

The Monumental Enlightenment: Karyn Olivier and Jeffrey Gibson's Reconceptualizations of Monuments

by Gordon Fung



Monuments – Must Change: Reimagining the role of monuments now featuring Karyn Olivier and Jeffrey Gibson

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How are artists reimagining and responding to the sites, subjects, and formations of monuments and memorials today? In the wake of recent social and political revolt and the ongoing movements to contest a history of racist and colonial symbols, what forms are both emerging and reasserting their aesthetics and subjecthood to counter, transgress, and empower? Artists Karyn Olivier and Jeffrey Gibson offer notable contributions to this conversation with powerful emblematic works reflective of community, critical positions, and formal dynamism. Co-moderated by Peter Simensky, Chair of CCA's Sculpture, Individualized, and Community Arts programs, and Ebtihal Shedid, 2021 CCA MFA candidate.

Monuments silently surround us. Their static timelessness has left their stories untold, and implications overlooked. The burning questions of ours leftover are: Why are monuments crucial to our lives? What are their roles in our communities? Who is the agency behind the monuments themselves? Who and what are they representing? Offering some insights, Karyn Olivier, a Philadelphia-based public art and installation artist, and Jeffrey Gibson, a Hudson-based interdisciplin-

ary artist of Mississippi Choctaw-Cherokee ancestry, joined together to share their interpretations of monuments. The webinar was co-moderated by Peter Simensky, Chair of CCA's Sculpture, Individualized, and Community Arts programs, and Ebtihal Shedid, a 2021 CCA MFA candidate.

Public artworks are often commissioned by the authority who holds the power of storytelling. Karyn Olivier's *Witness* (2018) is a site-specific mural that recontextualizes a controversial fresco by Ann Rice O'Hanlon at the University of Kentucky's Memorial Hall. In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt enacted the New Deal (1933–1939), a series of federally directed public-work projects to reform the post-Depression economy. O'Hanlon took part in the commission project under the New Deal and captured daily Kentuckian lives in the '30s in the fresco. O'Hanlon's depictions of those people, however, appeared racially insensitive and provocative to modern eyes. Her paintbrush somewhat romanticized slavery and colonization, on top of misrepresenting African and Native Americans. The university recognized the historical complexity behind this mural, and commissioned Olivier to shed new insights through a reinterpretation of the work. On a dome ceiling with gold leaf, Olivier amalgamated motifs from O'Hanlon's fresco, and juxtaposed them onto the domed ceiling of the vestibule in the Memorial Hall. The artist then distilled the once under- and misrepresented sideshow figures, reviving them into protagonists in their own right on this land. The exquisiteness emanating from the golden back-



Witness (2018) by Karyn Olivier.

ground evokes the early Renaissance depiction of saints and martyrs who sacrificed themselves to promote virtues and humanity. To reiterate the entitlement of liberty and freedom among all people, the circumference of the dome ceiling is inscribed with a line from Frederick Douglass' speech *The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro* (1852): "There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven, that does not know that slavery is wrong for him." Olivier transfigured and restored a once insensitive fresco into a message of hope and healing, invigorating a more meaningful dialogue between the installation and viewers.



The Battle Is Joined (2017) by Karyn Olivier.

Olivier extended her reimagination of historical works through *The Battle Is Joined* (2017), a temporary installation at Vernon Park, Philadelphia. Olivier installed reflective Plexiglass all over the *Battle of Germantown Memorial*, a monument commemorating a revolutionary battle where George Washington was defeated, metamorphosing this once overlooked monument into a point of interest. The Plexiglass installation concealed the original tale behind it yet unveiled a contemporary meaning. The reinterpreted monument enabled the visitors to become more aware of their own existence and role in the monument's history through the reflections. This giant mirror engulfed every single corner and reflected every moment indifferently, whether the moment was sweet or bitter, glamorous or hideous. This interactive installation re-energized the

