

'MONUMENTS' at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA and The Brick, Los Angeles

Frances DeVuono

The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA and The Brick, Los Angeles, 23 October 2025 – 3 May 2026



Installation view of 'MONUMENTS' at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA; **left:** Andreas Serrano, *Klansman*, 1990; **right:** Edward V Valentine, *Jefferson Davis*, 1907; courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) and The Brick, photo by Fredrik Nilsen

On the surface, it might seem like public monuments in the USA are of little importance as right now its citizens are facing a 180-degree policy turn from environmental concerns, its cities are invaded by federal agents picking up people off the street, and the US attacks vessels in the Caribbean... and so on. But the erasure and whitewashing of American history is arguably key to all of the above.

President Donald Trump's war against history is predicated on DEI (the acronym for 'diversity, equity and inclusion') – anodyne aspirations for any society, but apparently not for him. Within months of his election in November 2024 seven army bases were promptly renamed after

Confederate soldiers.¹ In one of his first attacks on culture, and in the wake of student protests against the slaughter of Gaza citizens, his Administration demanded that Columbia University ‘put [its] Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African studies departments under academic receivership for five years’.² His turn to culture was equally swift as he named himself Chair of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts a month after assuming office. His attack on Black women is also well documented,³ and in an apotheosis of pseudohistory, the National Park Service was told to scrub information of Harriet Tubman’s heroic work with the Underground Railroad because information about slavery was seen as ‘divisive’.⁴ Throughout this, the White House has also turned its attention on the Smithsonian (a vast series of museums, education and research centres founded by the US Federal government in the mid-nineteenth century), alert for any indications of DEI at this institution. As Kimberlie Crenshaw and Jason Stanley pointed out in *The Guardian*, the majority of what the Smithsonian has been asked to take down or change ‘includes exhibits, programming and artwork that highlight the Black, Latino and LGBTQ+ perspectives on the American project’.⁵

On the one hand, efforts to remove public imagery reifies the importance of culture and the arts, demonstrating how essential public work – and public art – is in creating how we view ourselves as a society. On the other hand, because memories are short, and humans easily led, it is possible that within a short time, huge swathes of our collective history could be covered up, forgotten and dismissed.

This is why the ‘MONUMENTS’ exhibition, held at both The Brick and the MOCA Geffen in Los Angeles, is so timely, and that it is well curated and powerful makes it even more significant.

Jointly curated by Hamza Walker, Director of The Brick, Bennett Simpson, Senior Curator at MOCA, and the artist Kara Walker, ‘MONUMENTS’ consists of work by contemporary artists alongside actual monuments erected during the Jim Crow era. Text in the exhibition reminds viewers that after the shocking, racially-motivated massacre at the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina on 17 June 2015, it looked as if America was poised for an honest

¹ See Lolita C Baldor, ‘Army restores the names of seven bases that lost their Confederate-linked names under Biden’, *AP News*, 11 June 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-army-bases-confederate-names-69f63771d0e7ca859d42c485129d1228>

² Jake Offenhartz, ‘Trump demands admissions overhaul and control of academic department at Columbia University’, Associated Press, PBS, 14 March 2025, www.pbs.org/newshour/education/trump-demands-admissions-overhaul-and-control-of-academic-department-at-columbia-university, accessed 27 October 2025

³ See Edmond W Davis, ‘Trump’s playbook: America’s most powerful man targets Black women in power’, *The Kansas City Star*, 28 August 2025, www.kansascity.com/opinion/readers-opinion/guest-commentary/article311872505.html, accessed 27 October 2025

⁴ See Jon Swaine and Jeremy B Merrill, ‘Amid anti-DEI push, National Park Service rewrites history of Underground Railroad’, *The Washington Post*, 6 April 2025, www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2025/04/06/national-park-service-underground-railroad-history-slavery, accessed 27 October 2025

⁵ Kimberlé Crenshaw and Jason Stanley, ‘Why Trump’s “anti-woke” attack on the Smithsonian matters’, *The Guardian*, 27 August 2025, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/27/why-trumps-attack-on-the-smithsonian-matters, accessed 27 October 2025

assessment of its history. In the years between 2016–2024, over two hundred Confederate monuments were removed (although seven hundred still remain). Predictably, there was controversy. There were White Nationalists who insisted that the Civil War was not a war against slavery but a war to ‘defend states’ rights from a tyrannical federal government’.⁶ But for those who acknowledged the United States’ actual history, and wanted an educational reckoning, removal led to larger social questions. What effect had these monuments and symbols had on the public? Was simply removing them enough? In 2017, Hamza Walker became interested in developing an exhibition that examined and critiqued the meaning of these Confederate symbols by placing them in dialogue with contemporary art.



