

FASHION

The Wide Awakes Are the Civil War-Era Activist Group Making a Comeback in Bold, Joyful Style

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In 1860, two diametrically opposed foes ran against each other for the president of the United States. The candidates were Abraham Lincoln, a Republican, and John C. Breckinridge, a Southern Democrat. The election took place during a time when the country was deeply divided over slavery, territorial borders, and workers rights. After Lincoln was elected, the Civil War began.

Fast-forward to 2020, and we're on the precipice of another contentious, terrifying election with two deeply divided sides of the country—one that puts God and country first and the other that puts human liberties and social justice first. But aside from drawing parallels between the perils of a discombobulated democracy then and now, there are also similarities between the two eras when it comes to advocacy and activism.

Tomorrow, an 1860s-era youth organization called the Wide Awakes will make a timely return. The Wide Awakes were, back in that day, a diverse group of young Republicans who supported Lincoln and the abolition of slavery. They represented a youthful, hopeful generation that believed strongly in democracy, civil liberties, and basic human rights. It began with five store clerks who marched behind Lincoln after a rallying campaign speech he gave in Hartford, Connecticut. They provided him with a parade and torch-lit escort, and they wore oilcloth capes in order to protect their clothing and skin from the dripping wax of the torches. The movement then gained momentum in the Northern states, and on October 3, 1860, 10,000 Wide Awakes marched three miles through the city of Chicago. By the time Lincoln was elected, the group counted some 500,000 members.

The Wide Awakes of 2020, however, look a little bit different. Cofounded by the artist Hank Willis Thomas, photographer Eric Gottesman, Michelle Woo, and Wyatt Gallery, the group includes hip-hop king Fab 5 Freddy, the Roots' Tariq Trotter, and artist José Parlá, among many others. The new Wide Awakes group was born out of Thomas's political organization For Freedoms, which he founded just before the election in 2016. Since December 2019, they've been planning this year's October 3rd march from their home base in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The processions are set to take place around the country, beginning at locations that include the Brooklyn Museum, Times Square, the Cincinnati Art Museum, the Alabama Contemporary Art Center, and more. In addition to spotlighting these starting points for tomorrow's nationwide marches, the [2020 Wide Awakes website](#) also provides information for those who would like to start their own activations in their local communities.

Members of the founding group in Brooklyn will pay homage to the original Wide Awakes and their protest fashion by wearing bold, handmade capes designed by a range of BIPOC designers. These designers include Michelle Obama's former Chicago-based tailor Christy Rilling and artist Wildcat Ebony Brown. The vibrant capes are a far cry from the oilcloth styles of centuries past: There are kaleidoscopic prints, colorful embellishments, and symbolic nods to the designers' heritage and the history of the Wide Awakes movement.

Below, the designers explain the meaning behind their creations and how tomorrow's march can inspire a new generation to throw on a bold, beautiful cape and fight for freedom with joy.



Capes designed by Paula Crown Atelier and Christy Rilling Studio Photo: Andrew Walker

The imagery is directly taken from Paula Crown's work. The main black and red print is taken from her *Kinematic* series. An artwork process that represents a moment in flow. It begins from an investigation into liquid graphite and water, two materials that, like oil and water, do not mix. The poured liquid graphite flows in water, creating a dynamic and ephemeral composition, and two disparate materials achieve a harmony and balance. The resulting forms are photographed and printed in this case on a woven iridescent silk faille and double silk charmeuse. Interwoven into the fabric is Lurex, which has a watery and metallic appearance, mimicking the original artwork process.

In contrast to these two dark prints, we interspersed a more recent painting from Paula's *Aspen Map* series, which she made in her Aspen studio during the pandemic. The series is based on trail maps in Aspen that are abstracted, layered, and rotated to reveal new forms and patterns. Digital and analog drawing and painting techniques reveal what is present in a novel way. As we orient ourselves to space, our perceptions are easily distorted by point of view, time, and memory. Maps often have their own viewpoint and biases. Her reconfiguration is a reminder that we must always question the information presented to us and ask what has been left out of the story. The resulting works are puzzle-like compositions that are both adamantly flat and invitingly deep. —Christy Rilling (cape designed in collaboration with Paula Crown)