from the sculptural epicenter, they evoke containers for memories and histories that have been battered or dispossessed. *Exodus* grapples with lived experiences of exclusion, discrimination, expulsion, poverty, and neglect—realities that remain relevant amid today's global refugee crises. The work engages a spiritual language that connects the artist's roots to the vernacular of the global diaspora and creates emotional resonance beyond the strictures of traditional religious symbolism.



**Exodus**, 1993  
Mixed media  
Collection Jeffrey Deitch

## SPELLBOUND

Throughout his career, Nari Ward has examined the brutal history of slavery and the post-emancipation period in the United States, and how this tragic past remains deeply ingrained in both American consciousness and the foundations of specific sites. *Spellbound* (2015), produced for his solo exhibition at the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah, Georgia, comprises a modest piano covered with house keys and Spanish moss. A screen concealed on the back presents a short film depicting people and places in Savannah, focusing on the persistence of cultural traditions in the African-American community there and on the layers of historical memory embedded in local architecture. One key scene captures the floor of the First African Baptist Church, founded by freed slaves in the nineteenth century. A series of holes were punched into the floor in a diamond-like shape, allowing escaped slaves to breathe as they hid in the church, which was a stop along the Underground Railroad. Patterned after a traditional Kongo cosmogram, a symbol that originated in West Africa, the breathing holes mark both a functional solution and a means of sustaining a culture that the transatlantic slave trade attempted to destroy. Ward also deploys these patterns in his *Breathing Circle* works, a selection of which are included in the exhibition.



### **Spellbound**, 2015

Piano, used keys, Spanish moss, light, and single-channel video: color, sound, 9:03 minutes

Filmed by Steven Rose

Audio by Austin Nelson

Commissioned by SCAD Museum of Art

Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin

Purchase through the generosity of an anonymous donor



**Anchoring Escapement; Fang, 2018**

Grandfather clock case, copper sheet with patina, copper nails, and African statues

Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul



**Den, 1999**

Wood, chain-link fence, metal pole, tacks, rug, and wooden furniture legs

Walker Art Center; T.B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2002