

# THE Urban Activist

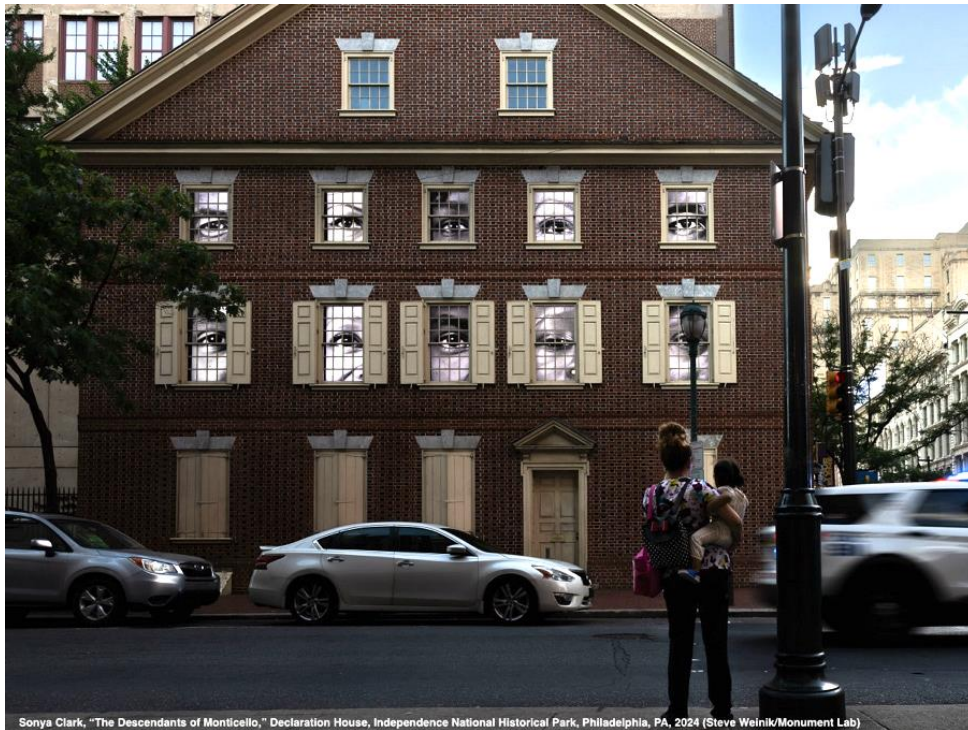
Urban change begins with people on a local scale

## CULTURE

# A House in Philadelphia and the Truth About US History

*Without having to step foot inside, award-winning artist Sonya Clark's new exhibit at Declaration House in Philadelphia engages passers-by with the entangled legacies of the United States' founding*

By Chisara Asomugha | August 6, 2024



Declaration House in Philadelphia is arguably America's democratic and historical ground zero. Originally owned by Jacob and Maria Graff, third-generation Germans who emigrated to America, they rented their second floor to Thomas Jefferson from May 23 until September 3, 1776.

In that home, away from the noise and bustle of Philadelphia's Old City, Jefferson, the future third president of the United States, drafted the nation's Declaration of Independence.

However, Jefferson, who lived and worked in the house's parlor and bedchamber, was not alone. He had brought along Robert Hemmings, both his brother-in-law and 14 year-old enslaved valet, from his plantation home (named Monticello). Hemmings, who most likely slept in the house's garrett, a "habitable" attic or storage space, was the son of Elizabeth Hemmings and her owner John Wayles, Jefferson's father-in-law. While Jefferson drafted the Declaration, it was the Hemmings' task to ensure Jefferson's comfort.

The Declaration House bore witness to the founding of the United States and to the exclusion of the enslaved from any freedoms the new country would offer. Almost 250 years later, America remains challenged in confronting its history. Award-winning artist and Professor of Art at Amherst College, [Sonya Clark](#), offers a more direct approach with her new installation, *The Descendants of Monticello*, exhibiting at the Declaration House.

The installation features video recordings and photographs of the eyes of descendants of Robert Hemmings and descendants from the over 400 people enslaved at Monticello, some of whom are Jefferson's direct descendants. With the help of the curatorial team's partner Ming Media, over 50 descendants between the ages of 8 and 88, were photographed. "We asked each participant to look into the camera lens and to not only see their eyes in the reflection but to also imagine they were seeing the eyes of their ancestors," Clark explained. Each photograph used was animated and enlarged to the six-foot height of Declaration House's windows, so that "every eye you see is blinking and moving, living."

At night, the eyes, illuminated by artificial lighting, become like "beacons in a lighthouse," a metaphor Clark appreciates. "In the same way eyes are windows to the soul, this artwork lets us into the essence of Declaration House," she continued. These animated eyes watching over history and the present prompt the public not only to confront the history these eyes witnessed, but to engage with the gazes of those most affected by it.

**When Monument Lab, a nonprofit public art, history and design studio in Philadelphia,** sought to create a work at Declaration House aligned with the upcoming 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, they approached Clark. For Clark, it is the first time one can experience her work without having to step foot into a building, making the work even more accessible to the public. For [Monument Lab](#), it is the first time an exhibit at the Declaration House has been open to the public in this way.



Declaration House Site Visit with Sonya Clark, Declaration House, Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia, PA, 2024 (Daniel Jackson/Monument Lab)

Situated on the southwest corner of 7th and Market Streets in Philadelphia at Independence National Historical Park, Declaration House also provides programming to the public about the historic site with related exhibits on the first and second floor of the building.

