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INSIDE AMERICAN VENGEANCE

HEIDI WHITMAN'S IMMERSIVE INSTALLATION AT THE NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM DRAWS A LINE FROM MELVILLE'S AHAB TO AMERICA'S PRESENT-DAY CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

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Heidi Whitman, Pequod Destruction, canvas, wood, rope, string, paper, cheesecloth, netting, Cinefoil, ink, gouache, acrylic paint, 8' 5" x 11' 7".

by Heather Stivison

"While thus employed, the heavy pewter lamp suspended in chains over his (Ahab's) head, continually rocked with the motion of the ship, and for ever threw shifting gleams and shadows of the lines upon his wrinkled brow, till it almost seemed that while he himself was marking out lines and courses on the wrinkled charts, some invisible pencil was also tracing lines and courses upon the

deeply marked chart of his forehead ... For with the charts of all four oceans before him, Ahab was threading a maze of currents and eddies, with a view to the more certain accomplishment of that monomaniac thought of his soul" — Herman Melville,
"Chapter 44, The Chart" *Moby-Dick; or The Whale*.

In March 2020, as the pandemic descended on the United States, Heidi Whitman began rereading "Moby-Dick, or The Whale." Reading a chapter a day, she made her way through the book's 135 chapters, discovering layers of meaning that connected Melville's book to America's obsession with vengeance that inspired the work that is now on view at the New Bedford Whaling Museum. The exhibition is being presented just steps away from Seaman's Bethel. Immortalized in *Moby Dick* as the "Whaleman's Chapel," it is the very church Herman Melville attended in the weeks before departing on the whaling voyage that inspired his book.

"Ahab's Head: American Vengeance" is a two-part exhibition. Part One is displayed in a corridor filled with complex abstract drawings from Whitman's "Leviathan" series. The drawings cover the sheets in whites, blacks and greys, all manner of mark-making, and a quiet sense of foreboding. A silhouette of a white whale, ominous clouds of black, scattered images of whale eyes, a view from the prow of a ship and invented maps of ocean voyages line the walls. There are also multi-layered constructions, representing whaling voyages and the diverse members of the crew — all relating to the gallery installation in the next room. Mounted high at the end of the corridor are actual weapons from the museum's collection. Together, these objects and artworks invite the viewer to pause and reflect on the deeper meanings of the exhibition.

The second part of the exhibition is a single site-specific installation called "Ahab's Head: American Vengeance" — carrying the same name as the exhibition. The installation fills the entire gallery that is fittingly named the Herman Melville Room.

It is a sensory experience — visitors literally step into the installation and are instantly surrounded by sculptural columns of tangled ropes and cord that hang suspended from the ceiling. Coated with white acrylic paint, and bearing scattered fragments of fabric, they seem like tattered unraveled remnants of some monstrous garment — unraveled perhaps, just as Captain Ahab's mind has unraveled. As with so much of Whitman's work, there are layers of meaning for viewers to uncover, and these tangled ropes are no exception. Are these white ropes remnants of the whaling ship's rigging? Are they the sun-bleached entrails of some gruesome whaling activity? Certainly, they speak of violence.

A single enormous column near the center of the gallery is vivid red. Blood red. Every shade of red imaginable is mingled with black. Ropes, cords and strips of glistening fabric cascade down from the ceiling and ooze out into puddles of red paint on the gallery floor. Shadows cast patterns on the floor, and occasionally on viewers themselves, creating a portentous drama of Captain Ahab's madness and the violence of Melville's text. The dark feeling of weight is intensified by an ominous sound installation composed by David Raposo.

The gallery walls are lightly scribed with lines indicating imaginary whaling routes — some derived from actual maps in the museum's collection, drawn by Dartmouth whaling Captain Eber C. Almy. Drawings of islands and compass rose designs appear on the gallery walls, as do clusters of "X" markings that indicate locations of whale kills. Whitman is known for creating map-based drawings that she called "cartographies of the subconscious" and works in which "shape and shadow interact

invoking memory, presence, and absence." Threatening shadows of the suspended ropes dance over the silvery lines that Whitman has marked out on these wall charts, echoing Melville's text in which he noted, "while he himself was marking out lines and courses on the wrinkled charts, some invisible pencil was also tracing lines and courses upon the deeply marked chart of his forehead ..." Her cartography is talking about Ahab's mind as much as it is describing voyages.

At the far end of the gallery, is a direct reference to Ahab's mind — a massive mixed-media wall-construction in the rough shape of a head. Towering nearly nine feet high, the densely layered work is composed of innumerable pieces of canvas, fabric and paper painted in reds, blacks and whites, with pigment that drips and oozes and splatters down beneath noose-like tangled ropes, cords and various other materials. Roughly two dozen images of eyes of both humans and whales focus outwards on the scene before them. This is Ahab's head. His mind. And as Whitman noted, it is also the whale's head. She sees these two violent beings as twins, each one motivated by relentless, messianic zeal to destroy the other.

Directly opposite the head is another layered construction, spanning more than 11 feet, representing the destruction of Ahab's ship, the Pequod, and the inevitable consequence of Ahab's hubris. The artwork presents a sense of the remnants of the ship's black hull beneath a chaotic explosion of splintered wood, paper and ropes that is the main focus of the work. Ropes and ragged bits of textiles stream down to the gallery floor, creating more of the numerous dark shadows that are so much a part of this exhibition. Paper drawings swirling with maelstrom imagery are layered onto the assembly, suggesting both literal oceanic whirlpools and the turbulent ending of Ahab's monomania. Images of weaponry — especially guns of all types — are tucked in and among the debris.

Heavy with symbolism, Whitman's work aligns with the views of Melville scholar Andrew Delbanco, who interpreted the Pequod as "the American ship of state" and believed the book's enduring relevance was because its social and political commentary resonated with contemporary life. In an essay published by the New York Times shortly after the horrors of 9/11, Delbanco described Melville's writing as having an "eerie prescience" in foreseeing "how a demagogue can fuse his personal need for vengeance with the popular will by promising his followers a huntable enemy in which evil was 'made practically assailable.'"

Like Delbanco, Whitman sees the symbolism in Moby Dick as a commentary on contemporary society. The artist's observations of the present-day American atmosphere of violence and revenge are the heart of the exhibition. Whitman herself stated that "Moby-Dick is, of course, an extraordinary book that is mystical, poetic, and beautiful. However, I kept thinking about violence and vengeance both in Melville's masterpiece and in the world today ... particularly in America.

"Gun violence, political violence, and just plain violence are very much a part of American life. Retribution and vengeance seem to be the cornerstones of our current government. Ahab is very much with us. This installation Ahab's Head: American Vengeance is a way to connect past and present."

The unique visual language of Whitman's artworks makes these connections come alive.