

NARI WARD

Balance Fountain

November 15, 2023 – January 13, 2024

London



Nari Ward, *Balance Fountain*, 2023 (detail)

Lehmann Maupin is pleased to present *Balance Fountain*, New York-based multidisciplinary artist Nari Ward's first solo exhibition in London. The exhibition precedes a major European museum exhibition to be announced in the coming months. Adopting a distinctly spiritual approach, *Balance Fountain* probes the unseen forces that shape both unique cultures and global society, exposing ritual as a structural artistic device. The presentation features a series of new copper panel works, a selection of sculptures, and a large-scale floor installation, each composed of objects adjacent to ceremonial practice or devotional behavior.

Ward is best known for his wall- and installation-based sculptural works created from materials frequently found and collected throughout Harlem, his longtime neighborhood. The artist combines these materials to re-contextualize their original meanings, creating assemblage works that confront complex social and political realities (often surrounding race, migration, democracy, and community) through literal and metaphorical juxtaposition. Materially specific but intentionally ambiguous in their signification, Ward's works encourage the viewer to explore many possible interpretations.

Installed in the center of the gallery are two sculptures, whose individual construction and mutual interaction explore the restorative possibilities of communal gathering. *Balance Fountain* (2013—2014) recalls a wheelbarrow overflowing with mysterious cargo. Strands of silver shade cloth, enormous golden mango seeds, and long metal window balances exceed the confines of an antique barrel. Freed from performing their crucial mechanical function, Ward's window balances suggest an array of metaphorical resonances. If a window is used to see, then a window balance is a purveyor of vision. Essential to this operation is a typically hidden cross-shaped spring that allows windows to be raised or lowered with ease. In *Balance Fountain*, these crosses proliferate to create a spray of delicate crucifixes extending from a base of luminous seeds. In both title and material, *Balance Fountain* is a meditation on equilibrium, potentiality, and the promise of insight if only you can strike the right balance.

Balance Fountain sits atop a new floor installation titled *Groundin' Visible* (2023), which is composed of bricks overlaid with a sheet of copper. Ward has long been drawn to copper as an artistic medium for both its energetic properties and its many

cultural associations with medicine and healing. In *Groundin' Visible*, the copper surface is imprinted with the indexical traces of sundry objects. The delicate outlines of prayer beads and rosaries appear alongside the visually resonant yet significantly opposing symbols of the Union Jack and the Congolese Cosmogram. Ward also includes the imprints of eight fan blades, which hold dual resonance in *Groundin' Visible* as a practical appliance and as a metaphor for the invisible movement of the Spirit. Recalling this animation, *Groundin' Visible* is conceived as a pedestal for hosting other activity. Several performances will take place during the run of the exhibition, where participants will engage *Balance Fountain* and *Groundin' Visible* in a ceremonial manner that explores communal introspection.

In *Prayers Series; Circuit* (2023), Ward considers the significance and omnipresence of prayer across global religions. Praying is an act of devotion that communes the individual with the divine, often through the use of sacred objects that materially structure a spiritual connection. The tactility of these exercises that connect the physical to the spiritual is of great interest to Ward, whose new series deploys prayer beads and hands as a central motif. Each panel in *Prayers Series* features the ghostly traces of prayer beads, their impression left on the copper surface through the application of a darkening patina. The unbroken loop of the beads is crisply visible. Describing this loop and also the conductive properties of copper metal, the titular word *Circuit* gestures towards both visible and invisible manifestations of connective energy and repetitive labor.

Echoing the interplay between *Balance Fountain* and *Groundin' Visible*, Ward's *Empire* (2023) is also composed of new and found art objects. The sculptural installation comprises a decorative glass cabinet painted black with indelible ink and filled with an assortment of unusual black globes. These globes are tufted in balls of cotton dipped in sugar and singed with fire. Their scorched topographies reference the most notorious crops that powered the economies of the American South. A dark twist on the western museological phenomenon of the cabinet of curiosities, *Empire* gestures towards slavery and colonialism as invisible forces used to violently re-structure societies, often in concert with religious proselytization. Here and elsewhere in the exhibition, Ward employs assemblage to deconstruct the often invisible yet intertwined religious, political, and cultural structures that charge humble objects with extraordinary significance.

Nari Ward (b. 1963, St. Andrew, Jamaica; lives and works in New York) is known for his sculptural installations composed of discarded material found and collected throughout his neighborhood. He has repurposed objects such as baby strollers, shopping carts, bottles, doors, television sets, cash registers, and shoelaces, among other materials. Ward re-contextualizes these found objects in thought-provoking juxtapositions that create complex, metaphorical meanings to confront social and political realities surrounding race, migration, democracy and community, intentionally leaving the meaning of his work open to allow his viewers to provide their own interpretations.