Ask Sonya Clark whether at its inception she'd imagined her new exhibit *The Descendants of Monticello* in its totality and she'll tell you that from the outset all she had was intention to incorporate eyes. And that was all she needed. "There wasn't a plan that said it must be like this or that. Art is capacious and generous. When you allow it, it will do what it needs to do."

Around 2018, Clark and Paul Farber, Executive Director of Monument Lab, were introduced to each other while she was working on her installation *Monumental Cloth: The Flag We Should Know* at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia. Shortly thereafter, they met for dinner. "I spoke with [Farber] about an issue I wanted to address with the work," Clark said, "and without hesitation he offered a tangible, meaningful solution that worked out better than I could've imagined." That care played a significant role in their future partnership. "There are few people in the artworld who I would enter into this kind of work with, and Paul Farber is one of them," she said, pondering the challenges artists—particularly Black artists—face in receiving support for their work.

After *Monumental Cloth* closed, Farber reached out to Clark and asked if she'd be interested in doing a project at Declaration House. "Well, Paul," she said to the man who would later play a hand in that conference table gathering at Monticello, "I've been thinking about eyes...."

**Clark had been working with Black ancestral eyes**, exploring cultural ancestors like Harriet Tubman, Chadwick Boseman, Toni Morrison, and others, long before *The Descendants of Monticello*. She recounted how in the 80s as an undergraduate student at Amherst College she learned about the Adenla (crowns of the Yoruba people covered with beaded eyes) from her professor, Dr. Rowland Abiodun. "He taught me that when the Oba [ruler] wears this crown, he immediately embodies the ancestors represented in that crown."

The significance of eyes is ubiquitous around the globe, but one aspect in particular was meaningful. "I had been thinking of multiple sets of eyes watching over us and a student of mine said, 'Oh, like the Ophanim!' [multi-eyed celestial beings mentioned in the Book of Ezekiel and apocryphal texts like the Book of Enoch.]" "The idea of having multi-eyed beings watching over us," she continued, "was powerful especially in the US where social injustice threatens the lives of Black people daily." Clark saw the power in a multi-eyed watchfulness of cultural ancestors and sought to bring that understanding to the artwork she envisioned for Declaration House.

No image of Robert Hemmings exists, "so I offered the idea of working with [Hemmings'] descendants because in their eyes are his eyes," Clark said. She already knew one of his descendants—her friend Gayle Jessup White, the fifth-great granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, whom she had met while living in Richmond, VA. White also happened to be the Public Relations manager of Monticello where Robert Hemmings, Sally's brother, was born. All Clark needed was permission to go through the archives at Monticello to find Hemmings' ancestors.

She reached out to White who was immediately on board with the project. White, in turn, invited Andrew Davenport of the Getting Word African American Oral History Project at Monticello and Jane Kamensky, President of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation that oversees Monticello's operations and management. By early 2024, they gathered in a conference room at Monticello to discuss Clark's idea. As they discussed, Kamensky leaned towards Clark and said, "I want to let you know before the meeting starts that when I was teaching at Harvard, I taught your work." This



revelation underscored her understanding that the ancestors were watching over her and this project, bringing all of them together to “get the work done.”



Sonya Clark, “The Descendants of Monticello,” Declaration House, Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia, PA, 2024 (Steve Weinik/Monument Lab)

Centering the eyes of Monticello’s enslaved descendants made sense to Clark and the curatorial team. “We chose to center the eyes of the descendants of the enslaved at Monticello because to do otherwise would have been to repeat an incomplete history,” Clark said. Rather than continue to erase the presence of enslaved Black people from the historical record, particularly those who bore witness to the founding of this nation, Clark’s work intentionally centers their presence offering a more complete telling of America’s story.

Archival work with formerly enslaved peoples and their descendants in the US has a long history: from individuals culling through family archives, to the federal government’s Federal Writers’ Project (1936-1940) containing more than 2,800 first-person accounts and photographs of former slaves, to the recent “Getting Word Oral History Project” at Monticello. About an hour north of Jefferson’s Monticello, archivists of *The Descendants’ Project*, at former president James Madison’s Montpelier estate, use historical documents, oral histories, and archeology to render a holistic American history. Like Clark’s work, these projects center the narratives of the enslaved and their descendants and provide the opportunity for them to tell their stories and complete our collective history.

**Visitors to the historic house are invited to respond** to the installation during the weekend summer hours of the exhibit. Those responses will be collected by Monument Lab and shared with Independence National Historical Park to inform future programming and reflection ahead of America’s 250th anniversary in 2026.

As for the life of this work after the exhibition (which runs through the 1st of December 2024, and is free to the public), the possibilities, Clark says, “are as numerous as there are people who encounter this work.” One lesson she’s learned from this work: “when you set an intention, the ancestors work with you and will guide you.”

In this era of persistent white-washing of history, looking into the eyes of those who bore witness to history-in-the-making gives us an opportunity to rethink and reframe what we call history and what we call freedom. “As soon as you believe that one life is more valuable than another life, that my humanity is less important than yours, then we have a problem.” Clark continued, “This is a fundamental problem the US continues to have when relating with indigenous and Black populations. It is important for us to recognize that we are the seeds in the gardens of each other’s liberation.” *The Descendants of Monticello* recognizes and upholds the value of lives devalued in the making of an independent United States of America.

On a recent afternoon in Philadelphia, Clark stood catty-corner from Declaration House, catching bits and pieces of conversations of pedestrians admiring the work. Some walked by without a glance, others stopped and stared in silence before moving on. “I’d love to do that more,” she said, “bear witness to the witness of people who encounter [*The Descendants of Monticello*]. What else are they thinking? What will they say of these eyes? What will they say they have witnessed?”