Kara Walker, *Unmanned Drone*, 2023, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) and The Brick, photo by Ruben Diaz

The art on show at The Brick consists solely of Kara Walker’s work commissioned for the exhibit, *Unmanned Drone*, and three related pieces. It is her response to a 1921 monument of Stonewell Jackson in Charlottesville, Virginia, which was removed in response to the white supremacist ‘Unite the Right Rally’ of 2017 where a counter protester was killed and nineteen seriously injured.⁷ The heavy bronze and granite of *Unmanned Drone* is akin to the paper shapes of Walker’s earlier work, in the way the piece hovers between beauty and revulsion at once. The man and his horse have been cut up and arranged in such a way that there is a kind of

⁶ Wall text at The Brick

⁷ See Rosie Gay, ‘Trump Defends White-Nationalist Protesters: “Some Very Fine People on Both Sides”’, *The Atlantic*, 15 August 2017, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/trump-defends-white-nationalist-protesters-some-very-fine-people-on-both-sides/537012, accessed 14 November 2025

magnificence to its structural flow; disembodied limbs of both rider and horse are strewn around the central carapace, which is reassembled into an arc. Yet, it looks as if Walker is reminding viewers that the original monument was a move backwards, with the horse's head peering out from between its two back legs. Nearby is *Star Spangled Banner*, made from the base of the same monument and set upright, at a slant, for easy viewing. Walker took the imagery of the five-pointed stars originally found on the monument, but her stars are awkwardly carved in different sizes, seemingly strewn across its surface together with what look like bullet holes.

A few miles separate the Geffen and the Brick, but whichever part of this multi-space exhibition one sees first, a certain amount of reflection is needed. The Geffen's 55,000 square-foot space holds twenty-nine pieces, one third of which are deaccessioned monuments, many already abridged by public outrage with paint and graffiti. The contemporary work includes some pieces made during the last several years, but the majority were specifically commissioned for 'MONUMENTS'. And, as might be expected with an exhibition premised on examining a collective history through a current lens, works by these artists range from the elegiac to outrage, from reflective to hopeful.



Abigail DeVille, *Deo Vindice (Orion's Cabinet)*, 2025, mixed media installation, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) and The Brick, photo by Fredrik Nilsen

Abigail DeVille's *Deo Vindice (Orion's Cabinet)* is the largest, single installation. Filling a separate, darkened room are a series of Colonial-era curio cabinets set closely side by side in a large circle, with no entry. The furniture is of various shapes and height, each broken and splattered with mud. Above them is some wood framing, suggestive of the remains of a burnt and abandoned house. Peering into its centre through cracks or cabinet windows reveals nothing more than scaffolding and a few red and white lamps that provide much of the room's dim light. Hanging on

top of this conclave of empty and rotting domesticity are animal skins. It is frightening in its decay yet dreamlike in the way it elicits contradictory feelings, matched by the work's title where DeVille juxtaposes both the Confederate motto and a reference to Orion, a prominent constellation used for navigation.

Reminding viewers that slavery wasn't only a Southern institution, Nora Faustine's *White Shoes* is a series of photographs in which the artist posits herself nude or bare chested (and always wearing white shoes) over multiple original sites of slavery in New York City – from the early auction blocks near Wall Street, to burial grounds in Brooklyn. Similarly, Martin Puryear's *Tabernacle* reminds us of a shared responsibility to the country's past. Loosely based on the kepi cap worn by soldiers during the Civil War, it is one of Puryear's characteristically graceful sculptures. But there is an opening at the bottom; the interior is lined in a homey chintz fabric with a small round mirror that places the viewer's own face inside. Addressing the ubiquity of Confederate imagery throughout American culture, Hank Willis Thomas created *A Suspension of Hostilities*, a replica of the 'muscle car' used in the popular 1980s TV show, *The Dukes of Hazzard*. Here the car is shown upright with the Confederate flag on its top in full view. A bright red-orange anti-monument, the car's front grill is grounded into sand.



Nona Faustine, *Ye Are My Witness: Adriance Van Brunt Farm, Brooklyn, 2018*, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) and The Brick

Throughout, the former cenotaphs are smartly set up in contrast with contemporary work. Andreas Serrano's 1990s portraits of Klu Klux Klansmen are matched by a supine statue of Jefferson Davis set on the floor. Formerly part of a larger monument in Richmond, Virginia, it was torn down, smashed and paint-bombed in the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020. In the next room is a 1917 statue, *Confederate Women of Maryland*. Wall text speaks to the propaganda

promoted by ‘Daughters of the Confederacy’ in raising funds not only for monuments, but also for lobbying for textbooks that ‘distorted the realities of the Civil War and Jim Crow era segregation’.⁸ Directly across from this romanticised display of Confederate womanhood is another, more tangible one. *Descendant* by Karon Davis is a statue of a larger-than-life sized boy based on her own son. The child wears a Nehru jacket and appears to be looking upward to a parent or elder. In one outstretched hand is a tiny replica of a Confederate monument. The boy is holding it by the tip of the horse’s tail, a little away from his body, as any child might do when bringing in questionable detritus from the outside world.



