

John Dowell: Cotton: Symbol of the Forgotten

Laurence Miller Gallery, New York City

By David Rosenberg



John Dowell, *The Long Road*, 2017. Courtesy Laurence Miller Gallery

Fabric panels, printed with images of cotton plants, hung in the center of the Laurence Miller Gallery earlier this winter. They floated down from the ceiling, creating an installation so visually rich that visitors could almost imagine they could smell and feel the “crops.” Entering the small maze elicited a sense of claustrophobia.

The installation, part of John Dowell’s exhibition *Cotton: Symbol of the Forgotten*, represented a story the artist’s grandmother had told him about a childhood experience of getting lost in a cotton field. As the branches scratched her arms and legs and she found herself going deeper into the field, she feared she would never get out. Although far less alarming than that experience, the installation, titled *Lost in Cotton*, evokes the power of storytelling and memory.

Lost in Cotton addresses a history, told through a personal narrative, of finding oneself lost. The rest of the work shifts to the loss of African-American history in New York City, represented by two iconic landmarks: Central Park and Wall Street. Dowell took modern-day photographs of Central Park and juxtaposed them with digital illustrations from the past of Seneca Village, New York City’s first predominantly middle-class African-American community, demolished through eminent domain in 1857 to create Central Park.

In *All Angels Church of Seneca or Giving Thanks*, the effect is ghostlike, recalling the neglected history of this now-beloved park. In other images, such as *The Long Road*, Dowell addresses the history of Wall Street, the site of the second-largest slave market in the United States, digitally lining the modern streets with cotton plants. In *Bursting Out*, the cotton does exactly that, overflowing from a building on Wall Street out onto the street. Histories can only be held back for so long, the work seems to proclaim, as cotton, a crop that made many white sharecroppers wealthy, doubles for the American dollar.

Throughout the exhibition, Dowell’s images, as well as the show’s title, balanced themes of history and memory. Cotton, a crop that evokes innocence – soft, white, cloud-like – is also symbolic of the brutal history of African Americans in the U.S. Whether it is personal or collective, Dowell’s work insists that storytelling is imperative. If we don’t acknowledge history, in all of its aspects, we are in danger of losing our way.