

## SoVA faculty member rejuvenates decade-old project with New York gallery exhibit



Penn State School of Visual Arts faculty member Bonnie Collura's latest exhibit, "Prince," is on display at Smack Mellon Gallery in Brooklyn, New York. Image: Etienne Frossard

Leon Valsechi  
January 22, 2019

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — Since Bonnie Collura, associate professor in the Penn State School of Visual Arts, was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 2005 for “The Prince Project,” her work completed around the concept has taken many forms — and the latest is on display at Smack Mellon Gallery in Brooklyn, New York.

[Collura's](#) sculptural installation “Prince” critiques our culture’s pattern of repeating iconic characters, gestures and polarizing traits to create heroes. With the mixed media installment, she interprets the prince figure as an amalgamation of four archetypal male characters from history, religion and popular culture: Jesus, St. Sebastian, C-3PO, and Abraham Lincoln.

The work is on display at [Smack Mellon](#) until Feb. 24. From 4 to 5 p.m. on Feb. 9, Collura will offer an artist talk to add context to the installation that evolved from the original concept of the Prince she developed in 2005.

When she began conceptualizing and constructing the “[prince](#)” figure, the early iteration was a large-scale, hollow clay mold that she could fit inside. But as the work progressed, Collura’s life changes, which included relocating to University Park from New York, inspired her to change the form of the prince.

“I felt that the work was becoming this heroic sculpture and that was something I was uncomfortable with, and I didn’t feel that I had the vocabulary at the time to figure out what exactly I wanted this figure to be,” Collura said. “My subsequent work led me to sewing and working with a lot of other materials, and that allowed me to see the Prince through a different kind of material lens.”

The change of course and materials opened a wide range of possibilities for Collura, which she said allowed her to create figures that expose the material vulnerabilities in their build while revealing her discovery of the characters as hollow and fragile shells.

### **Bonnie Collura's exhibit "Prince"**

Penn State School of Visual Arts faculty member Bonnie Collura's exhibit "Prince" is on display at Smack Mellon Gallery in New York until Feb. 24, 2019.



A floor view of Bonnie Collura's exhibit "Prince" on display at Smack Mellon Gallery in New York. IMAGE: Etienne Frossard



Gallery floor view of Bonnie Collura's exhibit "Prince." IMAGE: Etienne Frossard



Bonnie Collura's interpretation of Abraham Lincoln is part of her exhibit "Prince" on display at Smack Mellon Gallery in New York. IMAGE: Etienne Frossard



"Skin of a Dancing Ghost" created by Bonnie Collura for her exhibit "Prince." IMAGE: Etienne Frossard



A floor sculpture that is part of Bonnie Collura's exhibit "Prince." IMAGE: Etienne Frossard





A floor view of Bonnie Collura's exhibit "Prince" on display at Smack Mellon Gallery in New York. IMAGE: Etienne Frossard



Bonnie Collura's interpretation of the Star Wars droid C-3PO is part of her exhibit "Prince" on display at Smack Mellon Gallery in New York. IMAGE: Etienne Frossard

Located near Brooklyn Bridge Park, Smack Mellon offers a coveted gallery space with high ceilings and grand windows that illuminate the works with plentiful natural light. The nonprofit gallery was established in 1995 with the mission of nurturing and supporting emerging, under-recognized, mid-career, and women artists to realize new and ambitious projects, which Collura said aligns well with the inspiration for the work.

As visitors enter the gallery, the 15-sculpture exhibit is anchored with “Fortuna (woman),” a piece that offers a bridge between the finished works and the conceptualization of the exhibition. “I’m mining from Machiavelli’s text ‘the Prince,’ in which he often refers to Fortuna metaphorically as the uncontrollable woman that you need to control basically via violence,” Collura said. “I had been working with fabric and the one thing is, you can’t get fabric to bend the same way all the time, which led to the fabric metaphorically becoming the woman.”

On the floor of the gallery are the four hard-shell sculptures, representing the “Prince Project’s” characters, created with holes that allow fabric to be interwoven throughout each piece. In the mid-level of the space are four hanging sculptures called “the Color Codes,” which are quilted figures made from repurposed fabric that Collura collected during the two years it took her to create the exhibit. Finally, hovering above the lower levels of the exhibit, and ominously moving with the air current, are four silk figures called “Skin of a Dancing Ghost,” which represent the transformation of each character.

“When the sunlight comes through the windows you can see through the silk figures, and those are metaphorically the patriarchal skins of the characters floating away,” Collura said. “What I’m hoping is that these icons’ humanness is what is left on the ground.”

Knowing the space well, Collura deliberately plotted the arrangement of the works she crafted in her 2,500-square-foot studio in Bellefonte with support of an Individual Faculty Grant from the Penn State College of Arts and Architecture. The result is an exhibit that encourages the gallery visitors to view the entire space while walking among suspended pieces that are never stagnant.

“I want people to walk around the figures on the floor and maybe have some sense of wonder or empathy about how they’ve been built and to have a desire to take in the hanging and stationary pieces simultaneously,” Collura said. “I hope that the power of the stitch and the power of the cloth can represent the strength of the whole exhibition and that this construct of the hero or heroic sculpture is somewhat deflated while creating some wonderment through the voluminous fabric forms.”