



**ONYEDIKA CHUKE**

***THE FOREVER MUSEUM ARCHIVE\_CIRCA 6000BCE***

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1

### *Forever Museum Archive/The Untitled/ Labyrinth, 2020-2021*

Oak Pews

Dimensions variable

Framing the installation are Quaker pews constructed into a labyrinth formation. The pews give the sense that they are preexisting to the exhibition, while at the same time actively shifting the architecture of the space, creating an immediate barrier and challenge for the viewer to navigate.

The carceral system as we know it traces its roots back to 1790 when the Quakers built what is now considered to be the first state penitentiary - the Walnut Street jail in Philadelphia. While there were jails before this time, this was the first prison intentionally designed to confine inmates to their cells with little human contact in order to give them time to reflect on their behavior - the architecture of separation at times resulting then as now in lasting psychological effect.

The labyrinth motif has been used by Chuke before but never in this large format. Together the pews and the labyrinth motif create a complex interplay - the history of the pews referencing the democratic seating arrangements in Quaker prayer houses, while their formation suggests a much more complex power relationship between the community, the individual, and the societal impacts of such architectural structures.

2

### *Forever Museum Archive/The Untitled/ The Death of Saint Anne\_Fabrizio Chiari, Circa 1615-1695*

oil on canvas

104 x 69 1/2 in; 264.2 x 175.3cm.

Introduced into The Forever Museum Archive by Chuke in 2019, this large Renaissance painting joins the other works, collected and created by the artist, that have been removed from their expected context and reintroduced into new settings to insite alternative readings and associations.

The painting was originally commissioned for a church and convent in Rome that was demolished around 1880 to make way for the Regina Coeli prison. From the early 1990s onwards this prison also served as a police academy and one of the first schools in Italy to focus on forensics and criminal anthropology. Renaissance paintings were symbols of power and wealth. They were also tools through which to organise society around singular ways of thinking and acting, with the orientation of the viewer to the figures setting up a hierarchy to be read and internalised. By turning the painting on its side Chuke disrupts the traditional experience, compositional hierarchy and singular reading of the work forcing the viewer to reevaluate what they are seeing and challenging the intended power of the painting.

3

### *Forever Museum Archive/The Untitled/ Hermes\_and\_Reflection Pool\_Blue\_ Circa 2020, 2021*

Cast resin, steel, vinyl underlayment,  
concrete, wool and liquid soap  
3ft x 4ft and 17ft diameter

Like history repeating itself, the works and artifacts in *the Forever Museum Archive* are oftentimes self-referential. The feet of Hermes are one of these markers - seen first in 2016 at the Socrates Sculpture Park, in 2019 at The Shed and SCAD Museum and now at The Arts Center at Governors Island. This 2021 version however, reflects the moment we find ourselves in: rendered in visceral full color it suggests that we now see more clearly the systems of power and oppression that exist around us and are able to better focus on these realities. The additional wings overtly point to the act of fabrication, elements that have been constructed for theatrics rather than necessity, visual information copied and pasted to reinforce themselves to the viewer. The pool adds to this narrative of artifice. Neither a reflection pool nor a fountain, it glows an unnatural blue regurgitating white suds that are pumped in through a network of tubes that snake through and interconnect the elements in the exhibition.

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### *The Forever Museum Archive/ The Untitled\_Corcraft , 2021*

Liquid Corcraft Soap, water and tubes  
Dimensions Variable

This large scale installation pumps liquid Corcraft soap and water through tubes that connect various elements within the space and serves as an underlying framing tool to the exhibition. The soap is a commercial cleaning product produced by Corcraft Industries—the “brand name” for New York State’s Division of Correctional Industries, which currently employs approximately 2,100 incarcerated individuals at a starting wage of sixteen cents per hour. Used by the artist as a critique on the exploitation of prison labor, the network of tubes and liquid, conceptually modelled after our central nervous system, snakes through the gallery to evoke the insidiousness and never-ending cycles of oppression and injustice.

5

### *The Forever Museum Archive/The Untitled/Vertebrae, 2021*

Concrete, foam, wire, water, liquid soap,  
vinyl tubes and pumps

These vertebrae are modeled after three of twelve from the thoracic spine, each embedded with a pump. The thoracic column (a spinal region that extends into the rib cage) protects the most vital organs of the body and houses vital nerves needed for mobility. Initiating the circulation of liquid, these sculptures represent the systematic nature of the broken system that we are currently experiencing, wealth, power, religion, politics connected in the present as it was in the past through imprisonment and the resulting profit from its labor force. Razors are embedded into the vertebrae to signify the use of razors in the cutting and bagging of crack cocaine, also references the use of concealable weapons within the prison system.

6

### *The Forever Museum Archive/The Untitled/Severed Head of Hercules, 2021*

Cast resin, glass

Modeled by hand in the neoclassical style of the 1800s (referencing a Roman copy at The Met), this work is a replica of the head of Greek demigod, Hercules. This work utilizes the most famous and often invincible Greek figure to depict an alternate ending to popular myths of heroism - myths often utilized by powerful white patriarchs such as Benito Mussolini. Cast within the resin of this sculpture is broken glass collected by the artist during the 2020 protests in Soho, NY following the murder of George Floyd. Its inclusion is not only a preservation of an artifact, but also references the Broken Window Theory which states that visible signs of crime and disorder encourage more crime. The theory directly influenced policing policies in the 80s and 90s, resulting in increased arrests for misdemeanors in New York during this time. This work speaks again to the constructed connection between narratives drawn out into reality, and the power dynamics that come into play in relation to who enacts the narrative and who receives the long term traumatic repercussions.

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### *The Forever Museum Archive/The Untitled/ Three Actors, 2021*

Three channel video

This work succinctly relays how powerful consciously practiced artifice is when disseminated with the intent to actively construct the understanding of our lived experience. It presents Ronald and Nancy Reagan's famous televised introduction to 'The War on Drugs', flanking a projection of a scene of extreme physical violence from the movie American History X. In it, we witness the Reagan's (both formally trained actors) acting out state power, and Edward Norton utilising the power of Hollywood, together constructing a culturally and politically unified perception around race and criminality.

After highlighting the common theatrics present in both, Chuke counters and challenges them through a careful editing of the American History X, removing the victim from the scene. In so doing, the artist releases the victim from the physical violence of the movie and the psychological violence of the state perpetrated narrative filtering through the words of the Reagan's. Chuke also edited out the Nazi symbols that emblazen the body of Norton in the original film disallowing the viewer from dissassociating with the assilent and instead rencouraging an engagement with the psychology of what is being presented.

8

### *The Forever Museum Archive/The Untitled\_Glass, 2021*

Acrylic

This work references both a previous work (*The Forever Museum Archive/ Dome and Double Nymph\_An Architectural Template for Spiritual Worship*) created in Switzerland in 2012 as well as *The Death of Saint Anne* painting in the current exhibition. The superimposition of the labyrinth again creates a sense of disorientation while also creating a target-like motif linking the work, and the exhibition as a whole to the site of The Arts Center which started its history as a munitions warehouse. The work overlooks NYC Wall Street marking the connection between labor, commerce and the carceral system.