

# Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

*Valerie Hegarty: Alternative Histories*

May 17–December 1, 2013





# *Valerie Hegarty: Alternative Histories*

## **About the Artist**

Valerie Hegarty lives across the street from the Brooklyn Museum and is a frequent visitor. "I am extremely fortunate that the Brooklyn Museum is literally my 'front yard,'" she says. "The Museum's vast and diverse collections are a rich resource for me as an artist who mines and reinterprets art history. Along with being an important cultural institution, the Museum is also a vital neighborhood hangout, and I spend many mornings drinking coffee on the steps, summer nights sitting in the grass people-watching, and *First Saturdays* meeting friends to listen to music and visit favorite shows."<sup>1</sup>

Hegarty uses foam core, papier-mâché, and ink-jet prints on canvas to reproduce familiar images of American art, which she then "paints, carves, twists, drapes, amputates, and grafts"<sup>2</sup> in order to infuse them with new meaning.

Born in Burlington, Vermont, in 1967, Hegarty earned her Master of Fine Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her work has been the subject of many solo exhibitions, including the High Line public art project *Autumn on the Hudson Valley with Branches* and, most recently, *Figure, Flowers, Fruit* at the Nicelle Beauchene Gallery.

## About the Exhibition

*Valerie Hegarty: Alternative Histories* is the second exhibition in a series inviting contemporary artists to install their artwork in the Museum's period rooms (examples of historic architecture and interior design that have been disassembled and moved from their original locations, then reassembled and furnished for display in the galleries). This series of "activations" is meant to engage visitors to think differently about the traditional presentation of domestic interiors. Hegarty's site-specific artwork appears in three period rooms.

In the Cane Acres Plantation dining room, which comes from a house built in Summerville, South Carolina, between 1789 and 1806, Hegarty has placed re-creations of nineteenth-century still-life paintings that burst their frames and spill fruit into the room, where it is picked at by sculpted crows. This tableau contains cultural references including the "Jim Crow" laws of American racial segregation, *vanitas* paintings (still lifes of objects that serve as symbolic reminders of life's impermanence, such as skulls, candles, or decayed fruit), and Alfred Hitchcock's thriller *The Birds* (1963).

Hegarty has also installed her artwork in two rooms—a "hall" (an all-purpose room for eating, socializing, or card playing) and a parlor—removed from the so-called Cupola House in Edenton, North Carolina, built in the 1720s. She has transformed the hall to look as if it was riddled with bullets. (The American Civil War would seem like the logical cause; however, the sculpture of a pileated woodpecker in the room provides an alternative explanation for the damage.) Her activation of the Cupola House parlor is discussed in the pages that follow.

Hegarty's altering of objects so that they appear to be disintegrating, destroyed, or overtaken by time and nature offers viewers multiple, alternative perspectives that she feels are often repressed in traditional museum displays. The artworks she has created for this exhibition highlight the construction of the period rooms, which she says are already a mix of fact and fiction. "Some parts of the room are authentic," she explains, "some reconstructed, and some imagined, much like our construction of history itself."<sup>3</sup> Her activations connect visitors to the experiences of people whose histories she believes were neglected in the initial installation of the period rooms: the enslaved African Americans who worked the land and served in the house at Cane Acres, and the Native Americans forced from their traditional lands.



## Description of the Artwork

The rug in the center of the Cupola House parlor appears to be decomposing. Grasses seem to have taken root in its remnants. On the mantel over the fireplace, a portrait of a man wearing a porcupine hair roach (a men's head ornament made of porcupine hair) also looks as if it's being taken over by nature. Branches and stems lift the man's head from his body. A head that resembles George Washington seems to have melted away from a portrait hanging over the sofa and lies on a cushion in a pool of black paint. The other items in the room are the usual furnishings.



## About the Cupola House

The downstairs interior of the Cupola House was removed and sold to the Brooklyn Museum in 1918. The house itself, believed to have been built about 1725 by Richard Sanderson, Jr., a New England sea captain, still stands, facing Edenton Bay in Edenton, North Carolina, one of three important colonial North Carolina ports. Colonization occurred very early there (settlers had come south from the Jamestown area in 1658) and many local tribes who subsisted on coastal and marine resources were pushed out of the area.

The cupola, or rooftop structure, for which the house is named provided a vantage point from which Sanderson could keep an eye on his ship as well as whalers, rum boats, and other vessels in the harbor.

