

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

Hyperallergic

Kehinde Wiley, Wangechi Mutu, and Kara Walker Upstage the Monuments Debate

15 January 2020

Ulrich Baer

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Kehinde Wiley, Wangechi Mutu, and Kara Walker Upstage the Monuments Debate

With recent monumental commissions, the artists focus on the imagination's role in accounting for the past.



Image: Kehinde Wiley's "Rumors of War" (2019) in Times Square, Manhattan (all images by and courtesy of Sarah Schecker unless otherwise noted)

A dreadlocks-sporting young man in a hoodie charges on a powerful steed into Times Square. Four seated women, wrapped in bronze coils, cast their regal gaze from the façade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A half-naked Venus spouts water into a tiered fountain from her breasts and slit throat in the vast Turbine Hall of London's Tate Museum. These three recently unveiled artworks, raising the likeness of Black people to monumental proportions, productively reframe the divisive debate over historical monuments.

The fate of monuments glorifying Confederate generals and other historical figures of imperialism are up for heated dispute from Charlottesville to Capetown, and from New York City to London. Deadly clashes followed heated debates over the removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia, after which President Trump declared: "Sad to see the history and culture of our great country being ripped apart with the removal of our beautiful statues and monuments [...] You can't change history, but you can learn from it." While many historians advocate for removing Confederate statues, others warn that removing monuments means censoring history itself. Conservatives and a number of liberals alike caution against the removal of these markers, invoking historical erasure.

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Image: Kara Walker: Fons Americanus at Tate Modern (photo by Dorian Batycka)

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New Orleans's former mayor, Mitch Landreu, removed four Confederate statues while in office, as did the mayors of Baltimore and Lexington. However, Virginia law prohibits the removal of war monuments, leaving General Lee's likeness atop his horse in Charlottesville for now. The United States Capitol has not acted on congressional bills to remove Confederate statues, while New York City's mayoral commission on monuments recommended "public dialogue" but voted against relocating statues of Christopher Columbus and Theodore Roosevelt, which have consistently ignited protests. The debate over the statues' functions to preserve, celebrate, or falsify history — or to memorialize the wrong history and celebrate the wrong principles — continues. If there is consensus, it often means adding contextual markers which passersby can read while a looming interpretation of the past, cast in iron and stone, remains above.



Image: Wangechi Mutu, *The New Ones, will free Us* (2019)

Into this debate now step three major artists. Instead of adding plaques or choosing between preservation and destruction, the sculptures, all commissioned by major museums in the US and UK, shift the terms of the debate — not whether monuments should stay or go, but how to create bold alternatives that question who and what history we honor, and why. Wangechi Mutu's quietly glowing, metal female figures inject African, European, American, and science-fiction references into the Metropolitan Museum's imposing neo-classical façade. Kehinde Wiley's eight-ton sculpture of an African-American man on horseback had been placed for several months at America's busiest intersection, Times Square. Offering a new vision rather than elevating or removing historical figures, these artworks imagine our present, and our past, differently. For her commission at London's Tate, Kara Walker has placed a female figure atop a fountain that sports a tree slung with a noose and allegorical figures taken from depictions of the slave trade and other events. It undercuts the celebration of British Empire by showcasing some of the people who paid for its wealth with their freedom, their labor, and their lives.

All three artists sidestep the debate over the ultimate fate of public monuments that glorify one set of historical actors at the expense and exclusion of those who suffered under them. They don't accept the false choice between preserving or erasing history in the monuments debate but show that history, when distilled into public monuments, is a story authored by individuals

with an agenda rather than a straightforward, purely objective rendition of the past. Instead of debating the accuracy of existing monuments, the artists focus on the imagination's role in accounting for the past. By countering Confederate generals with a African-American man clad in modern clothing; juxtaposing the female caryatids used as pillars to uphold the temple-like Metropolitan Museum modeled partly on African traditions; and responding to a fountain honoring Queen Victoria in front of Buckingham Palace, the three artists change the terms of the volatile but also distracting debate about toppling or maintaining monuments, between erasing and preserving history.