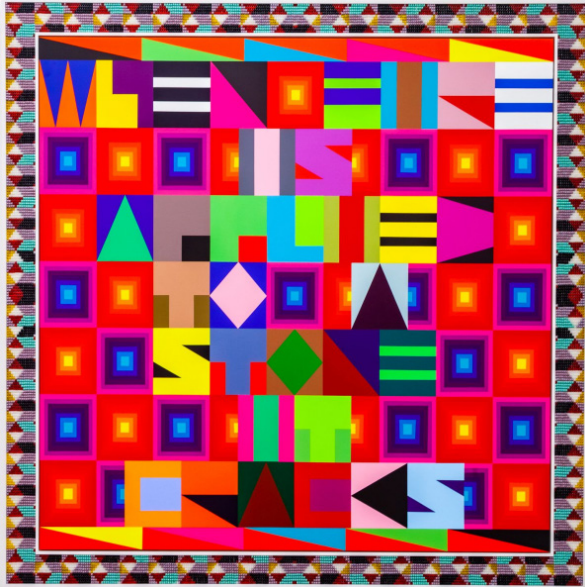
space, creating dialogues for and between the visitors. Monuments often canonize specific heroic people or significant historical events, neglecting the complete representation of the community and its context. The Plexiglass monument forcibly cast passersby into living monuments, allowing all persons to be equally represented. Besides glimpsing their own existence, visitors also witnessed how the power of storytelling and legacy are constantly shifting, as everyone can be part of this monument.

Jeffrey Gibson's *Because Once You Enter My House It Becomes Our House* (2020), embraced and fostered participation. This large-scale installation was located at Socrates Sculpture Park, New York. Informed by his Choctaw and Cherokee ancestry, Gibson drew inspiration from Cahokia Mounds in Mississippian culture. Cahokia was the largest pre-Columbian city in the area. The Mounds are multiple terraced structures that roam across Cahokia, with 80 out of 120 of the original earthen mounds remaining. These Mounds typically serve as a meeting point for various important social activities: burials, gatherings, rituals, ceremonies, among many others. Gibson adapted the architecture and traditions in the new monument. The work celebrated the fact that pre-Columbian Indigenous people had reached a significant level of civilization, unlike the misconceptions promoted by colonizers, which dehumanized Indigenous cultures, making falsifying claims about them, and eventually brutally erasing much of Native people's cultures and histories.

Gibson's monument, hacking the spaciousness of the site, was 21-feet tall, with a base of 44 by 44 feet. The exterior displayed kaleidoscopic geometric designs and wheat-pasted posters inspired by the Serpent Mound in Ohio. Invigorating the ancestral practice on this land, Gibson recruited Indigenous artists, dancers, and performers to convene at the monument. The three-tier plywood ziggurat, supported by steel frames, provided sturdy platforms for performances of all kinds. Not only were pre-Columbian customs revitalized, but living Indigenous artists, dancers, and musicians also got their representation

and recognition through performances and engagements at the site. Altogether, Gibson's monument and performances were a statement to demand a proper land acknowledgment, as the stolen land is always urgently needing genuine reparation. Exemplifying this urgent demand, texts inscribed on the four cardinal faces of the monument were: RESPECT INDIGENOUS LAND/NUMBERS TOO BIG TO IGNORE/THE FUTURE IS PRESENT/POWER FULL BECAUSE WE ARE DIFFERENT.

Gibson probed further the meaning of monuments in his installation work, *When Fire Is Applied to a Stone It Cracks* (2019). In collaboration with Brooklyn Museum, Gibson created a multimedia piece by examining the museum's collections. From the collection, Gibson handpicked *The Dying Indian* (ca. 1900), a bronze monument by Charles Cary Rumsey, alongside other Indigenous items like moccasins, headdresses, and ceramics. The realistic sculpture depicts the defeated and exhausted Native warrior, slouching on a starving pony and about to fall off at any minute. The statue itself is a single-sided story told by non-Native people, who celebrated and glorified the decline of Indigenous civilization on this land. Placed as a centerpiece at the entrance to the gallery, the monument gazed directly at the entering viewers. This confrontation challenged the visitors to reflect on the authorship and appropriateness of celebrating the fall of Indigenous civilizations, as the brutal genocide and looting of unceded lands should never be complimented. Gibson fabricated a polychromatic mural situated behind the monument and glass shelves that displayed unattributed Indigenous items found among the museum's archive. The vibrant hues contrasted with the dull, lifeless sculpture. The mural read: "I'm Gonna Run With Every Minute I Can Borrow," a line adapted from Roberta Flack's soul-song, *See You Then* (1971). Gibson also beaded the lyrics onto moccasins that



When Fire Is Applied to a Stone It Cracks (2019)
by Jeffrey Gibson.

were now worn by the defeated warrior, reanimating the deceased soul to march towards us, revealing an untold story of racial injustice.

The strategy of recontextualizing museum objects echoes Fred Wilson's installation *Mining the Museum* (1992–93) at the Maryland Historical Society. Museum objects have long been interpreted entirely through a Eurocentric lens. Indigenous items are often being explicated outside their original context. They are seen as no more than lifeless exotic objects that sit in the museum's display to satisfy the patrons' curiosity. Well-informed institutions have been realizing these untrue and harmful premises. Museums offer occasional efforts of inviting BIPOC artists to go through and rework the collections in museum archives. The success of such reinterpretations under the artists' hands affirms the necessity of decolonization. Not only are museums obligated to renounce their absolute power in story-telling, but they should also diversify their collections and exhibitions of BIPOC artists, as they are traditionally marginalized in the art market and art circles. In Wilson and Gibson's case, they mined not only the once neglected and misrepresented history, but they also challenge the complexity of story-telling behind Eurocentric institutions.

In considering the implications of current museum display techniques, the permanence of collections also brought up new avenues of critique for Olivier and Gibson. Both Olivier's "Mirror" and Gibson's "Mound" were temporary installations. Unlike the creation of permanent collections and monuments, they had to embrace the works' transient nature, which inspired a discussion of impermanence. Many monuments, often representing a Zeitgeist or historical event, are

meant to be permanent installations. Their messages and values might no longer be relevant to our modern society or contemporary standards. Impermanence, embraced by Olivier and Gibson, encourages us to rethink the constant dynamic shifts between the viewers and the monument itself. Olivier thought that we are the agents of the time, not the statue itself.

Regarding monuments that glorified traumatizing colonial history, Gibson and Olivier agreed that these had to come down. Olivier elaborated that even though these monuments were torn down, the materials themselves would remain on Earth. Seeing mutability through impermanence, both artists suggested redistributing these out-fashioned presentations to artists' hands for reinterpretations. Artists could then disassemble, transform, and reinterpret these monuments to reflect a more socially tolerant and appropriate meaning, pushing both the artists' and viewers' imaginations further.

Monuments stand taciturnly among us. Some whisper history that speaks dearly to freedom and love of humanity; many others are just slurping and spreading hateful words, racial injustice, and colonial brutality that breach the pursuit of happiness, equality, and liberty. It is time to reconsider how monuments are, and are not, serving our communities; it is time to rethink how artists can craft monuments that best represent virtues we embrace; it is time to rework any wrongful monuments to sculpt a brighter future for humanity. Trapeta B. Mayson, a 2020–21 Philadelphia Poet Laureate, composed "Monuments to Brown Boys" in response to Olivier's *The Battle Is Joined*. This excerpt surely enchants the closing of our discussion:

"You need to be somebody's memorial -
and not only when you laid out and lowered in the dirt;
a cold slab your foot stone, your pillow, a marble headrest of past tense -
he was, he once, he lived.

No, you are now and present,
alive and in color
and you need to be somebody's walking shrine,
somebody's testament,
somebody's tribute in this city."

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