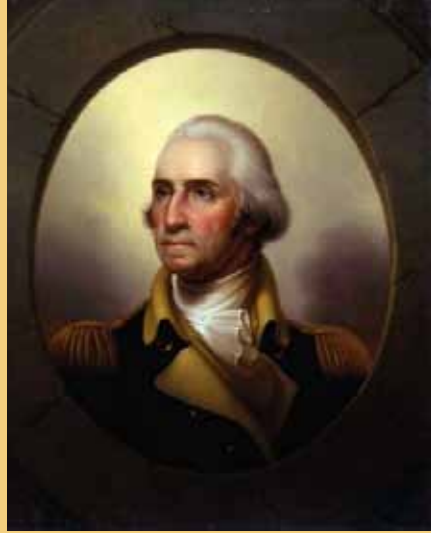


## About the Artwork

Hegarty's installation involves three significant additions to the parlor of the Cupola House: the two portraits and the brightly colored rug. All are intended to suggest alternative narratives to traditional American history.



1.



2.



3.



4.

Hegarty's portrait of George Washington (1) is based on a famous 1824 painting by Rembrandt Peale of Washington as the "Father of His Country" (2). Hegarty, however, knows Washington by another name: Conotocarious, an Iroquois word for "Town Destroyer." This title had its origins in 1779 when Washington, as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army in the Revolutionary War against the British, gave Major General John Sullivan instructions to lay waste to Iroquois settlements in retaliation against the Iroquois tribes who had remained loyal to Great Britain.<sup>4</sup> Hegarty's violent alterations of the portrait of Washington, in her words, "reverse the intention of the President trying to intimidate and subdue the Indians."<sup>5</sup>

Hegarty's artwork above the fireplace (3) is based on Charles Bird King's 1822 portrait of the Pawnee chief Sharitarish (4), one of seventeen Native American leaders invited to the White House by President James Monroe in 1821 in an attempt to persuade them to peacefully cooperate with the government's intention to expand west. During the visit the men were given medallions depicting President Monroe, and King painted a portrait of each man with a medallion around his neck. For Hegarty, King's portrait is a reminder of the desire to "frame, assimilate, and control the identity and destiny of Native Americans." She describes the growing foliage that lifts Sharitarish's head from his body in her own work as representing his inseparable bond to the landscape and hopes the viewer "ponders the possibility of transformation despite the events of the past."<sup>6</sup>



The third element of the installation combines a rug Hegarty purchased, labeled by the manufacturer as “Genesis Arizona Blue,” with materials she added to simulate plants growing through the rug (see right). The rug’s colorful, geometric patterns represent centuries of artistic exchange and collaboration between Native and non-Native people. For example, many of today’s “Native” patterns are inspired by Navajo blankets, which were influenced by seventeenth-century Pueblo weavers, who in turn were inspired by Spanish textiles. In the twentieth century, white Americans entered the conversation. Pendleton Woolen Mills (founded in Oregon) sent its head loom artisan to live with Native Americans so that he could design blankets specifically for the Native American market. When his early blankets were well received, he was sent on a six-month tour of the Southwest, where he lived with the Navajo, Zuni, and Hopi to find out what blanket designs those tribes would prefer. He returned with hundreds of ideas that freely mixed patterns, colors, and shapes from all over the Southwest.



## Questions for Viewing

The Cupola House parlor combines historical objects with contemporary artwork. Can you find examples of each?

Describe the two portraits. How are they similar? How are they different? What do you notice about the floor covering in the center of the room?

The artist says that these objects are meant to raise questions about the erasure of the culture and history of nonwhite peoples. In what ways are the contemporary artworks in this room being “erased”?

Archaeology is the study of past human activity using primary source material, such as artifacts and architecture. Hegarty describes some of her past artwork as a form of “reverse archaeology.” What do you think she means by this? What examples of “reverse archaeology” can you find in *Alternative Histories*?

The Cupola House was built in Edenton, North Carolina, around 1725, a decade after the Tuscarora Indian War between the Tuscarora and British, Dutch, and German settlers forced most of the indigenous communities out of the area. What in this installation reminds you of absence? What reminds you of memory? What reminds you of violence? What is hopeful? What do you see that makes you say that?

To answer the question “Who lived here?” many historic sites with existing plantation houses (such as Drayton Hall outside Charleston, South Carolina) are reconstructing spaces to represent the quarters where enslaved African Americans lived and worked. Art museums with period rooms are also experimenting with ways to address the question by including more information in labels and using photographs. What else could the Brooklyn Museum do?

## Activities

### Social Studies and Art

Hegarty’s artwork draws on her reactions to history and reflections on how historical events and the passage of time affect physical objects. Select an artwork created in the United States between 1776 and 1900 (digital images from the Brooklyn Museum’s collection of American art are available at [www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/american\\_art/objects/](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/american_art/objects/)). Research some of the historical events that took place from the date the artwork was made until the present day. Focus on events from the same geographic area where the artwork was made. Imagine how the artwork might change if it were to be present during one of these events, or how the passage of time might influence its condition. Alter an image of the artwork to show the visual evidence of this participation in American history.

