



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

ON-LOAN DEPT.
THUMBS-UP



The other day, Wendy Richmond, a sculptor with a Susan Sontag-like white streak in her dark, shoulder-length hair, repositioned a plaster cast of her left thumb on a bookshelf labelled “Please Touch.” The work, along with about three hundred others modelled on Richmond’s fingers, fists, palms, and other hand parts, made up Richmond’s installation “Check Out This Sculpture!,” on display in a shelf-lined nook at the Jefferson Market branch of the New York Public Library, in the Village. The pieces were cast from hydrostone, a type of gypsum cement; some were mixed with black pigment, some with terra-cotta, and most left naturally white. During the seven weeks that the installation was open, library members were encouraged to borrow them.

“My friends say, ‘I’m so glad you’re doing art work about your hands, because they’re beautiful and you’re finally acknowledging it,’” Richmond said. “No. They’re grotesque, and I’m acknowledging that.” Richmond’s hands, which seem flattened, are preternaturally squishy, as if they’ve been blown up like a balloon and then deflated. Her fingernails appear to be sinking into beds of quicksand. She is double-jointed, and her fingers leave no fingerprints. “This means I am very identifiable because of my weird hands, but I’m also unidentifiable,” she said. “The people at airport customs told me I could commit really good crimes.” Richmond’s condition is the result of a

mild autoimmune disorder, which she became aware of about twenty years ago. The “uniqueness” of her hands, as she put it, has become more pronounced over time. Doctors don’t know much more than that. “When you’re an artist, you work, and then shit happens to you, and you keep making art,” she said.

She continued, “I wanted the sculptures to be in the library so that people could have the same experiences with them that they have with library books. You’d be able to have one in your home and read it or, in this case, look at and hold it.” Throughout the day, about twenty visitors stopped by, including two of Richmond’s friends. Most had come to the library for books, but a few were there to check out plaster digits. Celeste Yockey, a six-year-old dressed in a glittery tutu, chose a partial hand with three fingers. “I don’t like that one so much,” her mother, Andrea Corson, a sculptor, said, of her daughter’s selection. “What if it breaks?” she asked Richmond. “Inevitably, it will break,” Richmond said. She held up a finger fragment that she had lifted off a shelf. “See? It’s more beautiful.”

Nearby, in a short video, “Like the Back of Her Hand,” Richmond explained that her project began in 2015, when her brother was diagnosed with cancer. (He died in 2017.) Onscreen, she hammered on a plaster fist, and it split in two. “I think what will end up being the strength of this piece is going to be what’s gone,” she said in the video. “You have something you really love, and then it goes away.”

Max Nazario, who works in communications, examined a flyer that described how to check out a piece of art work. (“3. Put the sculpture in a burlap bag OR wrap it in a piece of felt. 4. Bring the sculpture home and enjoy it.”) “Art is thought of as something confined

to the elite,” he said. “Putting it in a place as open and democratic as a library and then letting anyone take an object home—I think there’s poetry to that.” He didn’t borrow anything.

A four-year-old boy went straight for a piece that looked like a shark fin. An older woman, who lives in the neighborhood, stopped by with a terra-cotta-colored finger that she’d borrowed. “I had to return it,” she explained. “It had a horror element for me.” She continued, “After I brought it home, I got an e-mail that said a friend of mine had passed. Then someone in my temple died.” Emily Wasserman, an ex-lawyer, had come from Fort Greene on a mission: “I just had a fight with a family member, so I’m looking for a really strong fuck-you finger.”

As the library was closing, Betty Smithsonian, a comic and freelance clown from Philadelphia, said that the sculptures looked like fossils. She asked Richmond about the most disappointing interaction she’d seen at the show. Richmond hesitated. “A very young girl was here with her mom,” she said. “Her mom was encouraging her to touch the sculpture, but she just wouldn’t. I held out my hands, and she touched those, but she wouldn’t touch the art!”

Before leaving, Richmond counted how many pieces had been borrowed. “Seventy-eight!” she said. Nothing had been stolen, not even any of the pencils by the comments book. “I have borrowed a hand that reminds me of my mother—she used to hold her thumb in her clenched fist,” one guest wrote. Another added, “Holding all those hands, even though I’m by myself here, I don’t feel alone.” And another: “I’m naming my lil sculptures Tim and Willy.”

—Patricia Marx