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CRITIC'S PICK

Monuments That Celebrate Communal Struggles, Not Flawed Men

Contemporary sculptures by Jeffrey Gibson and others, part of “Monuments Now” at Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, draw on the past to look toward the future.

By **Jillian Steinhauer** Sept. 17, 2020



Jeffrey Gibson's “Because Once You Enter My House It Becomes Our House” (2020) at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, Queens.

A striking billboard looms over the gates at the main entrance of Socrates Sculpture Park. It's not an advertisement but an artwork by Nona Faustine that speaks to the reckoning that — fueled by a summer of protests — has led to the toppling of monuments across this country.

Titled “In Praise of Famous Men No More,” its soft-focus images show the Lincoln Memorial in Washington side by side with the equestrian statue of Theodore Roosevelt outside the American Museum of Natural History in New York City (which has long been considered a symbol of colonialism and racism and is in the process of being removed).

A hazy horizontal line runs across the middle of each photographic rendering, as if the sculptures were being crossed out or viewed from behind bars. The negation seems less individual than categorical. Both presidents are venerated for progressive policies, but in reality, their legacies are mixed. Ms. Faustine seems to be rejecting the traditional monument form for not making room for those complications. Enough, her billboard seems to say. Let us no longer spend our resources praising famous men.

The work is a perfect introduction to “Monuments Now,” a thought-provoking exhibition whose first phase is on view at this park in Long Island City, Queens. (The second and third parts, which will add works by 10 more artists and a group of high school students, open Oct. 10.)



Nona Faustine’s “In Praise of Famous Men No More” (2020). The artist created photographic renderings of two monuments to American presidents to challenge their whitewashed legacies.

Planned before the latest wave of falling statues, and curated by the park's director of exhibitions, Jess Wilcox, "Monuments Now" looks prescient today. It suggests possible answers to a question that haunts our public landscape: As stone and metal renderings of imperious men that once seemed permanently affixed to the ground have vanished, what should take their place?

Local governments have begun to respond by mostly commissioning new statues in the old figurative model. Some artists and art organizations are, thankfully, testing out more radical ideas. Foremost among them is Philadelphia's Monument Lab, whose founders, Paul Farber and Ken Lum, in a recent Artforum piece, proposed reimagining monuments "as a continuation" rather than an endpoint of history, "as the bridge between what happened and how time falls forward" and "a site of struggle, but also of possibility."

That could be a thesis statement for "Monuments Now," which spotlights the works of artists who, rather than planning for posterity, are cultivating a sense of open-ended possibility.



Paul Ramírez Jonas's "Eternal Flame" (2020), a homage to the communal and cultural importance of cooking.

Just inside Socrates Sculpture Park is Paul Ramírez Jonas's "Eternal Flame" (2020). Five brightly colored picnic tables have been arrayed around a peculiar structure: a sand-colored chimney-cum-obelisk sitting atop a base with five fireplace-like openings, each

containing a barbecue grill. This is the artist's homage to the communal and cultural importance of cooking, and a pun of sorts. Despite its unusualness, and the undoubted complexity involved in actually constructing it, the piece has an appealing simplicity.

The grills are functional and available for public use. With "Eternal Flame," Mr. Ramírez Jonas has rethought the traditional social dynamics of a monument. Instead of imposing a narrative on passers-by, the sculpture invites, even requires, activation by viewers. Its overarching statement is that cooking is a uniting force and a vital cultural constant — a truism of sorts that becomes beautifully specific and meaningful only when people bring their recipes and experiences to the table (or, in this case, grill). And by being displayed in Queens, the most ethnically diverse urban area in the world, the work also turns into a celebration of immigrant communities and of living together in difference.



Xavier Simmons's "The structure the labor the foundation the escape the pause," 2020, comprises three distinct sculptures. The artist uses written texts to reflect on "a monumental form of systematic change," as one of her pieces says.



Two of Xavier Simmons’s three sculptures here include text; one delves into the subject of reparations and the other includes excerpts from Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman’s Special Field Order No. 15, which provided land to newly freed slaves.

