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The Precarious Deaths of Monuments

The afterlives of Confederate memorials and the ideological contradictions of American commemorative culture.

By Jillian McManemin • April 23, 2026

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IN THE HEAT of July 2020, at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests, a statue of Christopher Columbus in Baltimore was toppled to the sound of electric cheers. The statue was then dragged from the square and thrown into the Inner Harbor. This was one incident amid a wave of movements focused on the history and legacy of colonialism, the Confederacy, slavery, and racism. It was an incredible moment, so exciting and full of hope; it felt like toppling these symbols of past horrors might help redress inequalities in the present.

Just two days following its descent into the harbor, I watched footage of the statue rising out of the water. A scuba diving team had been hired by the Knights of Columbus to locate the fragments, which were fished out by crane, pieced back together, and 3D-scanned to produce a mold from which a replica was eventually made. The statue was "brought back to life," in the words of the local Fox News affiliate. On February 5, 2026, *The Hill* reported that "White House officials signed a loan agreement Wednesday with the Italian American Organizations United to secure a reconstructed statue of Columbus thrown into the Baltimore Harbor."

Many such monuments—particularly those to the Confederacy—were contested long before 2020, but that year brought mainstream awareness, debate, and a wave of removals. The years since have shown how difficult it is to kill them, just how precarious their deaths can be. Monuments cannot die unless the ideologies that built them also die, which doesn't seem possible in 2026 in the United States of America, where inequality, racism, and the fascist Right are ascendant. While neo-Confederate groups have seen their numbers go down, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, pro-monument groups have been gaining momentum, in a sense taking the place of the former. The defense and reinstallation of Confederate and colonial monuments are symptoms of persistent white supremacy, alongside the more violent examples of the daily terror committed by ICE agents and endless imperialist wars.

In the United States, contested and toppled monuments have been moved around, absorbed into private collections, reinstalled in cemeteries and golf courses, placed into storage, and put on display. The Robert E. Lee monument in Dallas was relocated to the Lajitas Golf Resort near Terlingua, Texas, in 2021. The Reconciliation Monument, a Confederate memorial removed from Arlington National Cemetery in 2023, is slated for repair and reinstallation by 2027, at a cost of $10 million. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth stated on X:

> I'm proud to announce that Moses Ezekiel's beautiful and historic sculpture—often referred to as "The Reconciliation Monument"—will be rightfully be [*sic*] returned to Arlington National Cemetery near his burial site.
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> It never should have been taken down by woke lemmings. Unlike the Left, we don't believe in erasing American history—we honor it.

Another, rather different staging of the afterlife of Confederate statues, the landmark exhibition titled *MONUMENTS*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and the Brick, gathers 10 of these decommissioned monuments and displays them alongside works by 19 contemporary artists. There's a disjointed quality in encountering these monuments in an art space. Perhaps that's the point. More than the question of Confederate monuments themselves and the ideologies they represent, placing them inside the museum, alongside contemporary artworks, asks the question of the relationship between these two distinct types of objects—artworks and

monuments—and introduces a third, crucial category: ruins. Upon entering, the viewer first encounters fragments from the base of the Robert E. Lee monument, previously installed in Richmond, Virginia. One of the largest Confederate monuments in the American South, (though it pales in comparison to the gargantuan bas-relief Stone Mountain outside Atlanta) and the first to be installed on Richmond's Monument Avenue, in 1890, it became one of the most representative symbols of the 2020 uprisings. A gathering place for many actions, the monument was heavily graffitied, with activists renaming its plaza "Marcus-David Peters Circle" as a memorial to a Richmond resident killed by police in 2018. *The New York Times* named the altered monument one of the "most influential works of American protest art since World War II." Many argued for keeping the monument in its transformed state as a permanent public art project, for the object to take on another life, but the statue was removed by the city in September 2021, the pedestal in February 2022. It is currently owned by the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia.

It's strange to see these fragments, as if they're from a long-lost civilization rather than one being furiously debated. One of the reasons that we are drawn to ruins is the distance they conjure. We get to look at a death and stand askance, experiencing what frightens us at a comfortable remove. We take in destruction and persistence simultaneously. We uncover the desire for obliteration together with the desire to preserve. In *Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed* (1997), Michael S. Roth writes, "The word *ruin* has its origins in the idea of falling and has long been associated with fallen stones. When we frame an object as a ruin, we reclaim that object *from* its fall into decay and oblivion and often *for* some kind of cultural attention and care that, in a sense, elevates its value."

