



ARTS + CULTURE

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## River Walks

**An immersive and interactive show at Vis Arts explores walking by the James.**

**Karen Newton**

Texas Beach. The flood wall. The Buttermilk Trail. The James River is so central to Richmond's identity that it's a rare city resident who doesn't have a favorite place or route along its banks.

Lily Cox-Richard, a sculptor and assistant professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, uses the river to recharge her energy. When Michael Jevon Demps, an interdisciplinary artist, musician and DJ, moved to Richmond, they got to know each other and better understand each other's practices through talks that transpired on river walks.

As part of an ongoing project, the artists decided to confront and honor place through walking, listening and making.

"I had recently moved back to Richmond," Cox-Richard explains. "I wanted to understand layers of the city's history through different sites and spaces, which expanded our walks." The result is "Walking With," an interactive exhibition at the Visual Arts Center attributed to Cox-Richard, Demps and the Library of Radical Returns.

The concept of the Library of Radical Returns had begun to crystalize on their walks. The collaboration was rooted in the exploration of shared energy, where things are loaned without concern for return and with trust that the energy sent out into the world compounds and creates returns greater than any actual object brought back. Their philosophy was to share what you have, take what you need.

Of the interactive nature of the library and the fact that the Visual Arts Center is a place for learning and making, Demps says "it

made sense to us that walking with is a place where visitors can witness the creation of space and take space as needed. The opportunity to have a show in Richmond, where they're both living and working, meant they could also be more experimental because the work could evolve even after the opening.

Walking into the exhibit, it's easy to feel transported to the river. Speakers play the sound of water rushing over rocks and in the back gallery, a video called "Live Stream of Streams" plays. The open-ended and ongoing aggregation of videos was compiled from many sources because anyone can contribute their own river experience by using the hashtag #walkwith\_LORR.

Mounted on steel bar coming out of rocks are fabric hangings called residuals. To create them, the artists made rubbings of riprap and other materials on used bedsheets and tablecloths that they'd previously used to refine clay. Most of the rubbings were made along the Richmond Slave Trail between Ancarrow's Landing and Mayo Bridge.

"Making rubbings there documented a site where rocks are haphazard while bringing attention and intention to a site where that feels lacking," Cox-Richard says. "Rubbing is caressing and also feels like a way to activate matter."

In another gallery sit six rock tumblers, constantly turning and adding a squeaky counterpoint to the sounds of moving water. Throughout the run of the show, rocks are tumbled and then polished inside. The small clay bits in the tumblers that cushion the rocks were made by many participants with local clay at a series of events the library held and continue to be made during hands-on field trips and workshops.

"We like the idea of the rocks being in the hands of community and that the very material that grinds down the rocks also softens their fall as they knock into each other," Cox-Richard says. "In addition to rocks, clay bits and grit, the rock tumblers are filled with river water and silt, so they're like an elevated river, bringing rocks from the future."

On the wall are portals made from photographs of specific moments from their walks. The images were screen-printed using ink made from rock slurry, a by-product of the rock-tumbling process. Monoprints of leaves, berries, and bark collected on their walks were then collaged over the screen prints to create wall-sized marks and drawings.

Central to the exhibit is peeling back the complicated layers of racist violence and injustice embedded in Richmond. Both agree that for any kind of healing to be possible, the traumas need to be known.

"Of course, for many people, this knowing is unavoidable," she says. "Historically, some people — white people — have gotten to generalize, gloss over and rewrite traumatic histories."

Insisting on specificity required that the artists use rocks, clay and water from locations with a sordid history, both to charge the space and to bring people closer to understanding the specifics of that place and, ultimately, open it up for further contemplation.

"Many of our walks began at a site that was made vital to Richmond as a dock to unload enslaved people and march them to market," Cox-Richard explains. "All of this is in the city where we live, work and play. So, it needs to be in the show, too. Immersive and interactive experience is how we live. It's also how we can learn, understand, heal and play."

*"Walking With" runs through Feb. 2 at the Visual Arts Center, 1812 W. Main St. visarts.org.*

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