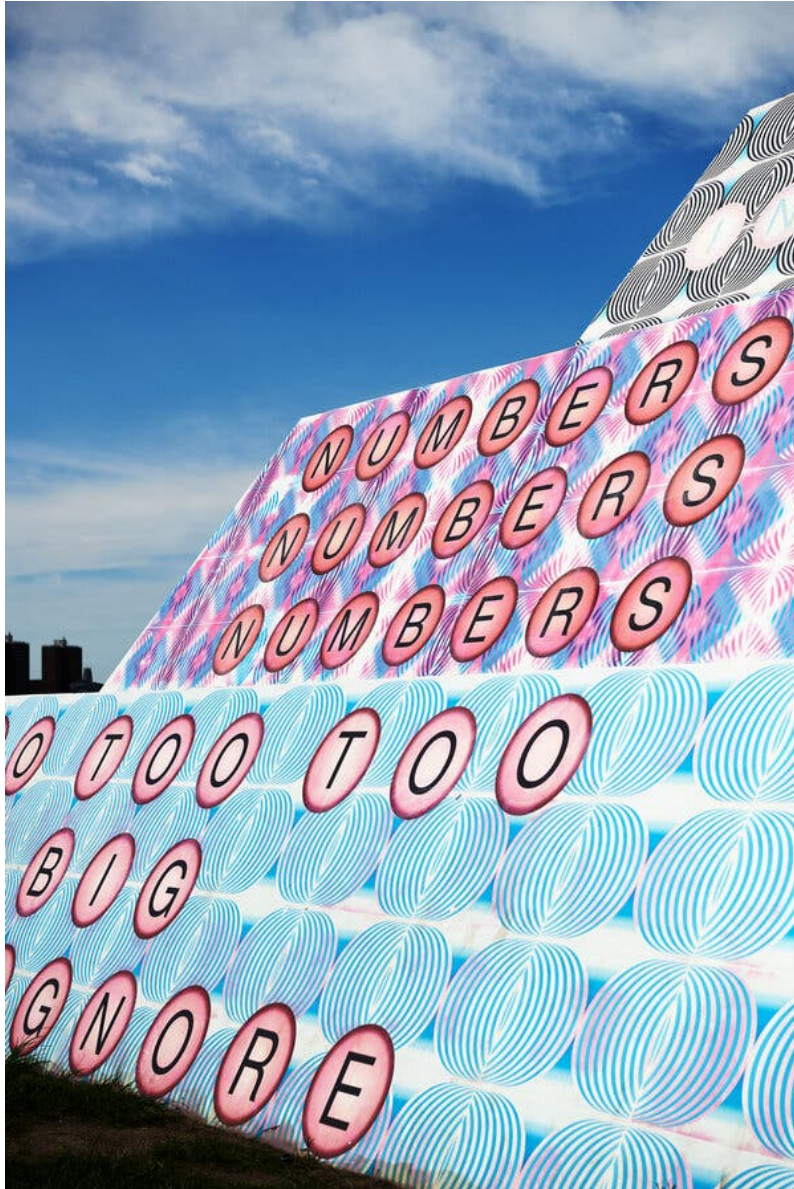
If Mr. Ramírez Jonas creates a space for engaging collective, oral histories, Xavier Simmons uses written texts to reflect on “a monumental form of systematic change,” as one of her pieces says. Her contribution, titled “The structure the labor the foundation the escape the pause” (2020), comprises three distinct sculptures. The biggest looks as if it could be the screen at a drive-in movie theater, only what’s playing isn’t escapist entertainment. Instead viewers are confronted with written excerpts from Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman’s Special Field Order No. 15 (issued in January 1865), which provided land to newly freed slaves. (It’s partly the source for the promise of “40 acres and a mule.”)

Hand-painted in thick, white, capital letters on a black background, the words are arranged in such tight formation that in order to read them, you have to slow down, concentrate, and sometimes sound them aloud. The same is true for the text in Ms. Simmons’s second sculpture, which features passages about reparations for slavery. Both works feel like direct challenges to the viewer — especially a white one like

myself — who shirks the responsibility of helping to dismantle racism, whether because he or she finds it overwhelming or sees it as someone else’s problem. By illuminating

sources that clearly point the way forward, Ms. Simmons demonstrates that it's not a matter of innovating new solutions, but about the will and power to redistribute resources.

In contrast, the artist's third piece is abstract: an elegant, modernist-inspired interplay of geometric forms in black-painted metal. It seems out of place at first, recalling something you might whiz by in a traditional sculpture park. But placed in conversation with its companions, the work starts to resemble an oversize blank slate, its sloping central plane suggesting a scroll. What equitable future could we write if we spent more time studying the past?



Jeffrey Gibson's monumental "Because Once You Enter My House It Becomes Our House" (2020).

A similar question is invoked by Jeffrey Gibson's "Because Once You Enter My House It Becomes Our House" (2020), the most monumental structure in the show thus far. Inspired by the [earthen mounds of Cahokia](#), the largest and perhaps most important ancient city built by the North American Indigenous Mississippians (the remains are a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Collinsville, Ill.), [Mr. Gibson](#) has constructed a three-tiered ziggurat that measures 44 feet by 44 feet at the base and rises 21 feet high. It's an electrifying sight, papered with wheat-paste posters that seem to vibrate with psychedelic patterns.

Those posters help spell out phrases that are broadcast from the sculpture's four sides: "In numbers too big to ignore," "Powerful because we are different," "The future is present," and "Respect Indigenous land." The last one resonates especially while looking across the East River to Manhattan, where the skyline offers an image of modern "progress" that Mr. Gibson's dramatic yet more humble form challenges. Who are the beneficiaries of such progress? Who is terrorized and killed to make way for it? The land occupied by Socrates Sculpture Park used to be the territory of the Canarsee band of the Lenape people. As far as I could tell, there is no marker or mention of that on the grounds.

Like Mr. Ramírez Jonas's work, Mr. Gibson's comes alive with interaction: He's curated a series of performances by Indigenous artists to take place on and around it. And like Ms. Simmons's work, Mr. Gibson's draws on the past to outline the possibilities of a more just future. There are no heroes in "Monuments Now," no canonization of individuals. Instead, there's a celebration of communities and the knowledge they hold within them.

On my visit, the posters covering Mr. Gibson's ziggurat had already begun to wrinkle and tear. Rather than detract from the piece, the imperfections added a layer of depth, evoking ephemeral street art, fading signs for glamorous parties, and the blunt reality of the changing climate. They offered a reminder of something traditional monuments would have us forget: nothing, not even a likeness in bronze, lasts forever.