Right: Karon Davis, *Descendant*, 2025; left: J Maxwell Miller, *Confederate Women of Maryland*, 1917; installation view of ‘MONUMENTS’ at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) and The Brick, photo by Fredrik Nilsen

New Nation (States) Battle of Manassas 2014 consists of two maquettes of Ferguson, Missouri by Kahlil Robert Irving. The piece renders the aftermath of the righteous fury in the wake of Michael Brown’s murder by police in that city. Irving cast both works in polished bronze. In one, the shiny gold-looking replica reveals falling down buildings and piles of trash; in the other, a series of six identical apartment buildings can be seen. A quieter piece by Bethany Collins is located nearby. Titled *Love Is Dangerous* and set low on the ground, it is another repurposed fragment of the Confederacy made solely from the stone base. Collins has dotted its surface with small rose petals carved out of the same, very permanent granite material.

Homegoing by filmmaker Julie Dash, in conjunction with opera singer Davóne Tines, speaks to strength in the face of tragedy. A two-channel video, 28-feet long, it begins with an image of

⁸ Wall text at the Geffen

Tines in front of a four hundred-year-old oak tree, its large branches spanning the width of both screens; then it brings us to the site of the Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, where Tines begins to sing ‘This Little Light of Mine’. Other voices join in, overlapping each other until the syncopated melody becomes thunderous, before returning to the image of the ancient oak. Dash ends the film slowly with portraits of the nine people killed that day, identifying each by name.



Julia Dash and Davóne Tines, *Homegoing*, 2025, two-channel video projection, 10.09 mins, installation view, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) and The Brick, photo by Fredrik Nilsen

Towards the end of the exhibition is *American Reflection*, created by Monument Lab, a non-profit research centre of artists, activists and curators who work to ascertain and document how public art functionally affects and reflects us. A simple digital screen gives viewers factual information – such as that there are more monuments to Robert E Lee, the General of the Confederacy, than there are to Ulysses S Grant, the General of the US Army and later President; and that forty-three States (out of fifty) have Confederate monuments, while only eleven were actually in the Confederacy at the time of the Civil War. In addition to its data, and consisting largely of white text against a black background, it is an extraordinarily visual piece. Letters break apart into minute particles at the end of each statement, then float like dust only to disappear when new text emerges. At the very end of *American Reflection*, the letters break apart again, but this time they fill the entire screen and linger to create an imaginary universe.

At some point viewers will notice the years when these deaccessioned monuments were made. Many are from the Jim Crow era of racial violence and invented history, but one statue of Josephus Daniels, known for his editorial work that incited violence against Black voters, was erected as recently as 1985. Given the current Administration’s preferential immigration status for White South Africans and the rise of White Nationalism in the US,⁹ it is clear that, in contrast to

⁹ See Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Hamed Aleaziz, ‘Trump Cuts Refugee Admissions and Prioritizes White South Africans’, *The New York Times*, 30 October 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/10/30/us/politics/trump-refugee-admissions-white-south-africans.html?searchResultPosition=4, accessed 14 November 2025

W E B Dubois's 1903 observation that '[t]he problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line',¹⁰ it is a twenty-first century problem as well.

To those who witnessed the monuments being taken down and wondered how they could be used as an educational tool, this exhibition provides an answer. In its entirety, 'MONUMENTS' acts as an antidote by demonstrating both the power of art and humans' tenuous hold on historical accuracy. The manner in which the contemporary artists in the exhibition wrest for an honest reckoning of the US's past provides a challenge for the present. Their art is a reminder not to erase our history, but to account for it. 'MONUMENTS' is an exhibition that could not have come at a better moment.

Frances DeVuono is an art writer, artist and former Associate Professor of Art at the University of Colorado Denver. She was a Contributing Editor for *Artweek*, and her reviews and articles have appeared in magazines such as *Art in America*, *Arts*, *Art Papers*, *Sculpture Magazine* and *New Art Examiner*, among others, as well as here in ***Third Text Online***. She lives in Berkeley, California.

¹⁰ Line taken from W E B DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903 by the Chicago company, A C McClurg