

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Sam Durant
Build Therefore Your Own World

Blum & Poe, Los Angeles
January 7 – February 18, 2017
Opening reception: Saturday, January 7, 6 – 8pm

Blum & Poe is pleased to present *Build Therefore Your Own World*, an exhibition of new work by Los Angeles-based artist Sam Durant. The title is excerpted from a Ralph Waldo Emerson essay.

Durant continues his excavation of marginalized American histories, unearthing counter storylines to the historical canon. In this exhibition he proposes a hybridized cross-pollination between the iconic nineteenth century transcendentalists like Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Louisa May Alcott, with African writers such as Phillis Wheatley and Lucy Terry Prince, along with abolitionists like Frederick Douglass. Further developing his theses from a recent three-month long public art project in Concord, MA entitled *The Meeting House*, Durant transforms relics from this politically loaded site of American history into a prescient presentation of culturally charged artworks.

Immediately upon entering the main gallery, viewers encounter *"Every spirit builds itself a house, and beyond its house a world...Build therefore your own world,"* 2017, an architectural structure based on the first houses built by and for the first free and emancipated Africans in Revolutionary Massachusetts. The horizontal boards that make up the walls of the deconstructed "home" become like lined paper, with texts painted directly on the inside walls by prominent, contemporary African American writers and poets: Tisa Bryant, Danielle Legros Georges, Robin Coste Lewis, and Kevin Young.

In addition to this reinterpreted hybrid "historical house" centerpiece, other artworks on view include sculptures that integrate artifacts related to African Americans in Colonial America and the notable transcendentalist writers and thinkers of pre- and post-Revolutionary Concord. Using precise 3-D renderings of original objects, the composite sculptures signify a fundamental interdependence of influences in the creation of American culture and identity. Works include a wooden mash-up of Phillis Wheatley's writing desk with Ralph Waldo Emerson's writing chair; a bronze cast of Jack Garrison's walking stick intersected by Henry David Thoreau's pencil; and the headstone of an enslaved man named John Jack crosscut by Thoreau's flute. The headstone bears a remarkable epitaph revealing the contradiction of the American revolutionary call for freedom and liberty while upholding and profiting from slavery. The artist has also forged a billy club of carbon steel – these often used by African American self-defense groups and their white comrades in battling bounty hunters who came to Boston to hunt fugitive slaves after the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in the 1850s. The African American defenders never carried lethal weapons – the billy club is symbolic of their courage and conviction not to kill.

Hanging on the walls is a series of prison and military blankets flecked with Lincoln pennies arranged in the formation of Ursa Minor ("Little Dipper," "Drinking Gourd," etc.). These works indelibly link the North Star and the Little Dipper, symbols synonymous with freedom, to African American history and cultural lore.

Scattered throughout an adjacent gallery are bronze casts of fieldstones originally collected by Durant when visiting Massachusetts, inspired by Robin Coste Lewis's poem "Inhabitants and Visitors" – an erasure work of Thoreau's *Walden*. The fieldstone was and still is a common building material used for foundations, chimneys, and stonewalls in New England homes. When presented in the context of dialogue relating to seventeenth and eighteenth century slavery, the term "fieldstone" conjures reflections on oppression and violence. On the topic of slavery in New England, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote: "In fact, this ghastly blood traffic was so immense and its profits were so stupendous that the economics of several European nations owed their growth and prosperity to it and New England rested heavily on it for its development. [Charles A.]

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Beard declared it was fair to say of whole towns in New England and Great Britain: ‘The stones of your houses are cemented with the blood of African slaves.’”

In conjunction with the exhibition, Blum & Poe will publish a catalogue that will include new essays by curator Pedro Alonzo and conflict resolution and reconciliation activist Tim Phillips, along with new works of poetry by Tisa Bryant, Danielle Legros Georges, Robin Coste Lewis, and Kevin Young. The book will be co-published by Black Dog Publishing and will be available in Spring 2017.

Sam Durant lives and works in Los Angeles. His work has been exhibited extensively around the world including in recent solo exhibitions at Art and the Landscape, The Old Manse, Concord, MA (2016); Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO (2015); Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA (2014); Museo d’Arte Contemporanea Roma, Rome, Italy (2013); dOCUMENTA (13), Karlsruhe Park, Kassel, Germany (2013); Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, MA (2006); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN (2003); and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA (2002). His work is featured in public and private collections internationally including: the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Australia; Fonds National d’Art Contemporain, Paris, France; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Project Row Houses, Houston, TX; Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, Belgium; and the Tate Modern, London, UK.