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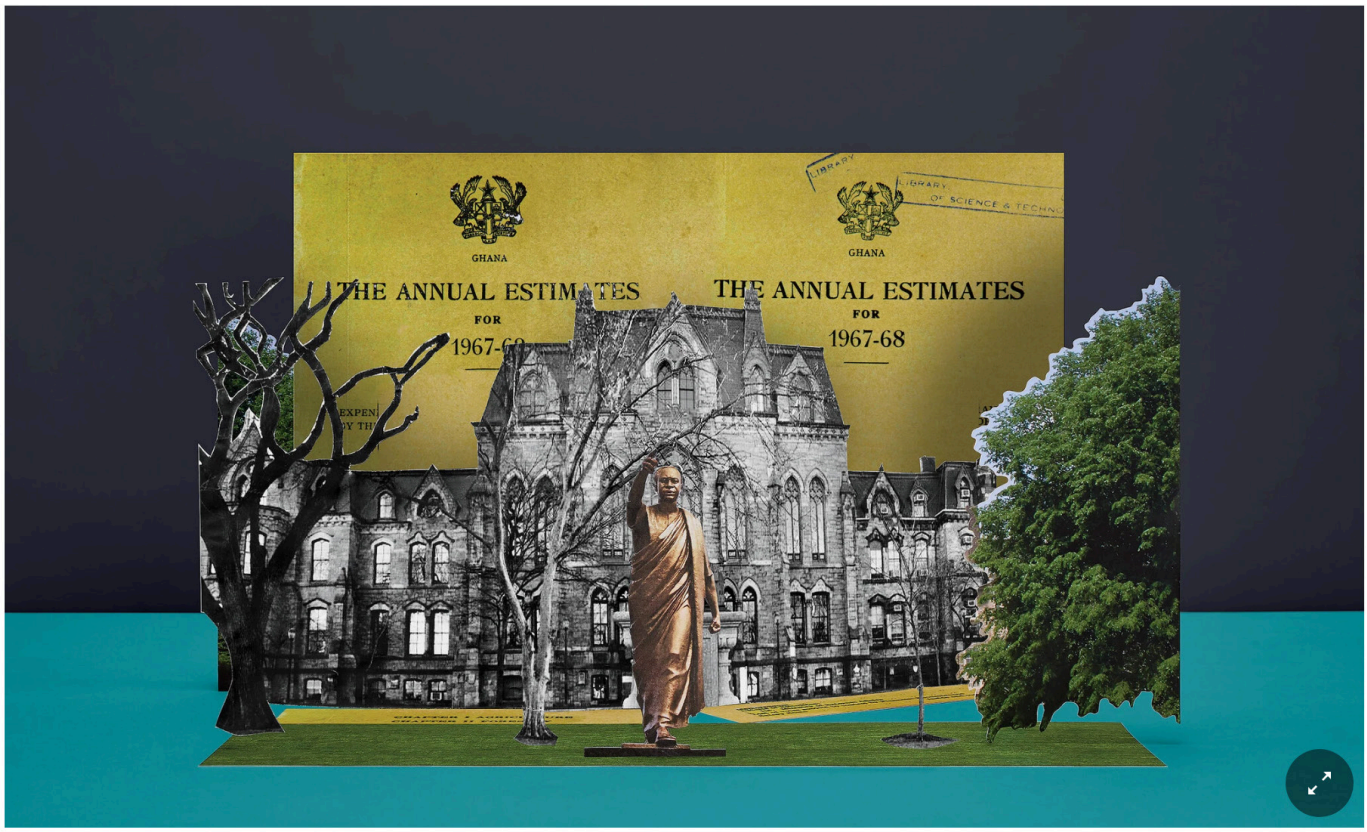
America's Monuments, Reimagined for a More Just Future

With colonialist statues being toppled in America and beyond, T asked five artists to envision a different kind of memorial, one that embodies this moment of reckoning.



Ibrahim Mahama, "Dreams In-Between Dreams, 1909-1972," 2020 © the artist. Altered image: Dennis Macdonald/Alamy Stock Photo

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ACCORDING TO DATA compiled by the Southern Poverty Law Center, some 100 monuments to Confederate generals and politicians have been removed from American public land since June 2015, when Dylann Roof, a then 21-year-old white supremacist, murdered nine Black parishioners in a mass shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., in a state that, at the time, still flew the Confederate flag over

its capitol. More than a third of these monuments have been removed since May 25 of this year alone, when a Minnesota police officer named Derek Chauvin, who has been charged with second-degree murder, was caught on video kneeling on the neck of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, for more than eight minutes while Floyd pleaded for his life. (As a point of comparison, for the nearly 100 years between 1923 and 2015, only nine such monuments were removed.)

