

For Immediate Release

Images available upon request

IOWA ARTIST INSTALLS 4000+ BLACK BUTTERFLIES AT DuMA

Traces routes taken by over 6 million African Americans during Great Migration

DUBUQUE, IA, January 3, 2023 – On January 15, the Dubuque Museum of Art (DuMA) will open BLACK THREAD, a large-scale, immersive new exhibition by Des Moines-based artist and activist Jill Wells (she/her). This exhibition traces the routes taken by over six million African Americans during the Great Migration. BLACK THREAD is sponsored by GreenState Credit Union and John Deere Dubuque Works. The exhibition will be open to the public, free of charge, January 15 (Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday) through February 12 (Winter Arts Snow Sculpting festival).

BLACK THREAD re-considers the historic phenomenon known as the Great Migration (roughly 1910-1970) when over six million African Americans from the South migrated to the industrial cities of the Northeast, Midwest, and the West. The flourishing impact of this landmark movement in U.S. history continues to this day. Wells will be on-site on January 9 and 10 to install the work, which include over 4,000 black butterflies inside the Museum's lobby. As thousands of black butterflies move over and across white walls, from floor to ceiling, BLACK THREAD raise questions about freedom, family stories, transformation, labor, and the U.S. economy. Converging on a black sewing machine, once owned by Wells' maternal grandmother, the black butterflies thread and weave together an African American flag and a black and white American flag. This acknowledges the sewing of the fabric of America done by countless African Americans throughout U.S. history.

Using various forms of mediums, Wells designed this large-scale installation to be accessible visually, tactilely, and audibly. Museum visitors are allowed to gently touch ground-level art pieces, including the custom Braille work by the Iowa Department for the Blind. Additionally, QR codes with immersive audio descriptions by the Iowa Radio Reading Information Services will be available throughout the exhibition and dbqart.org. BLACK THREAD is the inaugural exhibition in a new annual series that focuses on BIPOC and African American artists.

Opening Event

The January 15th opening of BLACK THREAD is kicked off with a conversation between Wells and Forensic Genealogist and Historian, Ricki King (Dubuque's Black Heritage Survey). With BLACK THREAD, Wells and King came together, an artist and a historian both with ancestral ties to the Great Migration, to research and contextualize migration narratives and personal histories through the lens of their contemporary practices. Following the conversation, the celebration continues with music by Iowa Music Award 2022 fan favorite, DJ Nita Beat, and food from Frannie's Barbeque.

Artist Bio

Jill Wells (America, b. 1980) is a multimedia artist, muralist, advocate, and mentor. Wells has firmly situated herself within art and advocacy work and is best known for her public works investigating race, history,



Photo credit: Jill Wells

stereotypes, accessibility, and human experiences. Wells' practice engages with individuals of all abilities, through various mediums, interdisciplinary art workshops, and talks to create new modes of working through the arts that are inclusive and representational. From 2012–15 Wells served as a Substance Use Activities Specialist. In 2015, Wells was certified as a Certified Alcohol and Substance Use Counselor for the state of Iowa. In 2020, she founded Artists X Advocacy Mentorship Program (AXA). In 2021, Wells was the recipient of the Iowa Arts & Culture Resilience Grant. Additionally, in 2021, Wells was a TEDx speaker on The Power of Public Art. In 2022 Wells became the first Harkin Institute Artist Fellow and was the lecturing artist for Al-Quds Bard College for Arts and Sciences in East Jerusalem for The Resistance Course on "The Disability Art, Revolution, and Advocacy in the USA." Her work is represented in the permanent collections of the Havelocks, Dublin; the Center of Afrofuturist Studies at Public Space One in Iowa City; as well as the Evelyn K. Davis Center for Working Families and Disability Rights Iowa.

About the Dubuque Museum of Art

The Dubuque Museum of Art (DuMA), founded in 1874 and accredited by the American Alliance of Museums in 2004, is Iowa's oldest cultural institution. Named a national affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution in 2016, DuMA's mission is to create engaging art experiences that excite, inspire, and connect our community. The Museum is open Wednesday through Saturday from 10am to 4pm and Sunday from 1pm to 4pm. More information can be found at dbqart.org.

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