



FEBRUARY 2018

## NAT TURNER'S PLOT

*Story Quilt: One Night at Cabin Pond* | Stephen Towns



### VISIT THE BMA

and see *One Night at Cabin Pond* in the exhibition *Stephen Towns: Rumination and A Reckoning*, on view March 7 – September 2, 2018.

Stephen Towns (American, born 1980). Detail, *One Night at Cabin Pond*. 2016. Natural and synthetic fabric, nylon tulle, polyester and cotton thread, crystal glass beads, plastic and metal buttons. 35 x 28½ inches. Courtesy of the artist. Photography by Joseph Hyde

Almost 200 years ago, six men named Henry, Hark, Nelson, Sam, Will, and Jack gathered in a swampy woodland area called Cabin Pond in southeastern Virginia. Each of the men was enslaved by a white family on a nearby farm. For months they had been plotting rebellion with their leader, Nat Turner.

History tells us that Turner was a preacher who despised the institution of slavery. He believed that God called on him to fight against its evils by bringing down white slaveholders. On August 21, 1831, Turner and his cohorts gathered more recruits and made their way from farm to farm, freeing enslaved families and attacking their masters. Days later, furious white militias retaliated against the entire black population. In the end, 55–65 white slaveowners and their families lay dead, and more than 200 people of color had been slain.

In this quilt, Baltimore artist Stephen Towns shows us the hours before the uprising began—the final plotting and planning, the vowing to stick together whatever the cost. Using small pieces of cloth, Towns stitched a picture of six men in workaday shirts and jackets, surrounded by the green trees of Cabin Pond. By making the light gray brim of each humble hat resemble a halo, the artist has consciously depicted the devout country preacher and his men in the style of traditional Christian religious imagery. The connection between these individuals and a larger cosmic and religious narrative is made even more clear by Nat Turner's gesture as he raises his arm and points to the luminous sky full of stars.

### CHALLENGE

Compare and contrast Towns' version of the scene at Cabin Pond with a more traditional illustration [bit.ly/2DRrUHm](http://bit.ly/2DRrUHm). See a photograph of the actual Cabin Pond [bit.ly/2E8gjqw](http://bit.ly/2E8gjqw) (scroll down).

Read the articles linked above and explore photographs and documents about the Nat Turner rebellion at [natturnerproject.org](http://natturnerproject.org). Discuss the different ways that Nat Turner and his uprising of 1831 have been understood, interpreted, and explained at various moments in American history.

Examine more of Stephen Towns' story quilts based on Nat Turner's life at [bit.ly/2EoTMqr](http://bit.ly/2EoTMqr) (click on gray circles under image at left) or at [bit.ly/2E3pDfs](http://bit.ly/2E3pDfs) (scroll down to "Story Quilts"). Listen to all or parts of two interviews with Stephen Towns about this work at [bit.ly/2rWFZlb](http://bit.ly/2rWFZlb).

**PRINT THE IMAGES ON PAGES 2 AND 3 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.**

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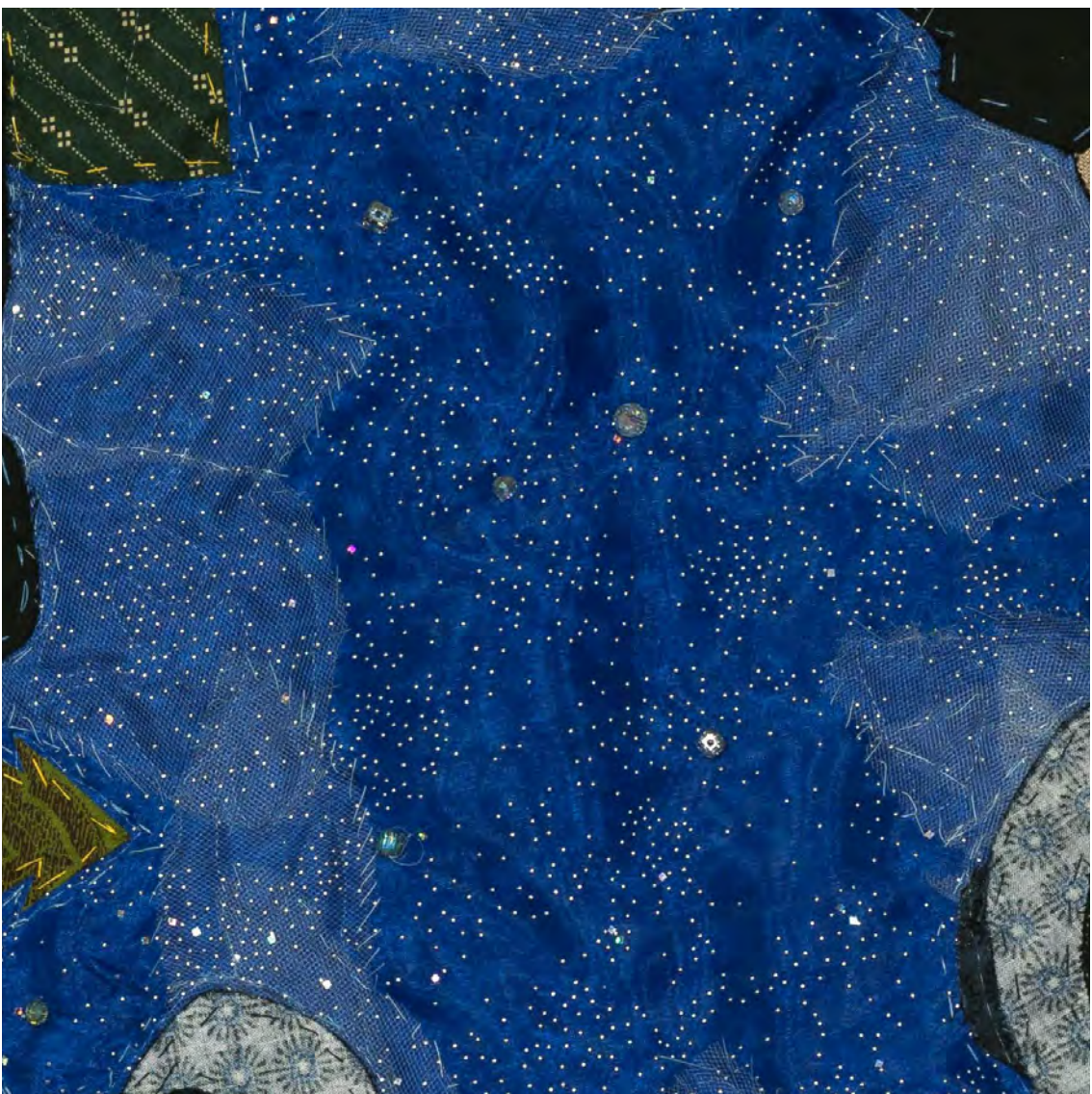
### *One Night at Cabin Pond*

Stephen Towns (American, born 1980). 2016. Natural and synthetic fabric, nylon tulle, polyester and cotton thread, crystal glass beads, plastic and metal buttons. 35 x 28½ inches. Courtesy of the artist.





Towns sewed portions of his quilt by hand. He used light-colored thread to define Nat Turner's chin.



Towns created a starry sky with layers of sparkling deep blue fabric, lightweight netting, and shiny glass beads.

JOSEPH HYDE

*One Night at Cabin Pond*

Stephen Towns (American, born 1980). Details. 2016. Natural and synthetic fabric, nylon tulle, polyester and cotton thread, crystal glass beads, plastic and metal buttons. 35 x 28½ inches. Courtesy of the artist.