“After-Ozymandias”: The Colonization of Symbols and the American Monument

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“After-Ozymandias”: The Colonization of Symbols and the American Monument

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

*After-Ozymandias* examines the visual rhetoric of American patriotism through its many symbols, including flags and monuments. My thesis project consists of photographs of empty plinths, objects, products and archival materials. Countless relics remain today memorializing leaders and empires that inevitably declined, from antiquity to modern times. Looking back at distant history feels like a luxury, though: the question for our time in America is whether we have the strength of mind as a society to scrutinize our history, warts and all.
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INTRODUCTION

When I was in high school, my mother became a naturalized American citizen, and by extension I too became a citizen. For years she tirelessly navigated the bureaucracies of INS while studying for her civics exam. I distinctly remember the Oath of Allegiance at her naturalization ceremony in Philadelphia, because swearing the oath symbolically completes the process of becoming a U.S. citizen. I recall thinking, “I don’t feel any more ‘American’ today, than I did yesterday.” This cognitive dissonance, of feeling both an insider and outsider, urged me to enlist in the United States Army. It seemed (at the time) the most immediate way to earn my place within the American fabric, to belong.

I spent several years working as a US Army photographer and press officer, serving both in Iraq and on other overseas assignments, often shooting heroic images of young men jumping from planes, driving tanks, and blowing things up. In my role as documenter I couldn’t help but study the theatricality of war, the performativity of ritual, and the representation of strength within the context of the photographic image.

Patriotism is indeed embedded in our cultural canon of values, but as mainstream attitudes about what it means to be an American evolve and change to reflect our contemporary moment, do we have the capacity to scrutinize our collective history, warts and all? The lens through which we see American identity often flattens military service to a political football. When real military service finally re-emerges from media and popular press commentary, it’s reduced to a car magnet in the shape of a yellow ribbon bearing a phrase like “Support Our Troops.” In my photography I try to
maintain the particular contradictions between the specificity of military service on the one hand and the public display of patriotic platitudes on the other.

My photographs and studio practice are concerned with American citizens’ assumptions about military experiences and the construction of American identity through collective memory related to American participation in wars. I utilize the 24-hour news cycle, mainstream media, popular culture, archival military training manuals, Congressional reports, and white papers, as source material. I work with the multiplicity and range of these materials in an attempt to interrogate broadly how the military and war are represented and defined, and by whom.

The photographic image leans on the viewer to assign a set of values by which to interpret its meaning. My photographs explore a “uniquely American” experience, history, and identity. They are subject to the verbal framing of captions, essays, commentaries, critical responses etc. for the way we come to interpret them.

To establish the lengthy history of American war imagery used to shape narratives of strength and power, no matter their factual accuracy, I point to Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze’s 1851 painting, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* [Fig 1]. Washington did in fact cross the Delaware, but did he look this heroic doing it? Probably not, considering Leutze was in Germany 75 years after the actual crossing, when he painted it. A judicious viewer only need compare the equestrian image of *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* [Fig 2] by Jacques-Louis David to Paul Delaroche’s *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps* [Fig 3] to discern how and why history images must be looked at skeptically.
AN INDEX OF PATRIOTIC CONSUMPTION

During my time at Hunter, I was introduced to a 150 page report by U.S. Sen. John McCain and Sen. Jeff Flake, both of Arizona, as part of the Senate Armed Services Committee’s, Joint Oversight Report on (then) recent Pentagon spending. This U.S. Congressional report described in great detail, in nearly line-item specificity, how the Department of Defense had misappropriated taxpayer funds for what is widely referred to as “Paid Patriotism.” The report outlines how the most egregious misappropriation of government funds was money paid to the NFL. Also, the Dept. of Defense spent $53 million on marketing and advertising with college football teams, Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL), and Major League Soccer (MLS), and Nascar, between 2012-2015. 1 The lion’s share of the funds were used for things like military “flyovers” during the national anthem, reenlistment ceremonies, hometown heroes on the JumboTron, and military appreciation nights during which t-shirt’s were shot from airguns. These rituals and iconography have become synonymous with American patriotism. My ongoing project An Index of Patriotic Consumption is part of my larger investigation into how military service is represented in popular culture broadly.

Exploring objects and events at the periphery of war can create an awareness of a national identity and foreign policy less discernible than the standard versions one encounters in public discourse. Examining what the average American watches, reads,

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eats, buys, and “Likes,” reveals how American patriotism materializes on the sides of beer cans at NFL games and summer BBQ’s. This historical period, when rhetoric, facts, and statistics are vague or flat-out false has created an urgent need to define how history and current events are perceived through images. Imagery, especially when circulated through mass mediation, tends to become disassociated from its original referent and become subject to new, mythologizing meanings and purposes.