Many of these Confederate statues were erected throughout the South during the Jim Crow era at the beginning of the 20th century, or during the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. The debate surrounding their removal is not new, but it has intensified and widened in 2020. This year has seen some of the largest and most sustained civil rights actions of the last 50 years, as well as a president who continues to attract the support of extremist hate groups. As a result, the debate around public monuments has become a worldwide phenomenon. In the U.K., protesters in Bristol toppled a statue of the 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston and threw it into the harbor. In Antwerp, Belgium, a statue of King Leopold II, whose violent colonial rule over what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo is thought to have led to the death of millions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was removed in June.

There has already been significant work done toward reimagining monuments — both figurative and abstract — in the media and among elected officials. In 2018, the editor Erin E. Evans launched "The Black Monuments Project" on the website Mic, which envisioned an America in which our public monuments celebrated Black greatness rather than white oppression. In July of this year, the U.S. House of Representatives approved legislation to remove Confederate monuments from the Capitol building in D.C. and to replace a bust of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney — the author of the Supreme Court's 1857 Dred Scott decision, which ruled that the Constitution did not grant Black Americans citizenship — with one of Justice Thurgood Marshall, the Supreme Court's first Black justice, who died in 1993. (The legislation still needs to be passed by the Senate and signed by the president in order to be enacted.)

Contemporary artists have also found themselves participating in this debate, such as Kehinde Wiley, whose 27-foot bronze statue, "Rumors of War" — depicting a Black man in jeans and a hoodie atop a rearing horse — was installed late last year in front of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, near Monument Avenue, which has long been a kind of public mausoleum for heroes of the Confederacy. It was in that spirit that T asked five artists, including the activist group and artistic collective Decolonize This Place, to imagine their own monument: It could be of anyone, or anything, and be placed anywhere (or replace anything). The

works or concepts they created range from the explicit, such as Ibrahim Mahama's statue of Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, on the campus of Nkrumah's alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania, to the more theoretical, such as Tourmaline's plans to turn the Rikers Island penitentiary complex into a pleasure garden. Collectively, they are an argument for rethinking the very idea of a monument itself: something that, instead of celebrating history, grapples with it — and then suggests a way to look forward, into a more just future.

Rindon Johnson, "Monument to the Multitudes Who Suffered and Suffer the Violent Establishment of the Global Economy," 2020. Altered image: David Grossman/Alamy Stock Photo.

Artist: Rindon Johnson

Project: Returning Ancestral Land to the Oceti Sakowin

Location: South Dakota, Prospect Park, Brooklyn and Elsewhere

Replaces or Reclaims: The Black Hills mountain Range and Surrounding Area

WHEN I WAS ASKED to propose a monument, my first impulse was to sand away the faces on Mount Rushmore, but this form of reclamation reifies the violence of settler colonialism and dispossession. Instead of further altering the landscape, the Black Hills should be returned to the Oceti Sakowin — the proper name for the Great Sioux Nation — so that they, as the ancestral people of that land, could decide what to do about those faces. A gesture of this scale and magnitude is an act of intention. A monument must be redefined. A monument is an act of intention. By return-

ing the Black Hills, the people of the United States would set the intention to change our government's behavior toward Indigenous people and begin to implement large-scale acts of land secession and monetary reparations. In the vein of these gestures, we should ask ourselves daily: What future are we working toward?

So much healing needs to happen, so many lives must be acknowledged. As one individual, a Black American trans man, how could I suggest a single monument in solidarity with all people of the United States as we try to heal the impossibly deep wounds of hundreds of years of slavery, the genocide of Native Americans, the killing of BIPOC and trans people, mass economic injustice and the caging of children? If a monument is then an act of intention, I could create a series of monuments that would act as mirrors and frames for deep, constant contemplation. As we intend to grow and change over time, so too should our physical monuments. Our monuments can help us see how far we have come.

In keeping with this aspiration of intention, I chose materials that can exist harmoniously with a warming planet. Using carbon-capture technology to inject excess atmospheric carbon into volcanic basalt, I propose the creation of a series of large spherical boulders that will eventually grow moss, lichen, plants and flowers. These multivalent forms could be installed in many U.S. landscapes, as there is nowhere that white supremacy has not touched. With the placement of each of these carbon-sink stones, we could measure our own progress toward the creation of a more just society. Before a stone can be placed in a public setting, a concrete action must be taken. For example, funds could be distributed more fairly based on the needs of the community, a polluted marshland could be rehabilitated, detained children could rejoin their parents. With each act, the community sets a new course. White supremacy must be weeded out of our lives, our discourse and ways of being. We must name the violence against BIPOC, trans people and those wishing to immigrate to the United States. These atrocities must stop, and the stones will keep us accountable. Here is a stone placed in the lake at Prospect Park, Brooklyn, a marker of our collective intent.

— Rindon Johnson, July 2020

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