

FRED WILSON

American, born New York, NY, 1954

Untitled (Venice Biennale), 2003

Chromogenic print, 28 1/2 x 39 1/2 inches (image)

Gift of Peter Norton, 2016.4.62

In 2003, artist Fred Wilson represented the United States in the Venice Biennale. Research for his project included seeking out overlooked, historic representations of Africans in that city's churches, civic buildings, museums, and antique shops, while simultaneously observing the constant presence of Senegalese immigrant street vendors. Wilson's immersive Biennale installation, *Speak of Me as I Am*, responds to these encounters. Its title comes directly from Shakespeare's play, *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, and evokes the tragic final speech uttered by Othello, the Black figure at the heart of Shakespeare's drama, just before he kills himself. In referencing Othello, the famous literary Moor, Wilson's work signals the presence of Africans during Shakespeare's time, and in twenty-first-century Venice.

This print was created to support the Biennale project. It juxtaposes images of two objects Wilson acquired during his wanderings: a commonly-found tourist engraving of Venice and a damaged Black figurine—a so-called “blackamoor”—representing an exoticized image of an African. The artist has described this worn figurine as an “abused slave,” an individual who may have passed through the cosmopolitan city but, “due to his bondage or psychological state, never truly became part of it.”¹ To Wilson, the figurine evoked the undocumented lives of both today's African immigrants and Africans in early modern Europe, especially those in the trading-city of Venice.

By the late fifteenth century, Africans had become a highly visible presence across Europe. In monumental paintings celebrating Venice, they are often included at a diminutive scale, as gondoliers for example, floating amongst extravagantly and jewel-toned dressed Venetians.

In Wilson's print this compositional order is inverted. The boldly “colored” slave figure, an outsized, ghostly, and defining presence, hovers over small, faceless gondoliers rowing past Venice's iconic waterfront. This reversal of scale and color serves as a metaphor: Wilson's intervention in pictorial convention disrupts the hierarchical, racialized values of dominant narratives of history. This untitled print revises the Venetian history that is reflected in the city's renowned paintings, testifying to the presence of the African individuals who are as much a part of Venice today as they were hundreds of years ago.

—Peter Erickson

Professor in Residence, Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities, 2012–20

¹ Fred Wilson, email message to author, September 24, 2019.