

A Brief Introduction to *50 States: Louisiana*

Nick Vaughan and Jake Margolin's new large-scale, multimedia exhibition, *50 States: Louisiana*, unearths a 1720s history of a same-sex couple involved in the burgeoning indigo trade in colonial Louisiana. The work uniquely connects this tale to a series of gay Mardi Gras Balls that were held at the New Orleans Longshoremen's Union Hall in the 1960s.

50 States: Louisiana brings together Vaughan and Margolin's research into the Louisiana state archives; interviews with historians, indigo experts, and members of New Orleans' LGBTQ+ community; and their travels to Louisiana and Dauphin Island, Alabama. It is the sixth iteration of the artists' life-long *50 States* project that reveals little-known and underappreciated LGBTQ+ historical narratives and channels them into community conversations, performance lectures, and immersive installations within a gallery setting.

The work presented at DiverseWorks is inspired by the 18th-century tale of a controversial romantic partnership between Captain Beauchamp, the ship captain of a merchant vessel, the *Bellone*, and a cabin boy on the Mississippi River. But the audio narrative, during which we hear the voices of both artists, leads in many directions, including an examination of the process of making indigo and woven into that, a recounting of more recent, yet parallel, stories of queer life.

The audio component of the work (part of which was included in a performance lecture by the artists, *Cabin Boy Blue*, in November 2019) is synched with five video projections: one shows the slow release of indigo dye into a pool of water; three are views of the Gulf off of Dauphin Island; and the fifth is a wide shot of "The End of the World" in New Orleans, a site where the ship channel meets the Mississippi River. A sixth projection, *Tidal Bury*, appears on a square screen suspended from the ceiling and consists of footage of waves and sand flowing over a video camera lens pointing upwards to a blue sky. All of these projections work together to convey a feeling that we, as viewers, are neck deep in water, about to be submerged by a coming wave or obliterated by the next dark drop of blue pigment.

Three mainsails, made of muslin custom stitched by a sailmaker and then dyed by the artists with organic indigo, run the length of the gallery space, further emphasizing this feeling of engulfment. While the call letters on each sail proudly identify two African American labor union halls and a blue collar Italian American hall that hosted Mardi Gras balls for gay krewes in the 1960s, the sails stretch horizontally across the span of the space – bringing forth images of a ship keeled over, bent to the wind to the maximum extent, on the edge of capsizing.

We like to think that history is made through valorous acts and moments of substance that all agree are worthy of record. But history is as amorphous and undependable as our own memory. It is a pliable thing that is dependent upon documentation and systems of cultural and political power to allow for the act of collective remembering. Vaughan and Margolin fully grasp the challenges of historicizing the lives of those whose stories are only loosely documented and rarely told. Through their work, the artists reclaim, recognize, and honor these tales that, otherwise, would have been lost to the depths of history.

– Xandra Eden, Executive Director & Chief Curator, DiverseWorks