Perennial themes of memorial, remembrance, and societal relationships have permeated Ward's practice, from his early, now iconic installation *Amazing Grace* (1993), composed of discarded fire hoses and hundreds of abandoned strollers, to the work he is creating today. *Amazing Grace* was produced during Ward's residency at The Studio Museum in Harlem in response to the AIDS crisis and drug epidemic of the early 1990s. It incorporated more than 365 discarded baby strollers—commonly used by the homeless population in Harlem to transport their belongings—which the artist bound with twisted fire hoses in an abandoned fire station in Harlem. Echoing through the space was a recording of gospel singer Mahalia Jackson's "Amazing Grace," with lyrics addressing themes of redemption and change and generating a sense of hope and optimism. In his most recent work, Ward engages ideas of commemoration, community, and the reclamation of public space through the medium of public streets. His new, large-scale copper *Peace Walk* panels are patterned after sidewalk squares and show the imprints of floral bouquets, spent candles, empty liquor bottles, and other objects that Ward collected from various street memorials near his studio. The series title comes from protest terminology, referring to people coming together to walk or march against an injustice. Here and throughout his practice, Ward identifies public streets as belonging to local communities—while these spaces have functioned as sites of grief and consolation, the artist also nods to their longstanding role as a stage for protest.

Nari Ward received a B.A. from City University of New York, Hunter College in 1989, and an M.F.A. from City University of New York, Brooklyn College in 1992. Select solo exhibitions of his work have been organized at Fondazione Nicola Trussardi, Milan, Italy (2022); Vilcek Foundation, New York, NY (2022); Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, CO (2020); Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston, TX (2019); New Museum, New

York, NY (2019); Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (2017); Socrates Sculpture Park, New York, NY (2017); The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA (2016); Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, FL (2015); Savannah College of Art and Design Museum of Art, Savannah, GA (2015); Louisiana State University Museum of Art, Baton Rouge, LA (2014); The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA (2011); Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, MA (2011); Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA (2002); and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN (2001, 2000).



Select group exhibitions featuring his work include *Longing, Grief, and Spirituality: Art Since 1980*, The Menil Collection, Houston, TX (2023); *Exercises in Imagination*, National Academy of Design, New York, NY (2023); *Sharjah Biennial 15*, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (2023); *In the Heart of Another Country*, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, Germany (2022); *Prospect.5 New Orleans: Yesterday we said tomorrow*, New Orleans, LA (2021); *Grief and Grievance*, New Museum, New York, NY (2021); *The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse*, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (2021) and Crystal Bridges Museum of American

Art, Bentonville, AR (2022); *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*, Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY (2021); NGV Triennial, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia (2020); *Objects Like Us*, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT (2018-2019); *UPTOWN: nastywomen/badhombres*, El Museo del Barrio, New York, NY (2017); *Black: Color, Material, Concept*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY (2015); *The Great Mother*, Fondazione Nicola Trussardi, Palazzo Reale, Milan (2015); *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago, IL (2015); *NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star*, New Museum, New York, NY (2013); *Contemplating the Void: Interventions in the Guggenheim Rotunda*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY (2010); Whitney Biennial, New York, NY (2006); *Landings, Documenta XI*, Kassel, Germany (2002); *Passages: Contemporary Art in Transition*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY (1999); *Projects: How to Build and Maintain the Virgin Fertility of Our Soul*, MoMA PS1, Long Island City, NY (1997); Whitney Biennial, New York, NY (1995); and Cardinal Points of the Arts, 45th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (1993).

Ward's work is in numerous international public and private collections, including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; Akron Art Museum, Akron, OH; Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX; Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY; Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO; DESTE Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY; GAM, Galleria Civica di arte, Torino, Italy; Huntington Library, Art Museum, Botanical Gardens, Los Angeles, CA; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; Istanbul Modern, Istanbul, Turkey; Long Museum, Shanghai, China; The Menil Collection, Houston, TX; Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC; National Gallery of Victoria, Southbank, Australia; New York Historical Society, New York, NY; New York Public Library, New York, NY; Pérez Art Museum Miami, FL; Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, NJ; Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, among numerous others. In 2022 Ward was named

a National Academician by the National Academy of Design; he has received numerous other honors and distinctions including the Fellowship Award, The United States Artists (2020); Vilcek Prize in Fine Arts, Vilcek Foundation (2017); the Joyce Award, The Joyce Foundation (2015), the Rome Prize, American Academy of Rome (2012), and awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1998), the Pollock-Krasner Foundation (1996); and the National Endowment for the Arts (1994). Ward has also received commissions from the United Nations and the World Health Organization.

Artist portrait by Axel Dupeux.

**LEHMANN MAUPIN**

Rachel Lehmann and David Maupin co-founded Lehmann Maupin in 1996 in New York. Since Inception, Lehmann Maupin has served as a leading contemporary art gallery with locations in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. For over 25 years, Lehmann Maupin has been instrumental in introducing international artists in new geographies and building long-lasting curatorial relationships. Known for championing diverse voices, the gallery's program proudly features artists whose work challenges notions of identity. and shapes international culture. Today, the gallery has locations in New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London, as well as a team in mainland China. In the past year with growing opportunities in new markets, the gallery has opened seasonal spaces in Aspen, Palm Beach, Taipei, and Beijing.

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