### Art and Writing

Imagine you are one of the paintings in the Cupola House parlor. Write a letter to Brooklyn Museum visitors telling them about how you were made. Consider what your daily life is like, how it feels to be part of this exhibition, and what special message you want visitors to know about. What lasting impression do you want to leave? Host a reading to share your letter or send a copy to [school.programs@brooklynmuseum.org](mailto:school.programs@brooklynmuseum.org).

## Resources

[www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/valerie\\_hegarty/](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/valerie_hegarty/)

Brooklyn Museum's webpage for *Valerie Hegarty: Alternative Histories*.

<http://valeriehegarty.com/home.html>

Hegarty's webpage, with images and descriptions of her other works.

<http://nicellebeauchene.com/artists/valerie-hegarty/>

Nicelle Beauchene Gallery's webpage for Hegarty.

[www.bravinlee.com/rugs.html](http://www.bravinlee.com/rugs.html)

The website for BravinLee Rug Editions. Hegarty's rug projects are featured.

<http://illsocietymag.com/?p=8254>

An interview with the artist about her process and inspirations.

[www.mutualart.com/OpenExternalArticle/Solo-exhibition-of-new-paintings--sculpt/A55C5DF489F5A4A2](http://www.mutualart.com/OpenExternalArticle/Solo-exhibition-of-new-paintings--sculpt/A55C5DF489F5A4A2)

A publication that describes some of Hegarty's artwork.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=zB6tgAb4wBM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zB6tgAb4wBM)

A video of Hegarty talking about *Fallen Bierstadt* (2007) from the Museum.

[www.whitehousehistory.org/whha\\_classroom/documents/WHHA\\_4-8-history-art.pdf](http://www.whitehousehistory.org/whha_classroom/documents/WHHA_4-8-history-art.pdf)

Historical information about artwork displayed in the White House, including Charles Bird King's Native American portraits.

[www.pendleton-usa.com/custserv/custserv.jsp?pageName=IndianTrading&parentName=Heritage](http://www.pendleton-usa.com/custserv/custserv.jsp?pageName=IndianTrading&parentName=Heritage)

The Pendleton Woolen Mills website, with an overview of the company's interaction with Native groups.

[www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/brainiac/2011/12/the\\_history\\_of\\_11.html](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/brainiac/2011/12/the_history_of_11.html)

Article featuring the history of Native American prints.

<http://nativeappropriations.blogspot.com/2011/02/lets-talk-about-pendleton.html>

A blog post about the pros and cons of Pendleton prints in popular culture.

<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/history/whtour/library-paintings.html>

Information about the 1821 meeting between Native American leaders and President Monroe.

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## Notes

1. Valerie Hegarty, email correspondence with Alexa Fairchild, March 8, 2013.
2. [www.mutualart.com/OpenExternalArticle/Solo-exhibition-of-new-paintings--sculpt/A55C5DF489F5A4A2](http://www.mutualart.com/OpenExternalArticle/Solo-exhibition-of-new-paintings--sculpt/A55C5DF489F5A4A2).
3. Hegarty, email correspondence with Alexa Fairchild, March 8, 2013.
4. Stannard, David E. *American Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 118–121.
5. Hegarty, email correspondence with Alexa Fairchild, March 8, 2013.
6. Ibid.

**Pages 1 and 2: Valerie Hegarty at work in her studio**

**Page 3: Hegarty's activation of the Cupola House parlor**

**Page 4: The Cupola House hall (top) and parlor (bottom) as usually installed in the Museum**

**Page 5: (1). Valerie Hegarty (American, b. 1967). *George Washington and Head*, 2013. Canvas, wooden stretcher, acrylic paint and gel mediums, paper, glue, sand, gold foil, thread; dimensions variable. (2). Charles Bird King (American, 1785–1862), *Sharitarish*, circa 1822. Oil on panel, 17 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 13 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (44.6 x 35.1 cm). The White House Historical Association. (3). Rembrandt Peale (American, 1778–1860). *George Washington*, circa 1850. Oil on canvas, 35 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 28 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (90.5 x 72.4 cm). De Young Museum, San Francisco, gift of Mrs. Charles Janin in memory of the James Hoge Latham Family. (4). Valerie Hegarty (American, b. 1967). *Native American Chief (Sharitarish) with Branches*, 2013. Canvas, wooden stretcher, acrylic paint and gel mediums, artificial branches, foil, paper, glue, sand; dimensions variable.**

**Page 6, top left: The Cupola House parlor as usually installed in the Museum**

**Page 6, right: Valerie Hegarty (American, b. 1967), in collaboration with BravinLee Editions. *Native American Rug with Marsh Grass*, 2013. Rug, fabric, raffia, glue, sand, acrylic paint, thread; dimensions variable**

## Brooklyn Museum

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