I imagine the amount of money spent to get the monuments to Los Angeles, the attention and care required. It is a strange fate: because of their political contentiousness, the Confederate monuments have been removed from public view, and yet vast resources go into preserving and housing them. Looking at a very different context, Arna Mačkić writes in *Mortal Cities and Forgotten Monuments* (2016):

> Due to their locations, use of material, construction methods and sheer size, [the Communist monuments in the Balkans] have proved to be almost impossible to destroy, which is why a large number of them could not be demolished during the Yugoslavian Civil War in the 1990s. [...] The majority of them are either damaged or left to the effects of nature. The monuments can now be considered tombstones that are reminiscent of the land that once used to be called Yugoslavia.

By contrast, in the United States, we all walk around in "Civil War purgatory," a state of irresolution captured in the simultaneous removal and preservation of these statues. At MOCA, a monument to Jefferson Davis is displayed at an angle, on its side, in a simulation of a toppled monument. The statue was brought down by protesters in June 2020 in Richmond, after being splashed with pink paint. Seeing it lying there in this condition, one can't help but imagine—an

impossibility in the current political landscape—what if these Confederate statues had been left to molder on the ground where they were toppled?

With the upheaval among memorials in the United States, proposals began to emerge for the making of new monuments. Organizations like Monument Lab, which aspires to "move toward a monument landscape that better acknowledges a fuller history of our country," exemplify this agenda. There is an obvious appeal to this vision of repopulating that landscape to represent a more just view of history, to include women and people of color. But the current enthusiasm for rebooting American commemorative culture raises critical questions, particularly because it is very often from contemporary artists and art institutions that the new monuments are being sought. Why this anxiety to refill rather than leave it empty? What happens when we replace one monument with another instead of embracing the radical potential of absence? In turning to art for new monuments, do we risk sacrificing the oppositional power of making art?

In their recent book *Monumental: How a New Generation of Artists Is Shaping the Memorial Landscape* (2025), Cat Dawson argues that several artworks created in response to monumentality, and specifically within the context of the history of American slavery (including Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*, a massive sculpture of a sphinx made of sugar, installed in the Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn, New York, in 2014), deserve recognition as monuments themselves. Dawson writes:

> [T]here is both a formal case to be made for, and political imperative to, recognizing these forms not just as monumental but as monuments. To understand these objects as having the same claim to the term as more traditional instances do challenges the kinds of exclusionary thinking that has long underwritten the relationships between monuments and domination.

Yet art's power lies precisely in its capacity for dissent, to question and refuse official narratives and symbols. Monuments, whether we agree with them or not, seek to efficiently express the values of the state. Art is meant to stir critical thought; it offers the viewer independence through an encounter. Art, in other words, is always subject to and meant for interpretation. Meanwhile, one of the main functions of a monument is to be toppled: it is an expression of both state power and its limit. When art is destroyed, however, it symbolizes the death of thought, like a book burning. This doesn't mean all monuments are "bad"—there are those that would be (or were) tragic to lose: for example, the oft-mentioned Buddhas of Bamiyan, a UNESCO World Heritage Site destroyed by the Taliban in 2001; or the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, designed by the Equal Justice Initiative, the only monument specifically dedicated to the thousands of Black American victims of lynching.

But it does mean there is a vital distinction between art and monuments—their function and lack of function.

The art in *MONUMENTS* is most successful when it doesn't, to quote from the exhibition text,

"broaden the field of what a monument can be," but when it actively opposes the form. Leonardo Drew's *Number 363* (2023) is a 900-pound cube constructed with layers of cotton, drawing on the history of minimalist and process-based sculpture as well as the history of slavery. It evokes a whitewashed pedestal. Even with its dense set of allusions, it's a meditative work, an object that opens itself to the viewer.

Abigail Deville's 2025 installation *Deo Vindice (Orion's Cabinet)*—whose Latin title references the motto of the Confederacy, translating to "With God as Our Defender"—utilizes a vast assemblage of china cabinets, lit with colored lights, and covered in salt, pig blood, and charred material to evoke the burning of Richmond at the end of the Civil War. Deville creates a series of doors that the viewer cannot enter. The piece cannot be viewed all at once, and its fragmentation, its shadows and light, is crucial.

