



Gerrit Smith, from the series "Abolitionists"

Date

2015

Primary Maker

Karen Hampton

Medium

Dye-sublimation print on polyester twill over archival inkjet print on silk organza, with hand-stitching

Description

The artist Karen Hampton considers herself a griot, or storyteller. Through her work, she explores her personal and family history as it intersects with significant moments and trajectories in African American history: "As their medium I provide a vehicle for my ancestors' spirits to transcend history and remain as historical memory." Her textile-based practice recalls the long and fraught history of the medium—before, during, and after slavery—in its use of weaving, quilting techniques, and indigo dye. This work depicts Gerrit Smith, a member of Hamilton College's Class of 1818. Smith was a fervent abolitionist and one of the organizers of the Cazenovia Convention, held near Syracuse, New York, in August 1850 in anticipation of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. Smith donated much of his wealth to the abolitionist cause and gave hundreds of parcels of land to freed slaves so that they

would meet the requirements for voting in the state of New York. He also helped to fund John Brown's unsuccessful raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia (present-day West Virginia), in 1859. Gerrit Smith is one of a series of twelve portraits of prominent abolitionists created specifically for the Wellin Museum's Fall 2015 exhibition *Karen Hampton: The Journey North*. To make the portraits, the artist transferred images of her subjects, obtained from period photographs, engravings, paintings, and monuments, onto fabric. She then overlaid each one with a second image of a place or object of resonance to the sitter—in Smith's case, an early rendering of Hamilton College, with the Chapel at its center. The image of the man himself is based on an undated canvas in the Hamilton College portrait collection attributed to the abolitionist painter Grove S. Gilbert, which originally hung in the Memorial Hall and Art Gallery. Hampton further embellished the composition with hand-stitched details, such as an image of Smith's land office (one of the last surviving structures on his former estate in Peterboro, New York), seen over his left shoulder. (SOURCE: Alcauskas, *INNOVATIVE APPROACHES, HONORED TRADITIONS*, 2017)

Dimensions

Overall: 24 3/4 x 17 3/4 in. (62.9 x 45.1 cm) Frame: 29 x 22 5/16 x 2 in. (73.7 x 56.7 x 5.1 cm)