

RISD MUSEUM

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RISD MUSEUM ANNOUNCES
NANCY ELIZABETH PROPHET: I WILL NOT BEND AN INCH

PROVIDENCE, RI – The RISD Museum announces *Nancy Elizabeth Prophet: I Will Not Bend an Inch* will be on view at the RISD Museum from February 17, 2024 through August 4, 2024. The exhibition will then travel to the Brooklyn Museum and the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art in 2025.

This comprehensive exhibition and its accompanying catalog, published by Yale University Press, is the first major museum presentation to celebrate the work and legacy of Nancy Elizabeth Prophet (1890-1960), an underrecognized 20th-century sculptor best known for her contributions to expatriate culture in Paris during the interwar period. Prophet was one of the first known women of color to graduate from the Rhode Island School of Design and her work reflects skills developed through academic training with a distinctly Modernist sensibility. This survey will feature three-dimensional sculptures of marble and wood, painted wood friezes, watercolors and photographic presentations of archival documents and lost or destroyed sculptures.

The exhibition is curated by Sarah Ganz Blythe, Deputy Director of Exhibitions, Education, and Programs; Dominic Molon Interim Chief Curator & Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art; and Kajette Solomon, Museum Social Equity and Inclusion Specialist.

Born in 1890 in Rhode Island to a Narragansett father and a Black mother, Prophet enrolled as a day student in the Department of Freehand Drawing and Painting at RISD, completing her degree in 1918 with a concentration in portraiture. In 1922, after a brief time in New York, she moved to Paris, where she worked for the next twelve years, enrolling in the women's sculpture studio at the École des Beaux-Arts and showing regularly at the Salon d'automne, August Salon, and the Salon des Artistes Français. Following her time in Paris, Prophet taught for several years at Spelman College before returning to Rhode Island.

The exhibition and catalog draw from historical documents revealing previously unpublished or unknown works of art, excerpts from Prophet's diary from Paris and the artist's correspondence with African American historian and civil-rights advocate W. E. B. Du Bois, providing insight into how she navigated the art world and sought to position her work. Contributors from a range of perspectives and disciplines situate Prophet's artistic practice within broader international understandings of Modernist sculpture

and reframe her powerful work and legacy within contemporary contexts, demonstrating how her sculptures and personal narrative continue to inform and inspire a new generation of artists, critics, and curators today.

Although Prophet's story is remarkable and her work is currently held in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the RISD Museum, and other institutions, her oeuvre remains largely unknown. ***I Will Not Bend an Inch*** provides the most comprehensive presentation and analysis of Prophet's work to date while also exploring the systemic racism of the art world and the absence of scholarly attention Prophet has received as a female artist of color. Renowned artist, Simone Leigh, has supported Prophet's work in recent years. Leigh is also featured in the exhibition with her 2022 film ***Conspiracy***, created with Madeleine Hunt-Erlich. This film reflects key themes of the exhibition, focusing on sculptural creation and labor. As Simone Leigh describes, Prophet is among those artists who have served as a mentor across time. "This search for mentors has been confounded by the fact that Black women fail to appear in the historical record or the archive. There's an absence of their knowledge and production. Their intellectual labor is erased due to lack of recognition or understanding."

Sarah Ganz Blythe states, "Working from an unshakable faith in the importance of her creations, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet was resolutely committed to her work and the fundamental importance of art in society. We are honored to give attention, care, and space for the work of this extraordinary artist." Kajette Solomon adds: "This exhibition exemplifies the RISD Museum's commitment to furthering social equity and inclusion (SEI), amplifying underrepresented identities and facilitating shared community-building and learning. We are excited to share the life and work of Nancy Elizabeth Prophet with not only RISD students, faculty and staff, but with the greater local and national arts community.

Dominic Molon says of the project, "Nancy Elizabeth Prophet's sculpture is exemplary and unique for its very modern interpretation of portraiture through an incredible demonstration of skill and technique developed through classical training and a profound understanding and appreciation of art historical tradition."

The exhibition is complemented by the book ***Nancy Elizabeth Prophet: I Will Not Bend an Inch***, to be released in February by Yale University Press. Co-edited by Ganz Blythe, Molon, and Solomon, this volume includes contributions by art historians Amalia K. Amaki, Horace D. Ballard, Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, Maureen O'Brien, and Stephanie Sparling Williams; artists Simone Leigh and Kelly Taylor Mitchell; and a conversation between Tomaquag Museum director Lorén M. Spears and Narragansett historian Mack H. Scott III.

Credit Line

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About the RISD Museum

Established in 1877 as part of a vibrant creative community, the RISD Museum stewards works of art representing diverse cultures from ancient times to the present. We interpret our collection with the focus on the maker and we deeply engage with art and artists, presenting ideas and perspectives that can be inspiring and complex. We aspire to create an accessible and inclusive environment that builds meaningful relationships across all communities. For more information: 401-454-6500 or risdmuseum.org.

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