A suite of photographs by Nona Faustine, taken between 2012 and 2024, conveys the body as subject and object and pulls from the history of feminist performance art, as she deploys her body as material. Faustine implicates New York City in the slave trade, standing naked at various sites involved with that history, including Wall Street, the Dutch Reform Cemetery in Brooklyn, and the Tweed Courthouse. She embodies both a ghost of history, acting as a stand-in for the many who have died, and a present-tense reminder of how these histories are still alive.

Stan Douglas's *Birth of a Nation* takes the eponymous 1915 D. W. Griffith film, which follows two families from the North and South through the Civil War and Reconstruction, and adds new scenes, sequences, and characters played by Black actors (instead of the blackface originals), flipping black-and-white into full color. He inserts, distorts, and alters, cutting into the iconography to dismantle it, splicing it up into five channels. The original *Birth of a Nation* was famously screened at the White House by Woodrow Wilson, but instead of creating a new cinematic monument, the Douglas version punctures the old with remixing.

The most exciting moment in the exhibition came while I was walking toward the large-scale equestrian monument of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson: out of the corner of my eye, I saw *A Suspension of Hostilities* (2019) by Hank Willis Thomas. The sculpture is a 1969 Dodge Charger painted bright neon orange with a Confederate flag on the roof, a replica of the General Lee car from the TV series *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979–85), flipped onto its front bumper, standing upright. This is art. It's something that knocks you sideways. It interrupts a narrative and does something else with it. The effect is entirely different from *The Embrace*, Thomas's 2023 monument to Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King for the city of Boston, which recreates the arms of the couple from an image of them hugging. Even with its surreal abstraction, *The Embrace* feels stagnant: it doesn't provide a new perspective on their history or facilitate a space for people to gather (just the opposite—its appearance garnered many jokes). All the criticality, supercharged aesthetics, and rebelliousness that typically characterize the artist's work were lost in the monumental form.

While *A Suspension of Hostilities* both recreates and reorients an iconic object from popular culture, Kara Walker's *Unmanned Drone* (2023), on view at the Brick, goes further: it remixes an actual Confederate monument. In 2021, Walker was deeded a decommissioned statue of Stonewall Jackson riding his horse, Little Sorrel, into battle; the monument was previously located in Charlottesville, Virginia, the site of the Unite the Right rally in 2017. Walker deconstructed the 13-foot-high, 16-foot-long statue and reassembled it into a mutated, twisted form, an inverted centaur. She describes making cuts to the horse as butchering meat. There's an uncanniness to the aliveness of this object, and a testament to what effort, what precision, it takes to change a monument, kill it, and make it art.

Through Walker's dissection and reconfiguring of Jackson into a contorted figure, twisting in agony, we're able to enter the brutal history of the Civil War from a different vantage point. When art is effective, it goes beyond itself, and the sculpture's title suggests how the Confederate monument-as-material can open onto other wars. Horses were used as technologies of war, vital to the colonization of the American continent, and the work suggests a through line to drones being used in Gaza and Ukraine today, and to the other modern technologies of surveillance and domination—tanks, robot dogs, facial recognition software.

Unmanned Drone works because it takes a monument and turns it into art, not unlike the collaborative transformation of the Robert E. Lee monument into Marcus-David Peters Circle. There is something charged about Walker's sculpture. It has a sex drive, a death drive, an aliveness that monuments do not and cannot possess. Where monuments are restricted, sculpture is porous, more affected by temporality and site specificity. Sculpture is easier to kill. It addresses the boundary between internal and external, the body and the melancholy that accompanies it. Sculpture provokes questions of mortality and immortality because sculpture exists in relation to the body, in the life and death of materials and of us: we need more autonomy, creativity, and freedom; we need more sculpture, not more monuments.

The ancient Roman method of disposing of an unwanted statue, a monument to a defeated enemy's king or god, involved decapitating it, denting it with a sword, and finally throwing it into a body of water as the final step in killing the symbolic power of the object. This was to prevent resurrections and hauntings. An ideological tug-of-war coalesces around our monuments, but it's important to remember that it cannot be fought with the objects themselves. The monuments to the Confederacy remain resuscitated, unable to be covered over with vines or blurred under layers of graffiti, unable yet to become softened into the remnants of a dead empire.

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Featured image: Edward V. Valentine, Jefferson Davis memorial, 1907, bronze, 98 × 54 × 48 in. The Valentine Museum, Richmond, Virginia. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen.