

ART ◊ CULTURE ◊ HISTORY

WE DON'T NEED ANOTHER MONUMENT

written by Guest Contributor | November 26, 2017

Edgar Arceneaux, *A Time to Break Silence*, 2013, photo credit: Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

What purpose does monumental art hold today – whether on the street or in a private collection?

Following the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 11th, Emancipation Park continues to be a meeting point for both white supremacists and counter-protesters, in part because of the impending removal of their statue of Robert E. Lee, which still stands, although currently covered with a tarp.

Since August, heavy media attention has been focused on the question of what to do with Confederate monuments and iconography. Since then, a graph has circulated online from a 2016 report titled, *Whose Heritage?*, produced by the Southern Poverty Law Center; as the report shows in-depth, Confederate monuments were systematically erected during Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras.

Monuments — structures created to commemorate a person or event that become important to a social group as a part of their remembrance — are an intrusion on public space, whether they are seen negatively, positively, or somewhere in-between. It is always important to ask, as the SPLC report urges – who is telling this history? Whose cultural heritage does this represent? I’ve thought a lot about this question over the last decade – so much to the point that there’s a conspiracy theorist character in my upcoming novel that takes Robert E. Lee’s name as inspiration for his alias. As imaginative as that may sound, I didn’t have to look much further than news headlines to understand that this is asking to be written about.

What’s so striking about the subject is that the monumental form is one that Western culture is extremely familiar with, pervasive enough that it fills not only our parks and government buildings, but contemporary art spaces as well. What purpose does the monumental form hold today? Are monuments the most effective form through which to understand our history?

Most recently, Kara Walker’s 2014 piece, *A Subtlety*, monumentalized a 75-foot mammy figure formed out of sugar and Styrofoam, calling to attention the complex ties between the history of sugar processing and race. Jillian Steinhauer’s *Hyperallergic* article, “Jeff Koons, Kara Walker, and the Challenge of Public Art,” points out similarities between Walker and Jeff Koons that are striking and surprising. At first glance, they seem to have nothing in common: Koons creates art monuments to toys and kitsch — art translates into commerce and hero worship of the power of production; Walker is known for her overwhelming room-sized murals focused on the violence of the Antebellum south.

Both Koons and Walker have huge bodies of work, and while they haven’t always worked in the monumental, both artists have received major attention to their sizable works, whether in public spaces or private galleries. Koons’ predominant work is just as likely to show up as an oversized ballerina in New York City, as it is to be seen at a basketball arena in Sacramento. Walker’s work spans across written music and song lyrics, videos, smaller works on paper, and album covers. The work in her current show, *Sikkema Jenkins and Co. is Compelled to present The most Astounding and Important Painting show of the fall Art Show viewing season!* ranges from wall sized to 14” x 10’. Is



the size that these artists work in a problem, or is it that the capitalist art culture that considers works primarily in terms of status and investment, and in many cases, scale?

Intriguingly, the word *monument* stems from *monēre* meaning to remind, or warn. Unfortunately though, the purpose of historical statues is often to make larger than life. To impose over. There's a reason that in so many cases monuments portray "great men" atop horses, dominating over nature, high above the ground, and in turn, their viewers. Monuments stun and paralyze through their size, and through the imagery invoked. Or in the case of the Confederate monument, their prevalence. But then what's the alternative to a monument? Is it simply art that engages history on a physically smaller level; art objects that are more on scale with that of a four foot, or five foot, or six foot human body?

Walker's not the only artist to have engaged with history through the use of sugar. Edgar Arceneaux has shown books covered in crystalized sugar, with titles such as his piece, *A Time To Break Silence: The Trading Futures Constellation*, 2014, or *False Equivalencies*, 2017. Using history as his medium, he engages research, newspaper headlines, speeches, and other artifacts to create an affect that powerfully does the work of scaling monumental people and events — such as the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — down to a level where we may be able to better understand and process what occurred.

At the recent Kerry James Marshall show, *Mastry*, at MOCA Los Angeles, his larger canvases had an inviting, intimate quality that engages memory, without making a monument out of it. I saw attendees in conversation and contemplation, and, enjoying themselves and the paintings, as they studied them — I didn't see people focused on using his work as a prop for status selfies. In *Souvenir I*, 1997, he beautifully blends folk and colloquial element through his use of collage, stencils, and glitter as he's memorializing the martyrs of the Civil Rights era, including Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X, and the Mississippi civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. The aesthetic makes it less about monumentalizing power that is above another, and more about remembering power that was once standing beside another.

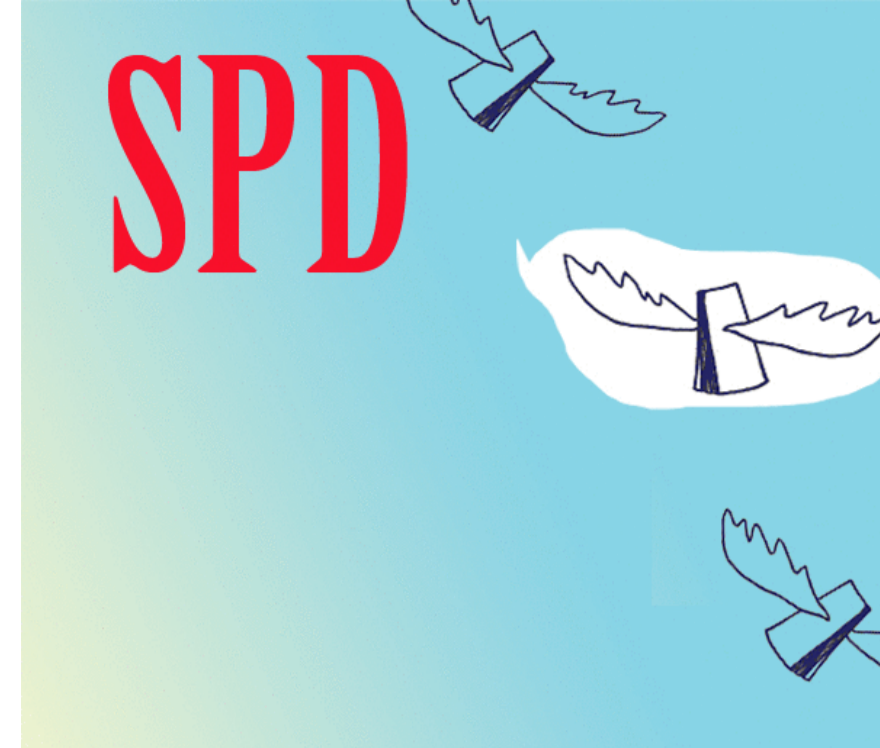
Cauleen Smith, is another artist whose work skillfully inspects these hierarchical constructs. Her project, [Human_3.0 Reading List](#), includes drawings of the books she lists. And their backgrounds? Everyday graph paper. The depictions are stunning and colorful; some of the books are shown being held by black hands making them feel humanized and accessible. Part of the statement on her website about the project reads: "Naw, this ain't no afro-pessimism shit. This reading list is for the Doers-Who-Think; not the academics who think there's no point. This shit is for the afro-nihilist. Because the only reason to destroy a world is if we share the fundamental belief that a better world is possible."

When looking at monumental art works, it seems near impossible to dismantle a system that is being presented as uniform and bigger than you. Through Smith's book list, it can start with reading Octavia Butler, something that might only require two weeks and a library card. What does that show? That Smith has done the artistic labor of breaking things down in order for her audiences to be able to chew off bit by bit and metabolize for their own selves.

Unfortunately, with these larger blue-chip artworks, whether by Koons, Walker or others, it feels as if there is no metabolism, there is only monument.

Cauleen Smith's astute and powerful statement about the reading list seems like a good working order for how to navigate the complex issue of the Confederate monument. That destruction is part of the cycle of creation, and things need to break before they can be fixed. One could argue that these monuments are not being torn down out of violence, but rather, because they are symbols of racial violence in and of themselves. The take-down of Confederate monuments does not harm living bodies but works against the power structures that made the systematic harm of black bodies possible.

These three artists in particular — Edgar Arceneaux, Kerry James Marshall, and Cauleen Smith — have included in their bodies of work elements of joy and candor, the mystical and mythical, both the forgotten and the futuristic. This is not to put these artists on a pedestal; it is a small jumping-off point to further a conversation. Right now it seems helpful if more attention, and in particular, funding, were going to the countless artists who, instead of working in monumental forms, use art to engage the past and deconstruct racist American history in accessible ways, especially when we as a country have uncertainties, anxieties, and anger about where our country has come from and where it is going. In their artistic practices, bodies are not simply reduced to racial currency, but rather, expanded beyond the artificial limits placed upon them through segregation and exploitation and capital. Through viewing their work there is



RECENT COMMENTS

Aaron Mandelbaum This game took a while to sink in. I've played Lords of Waterdeep and Champions of Midgard however, the foreign and tightly clustered imagery made the board swim in confusion. After my first play I...

Session Report: Anachrony and Future Planning
January 7, 2019

Christopher Day This is why I seldom contribute and write exclusively for my own pleasure.
It Is Always Your Problem · January 4, 2019

Kjell Signell Thank you Carolyn for your story! I meet EDS patients as a physiotherapist in my clinic, on weekly basis. I also have a wife and children with EDS...I would really like to know what you have for...

My Body's Bad Glue · December 30, 2018



Two If By Sea | a journal of water.
print and online
www.twoifbyseapress.org

CURRENT SUBMISSION PERIOD: DECEMBER 1- JUNE 15

a sense of wholeness, not beyond imbalanced power structures, but in spite of them. And through that wholeness, there can be something that hopefully feels akin to healing – a healing that American history desperately needs.

It feels like it goes without saying, perhaps we do not need any more statues of solitary men dominating over crowds, especially not at this time. What we need are groups of individuals doing the necessary work of transforming themselves and the structures around them, bit by bit, moment by moment, until they eventually add up to something stronger than they are today. Racism was not a blanket worldview that manifested itself overnight – it escalated into the behemoth that it has proven to be through individual court cases, economic practices, and cultural injustices over time. Maybe, we do not need another monument. Maybe we all would be well served to read another book.

Laura Paul is a writer living in Los Angeles. Her work has previously been published in the Brooklyn Rail and featured at the West Hollywood Book Fair and Los Angeles Zine Fair. She is currently querying agents for her first novel, BLK MTN. You can find her on Twitter and Instagram @laura_n_paul.

[Download PDF Version](#)

0 comment | 0 love | f t G+ p



GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Entropy posts are often submitted to us by our fantastic readers & guest contributors. We'd love to receive a contribution from you too. [Submission Guidelines](#).

f t

previous post

ROCK AND ROLL: THANKS TO IDENTITY AS A METAPHYSICAL CONCLUSION

next post

BROTHER SON BOYFRIEND BABY

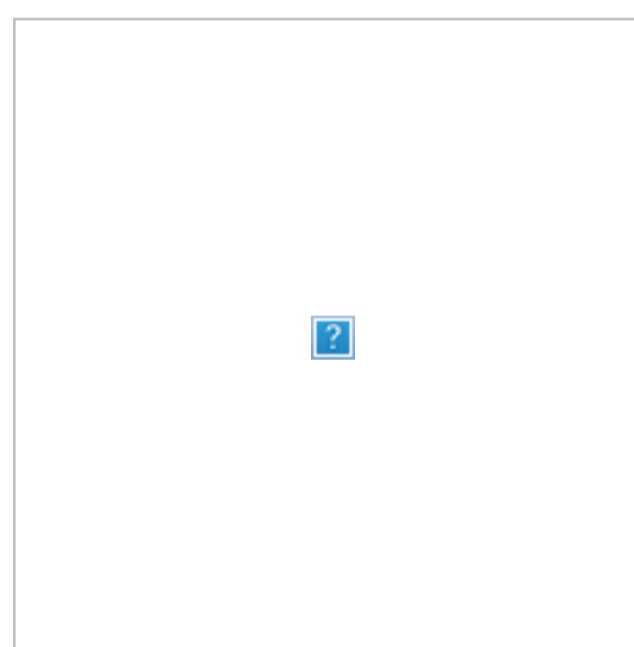
YOU MAY ALSO LIKE

THE PETTINESS OF TYRANNY

April 9, 2018

PAKISTAN — THE FLIP SIDE

November 1, 2016



I BELIEVE THAT WE WILL WIN

October 7, 2015



FEATURED COLUMNS & SERIES

The Birds

Sunday Entropy List

Dinnerview

Variations on a Theme

Their Days Are Numbered

Disarticulations

On Weather

Mini-Syllabus

Birdwolf

Session Report series

Comics I've Been Geeking Out On

Literacy Narrative

Small Press Releases

BLACKCACKLE

WOVEN

The Poetics of Spaces

Notes On Motherhood

30 Years of Ghibli

Tales From the End of the Bus Line

YOU MAKE ME FEEL

OF MONSTERS

Ludic Writing

Best of 2018

The Weird Interview

DRAGONS ARE REAL OR THEY ARE DEAD

Bearing Witness to Ferguson

Pop Talks

The Concept World is No Longer Operational

Splendid Grub

LEAKY CULTURE

Jem and the Holographic Feminisms

D&D with Entropy

Foster Care

TWEETS



Hunger - <https://t.co/uv17ac0uzw>

15-Jan-2019

[Reply](#) / [Retweet](#) / [Favorite](#)



FIND US ON FACEBOOK

Entropy



^
BACK TO TOP