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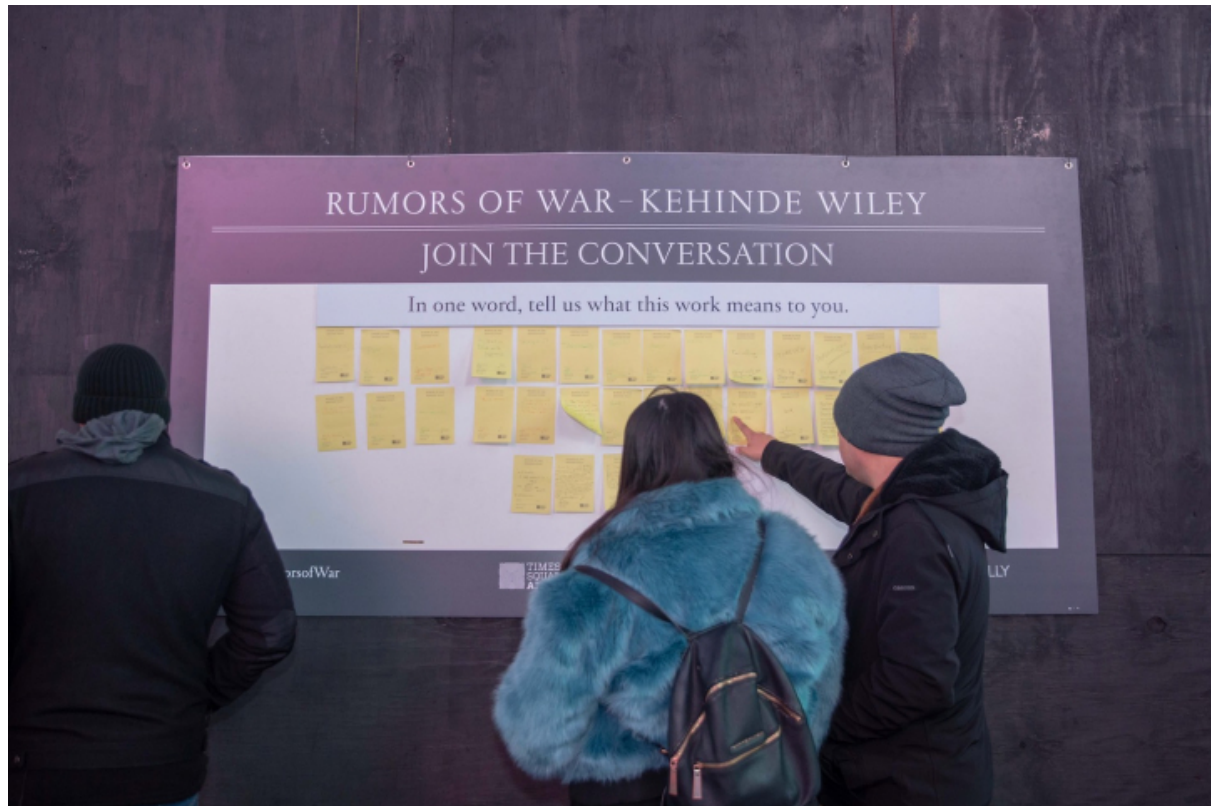


Image: The public reacts to Kehinde Wiley's "Rumors of War" in Times Square

All three works were commissioned by private institutions but have been placed on a public street, a museum's façade, or a museum space which can be accessed free of charge. Wiley's work will be moved to a location near Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia, where his rider can stare down the statues glorifying the Confederate cause. It's not yet clear what will happen to Mutu's work once the Metropolitan Museum's commission ends, though it has been extended from an initial removal in January to June. These works are not "public" in the way of New York City's originally privately funded Christopher Columbus statue, or the Victoria Memorial in London, neither of which is directly connected to a major museum. But by placing imagined rather than actual figures on a pedestal, they expand the monument debate from being a public concern, touching on politics and civic space, into something simultaneously rooted in the world of art, where the imagination is as powerful a weapon as historical knowledge. These works do not present arguments. Rather, they offer glimpses of what José Esteban Muñoz called, after philosopher Ernst Bloch, the "anticipatory illumination of art," meaning a world which fights injustice and inequality with the unmitigated force of the imagination, grounded in historical analysis but not chained to textbook versions of the past.

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Image: Kara Walker: Fons Americanus at Tate Modern (photo by Dorian Batycka)

Their sculptures do not hoist actual, historical non-white figures onto pedestals, which New York City, Richmond, Charleston, and other cities have done to their credit and in order to correct a historical record that omits the contribution of Black people to the nation's history. Instead, these artists cast the creations of their imagination in bronze, stone and iron. They add to the historical record not by casting the likeness of actual figures, which is a worthwhile pursuit, but from their prominent positions acknowledge history has been imagined from an exclusionary point of view from the start.



Image: Wangechi Mutu, The NewOnes, will free Us (2019)

Their point is not to correct history but to alter our point of view; it's not to show what really happened but to create hope. Instead of replacing historical figures with previously overlooked individuals in an endless cycle of one-up-manship that views

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history as a battle for one's viewpoint, these works show that the past is shaped not by facts but by our imagination. The monuments to white generals, royals, and colonizers glorify a culture that considered itself superior to any other by effacing, silencing, and excluding the non-white people who lived in the same historical periods but experienced that time differently. The works by Mutu, Wiley and Walker do not replace one truth with another but transform this polemic over who owns the past into dialogue, a linear version of history into a "postcolonial constellation," in the words of late curator Okwui Enwezor, a stand-off into a vista. These artworks expose a blind spot in the idea that adding figures thus far overlooked by mainstream history will correct our knowledge of the past. Their weapon against a false account of the past is not to add more accurate facts but to activate the imagination in order to reset the terms of the debate, rather than its content.



Image: Kehinde Wiley's "Rumors of War" (2019) in Times Square, Manhattan

In his formal address to the United Nations General Assembly in September of 2019, President Donald Trump told representatives from 195 countries that "academic institutions push flat-out assaults on our history, tradition and values." Trump underscores that the monuments debate is a battle not over historical truth, but over who has the power to define what's true and what values are embodied by our symbols and our art. The three sculptures gloriously show that art can shift the terms of the debate from a battle over who has the power to elevate their story to another, truer understanding of history. This interconnected and multi-perspectival vision of history is shaped decisively by a bold imagination that fills the deliberate gaps and distortions in the historical record not to establish an absolute truth but to use the past as a means for forging a more just future.