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Pittsburgh artists make history,
literally, with plaque unveiling
and new Troy Hill gallery space

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Courtesy of Lenka Clayton and Phillip Andrew Lewis

Historic Site plaque by the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation at 1733 Lowrie St., Troy Hill

Anyone who has ever had to scale Rialto Street, the incredibly steep entryway into Troy Hill from Route 28, would be crestfallen to know that an incline once carried passengers up the slope. A plaque on [Gallery Closed](#), a new art space opening in the neighborhood, details how the Lowrie Street building served as the former upper station of the incline until it ceased operations in 1898.

Now Pittsburgh-based artists Lenka Clayton and Phillip Andrew Lewis, owners of [Gallery Closed](#) and the studio behind it, will delve further into the site's history with their art installation ["Historic Site."](#)

"Historic Site" will be unveiled on Sat., Sept. 18 during a community gathering that also celebrates the opening of the gallery. The event will include a performance by the Teutonian Männerchor and Damenchor choir, and a recital of the plaque's 1,000-plus word text by artist John Carson.

The "Historic Site" plaque will serve as an 8-foot-tall companion to the 12-by-18 inch plaque that has been on display since the 1980s. Clayton and Lewis even used the same foundry that poured the old plaque to further establish the connection between the two.

However, Clayton and Lewis say the new, much larger plaque will cover more than what's detailed on the current plaque.

"So we looked at that, and read it as sort of like this first point of departure," says Lewis. "And immediately, we started asking ourselves the question like, 'OK, that is roughly 10 to 15 years history told on the plaque but is that when history began? Is that when history ended? What happened before, what happened after?'"

The two say the new plaque will document the history of the site dating back to its days as Troy Hill's first silent movie theater, and as the place where a large landslide occurred in the early 20th century. Clayton says it also served as a grocery store, an ice cream store, and a Republican Party headquarters, as well as two bakeries and several banks.

The plaque keeps going back, *way* back, millions of years ago, to describe how a long-extinct prehistoric amphibian, the Fedexia

striegeli, roamed the land where Gallery Closed now sits. Fedexia striegeli bones were discovered near the Pittsburgh International Airport's FedEx depot in 2004 by a geology student, hence its strange, brand-specific name. It was then identified by Carnegie Museum of Natural History staff as a new species.

Clayton and Lewis say they used their time in pandemic lockdown to research archives and speak to experts, including anthropologists, architects, and historians, to get the project just right. Their work was made possible by a Sabrina Meraige Foundation Artist Fellowship offered through the nomadic contemporary art museum, Black Cube.



Courtesy of Lenka Clayton and Phillip Andrew Lewis
Text from "Historic Site" by Lenka Clayton and Phillip Andrew Lewis

"And I think also for us, what was interesting was, you know, going right back to acknowledging the first European settlers, but then going back into the people who were living there before,

and what happened to them, and then going back, and where did they come from?" says Clayton. "You go back to the beginning, and then there's another beginning, and another beginning, and it keeps going, and that's sort of the thrust with this plaque."

Lewis says that in doing the project they "immediately noticed that we were writing a new history, and as a part of questioning our own authority, we decided to expand on that even further." As a result, they invited 27 local and internationally renowned artists to respond to different word sets taken from the plaque. The request turned into *Historic Sights*, a year-long exhibition at Gallery Closed displaying a rotating selection of the paintings, drawings, sculptures, and other works created by the artists.

The opening of the exhibition will coincide with the event celebrating the plaque's unveiling. The pieces will then stay up in the front windows of Gallery Closed, where anyone can view them 24 hours a day.

"We're thinking about how to open up a normally very private studio space, and our building is really particular because, on one side, it overlooks Route 28 and the whole city, and then on the other side, it's got this very intimate audience of the bus stop and a whole neighborhood area," says Clayton. "So we started it as a way of connecting with the people who live around us."

Clayton says the pandemic shutting everything down made them consider how keeping a gallery physically closed to crowds, and only allowing people to view art through the windows, could "actually make it much more accessible."

"You'd never have to go in, you'd never have to buy tickets, you

don't have to talk to a receptionist," says Clayton. "The lights are going to be on all day and all night. So you can come and see it in the middle of the night in your pajamas."

She and Lewis say that, like its predecessor, "Historic Site" will remain as long as they own and run the building. They also plan on adding to it as time goes on.

"We acknowledge a certain amount of history that we could capture on it, and as soon as we unveil it, we're gonna find out other things," says Clayton.

"Historic Site" unveiling and Gallery Closed opening event. 2-3 p.m. Sat., Sept. 18. 1733 Lowrie St., Troy Hill.
Free. galleryclosed.org

<https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/pittsburgh-artists-make-history-literally-with-plaque-unveiling-and-new-troy-hill-gallery-space/Content?oid=20213891>