In utilizing the term “mythologizing,” with respect to visual language as both iconography and a mode of depiction I point to Roland Barthes’s Mythologies. In the chapter Myth Today Barthes explains that it is human history which converts reality into speech and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language, therefore mythology can only have a historical foundation and thus cannot evolve from the ‘nature’ of things.²

“Speech of this kind is a message. It is therefore by no means confined to oral speech. It can consist of modes of writing or of representations: not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to mythical speech. Myth can be defined neither by its object nor by its material, for any material can arbitrarily be endowed with meaning: the arrow which is brought in order to signify a challenge is also a kind of speech.”³

I am interested in the commodification, consumption, and representation of patriotism in advertising, media, culture, and religion, often overlapping in video games, TV shows, and sporting events. My work utilizes the medium of photography to document, archive, catalog, flatten, enlarge, and scrutinize these objects in descriptive

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³ Ibid
The specificity of photography allows me to use the aesthetics of the press and advertising industries to oscillate between two uses of images which I will call “art as fact” and “documentary as fiction.” (I will later address these two strategies as both genre and method on page 16).

By re-contextualizing ordinary consumer packaging I intend to place it in the arena of critique descended from Duchamp’s work (via Pop and postmodern appropriation). My address to the relation of these appropriated materials to representations of patriotism is an attempt to push the work beyond this lineage. The aesthetic decision to photograph patriotically themed commodities in a manner appropriate to professional product or “catalog” photography functions as a critique of “expressive” fine art photography insofar as it refers to the sensibility of a maker, thus undermining it via parody in a manner comparable to the work of Christopher Williams.

There is an obvious disproportion in the consequences of “patriotic duty” between purchasing the Heinz Ketchup bottle [image XII] in comparison to actually serving your country. The idea that serving food amounts to patriotic duty, rather than consumption in itself, undermines Heinz Company’s attempt at patriotism; the bottle self-critiques, therefore just showing it becomes a parody.

This method explores ambivalence as my personal motivation by cross-referencing and embedding my subject position (as an Iraq Veteran) with the recording of military information, ephemera, artifacts, and products. I simultaneously critique the commercialization of the military while having a deep respect for the institution.
AN INDEX OF PATRIOTIC CONSUMPTION

(Installation Shots)
AN INDEX OF PATRIOTIC CONSUMPTION

Caption List

I. Installation shot of *Toy Soldiers* (Legos)
   Archival Pigment Prints, 11x14, 2017, (3 images)

II. *Military Special Gin (Red)*
   Archival Pigment Prints, 16x24, 2017

III. *Military Special Tequila (White)*
   Archival Pigment Prints, 16x24, 2017

IV. *Military Special Whiskey (Blue)*
   Archival Pigment Prints, 16x24, 2017

V. *Military Special Special (Red, White and Blue)*
   Archival Pigment Prints in hand painted frames, 16x24, 2017 (3 images)

VI. *Toy Soldiers, Lego 1 (Vietnam)*
   Archival Pigment Prints, 11x14, 2017

VII. *Toy Soldiers, Lego 2 (ISIS)*
   Archival Pigment Prints, 11x14, 2017

VIII. *Toy Soldiers, Lego 3 (Operator)*
   Archival Pigment Prints, 11x14, 2017

IX. *Toy Soldiers, Lego 4 (Al-Qaeda)*
   Archival Pigment Prints, 11x14, 2017

X. *Fortune 500 (Johnson & Johnson)*
   Archival Pigment Prints, sizes vary, 2017

XI. *Fortune 500 (Coca-Cola)*
   Archival Pigment Prints, sizes vary, 2017

XII. *Fortune 500 (Heinz)*
   Archival Pigment Prints, sizes vary, 2017

XIII. *Fortune 500 Installation shot*
   Archival Pigment Prints, sizes vary (5 images), 2017
“The Rhetoric of Timelessness never ended up convincing anyone.”
- Kirk Savage, The Obsolescence of Sculpture

AFTER-OZYMANDIAS

The title After-Ozymandias is a nod to a poem written by Percy Shelley about the inevitable decline of any empire and their surviving pretensions to greatness. Ozymandias is the Greek name for Pharaoh Ramesses II, who ruled Egypt during the thirteenth century b.c.e. Shelley wrote the poem in 1817 shortly after the announcement of the British Museum’s acquisition of a large fragment of his statue [Fig 7,8,9].

Today, the debate over Confederate monuments has many Americans considering how historical figures are represented in our public spaces because as Daniel Walkowitz points out in the American Historical Review Journal, “The act of memorializing is as much about what we chose to forget and what stories and experiences we chose to discredit.”

To comprehensively understand the significance and role public sculpture plays in our modern world we must consider the material decisions taken in producing them. First, monumental sculpture is often built 1/3rd larger than human scale, high upon a pedestal looking down at us, made of stone or bronze, rooted with bolts in the ground. These material attributes are intrinsic to the monument’s cultural significance, suggesting myths of immortality intended to outlast the fragility of flesh and bone.

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This, of course, doesn’t prevent them from falling all around us [Fig 10] as their cultural value is challenged.

We need not look far for examples of destroyed monuments to understand how cyclical history can be. The distributed image of such an event via the web, print, and cinema multiplies its significance to a global audience [Fig 11-18]. This leads many to believe that the public monument, as we understand it today, deriving from the Greek and Roman traditions, is obsolete and problematic in the modern world. Even before sculpture became everything from a bicycle wheel to a bottle rack, it received less enthusiasm from critics, scholars, and collectors than other visual art mediums. Research of American sculpture (within the Western tradition of the monument) today lags behind that of painting, film, and photography.\(^5\)

Rosalind Krauss supports this idea in *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* by pointing out that “The logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument.” She continues:

\[\text{[Monumental sculpture] sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place. The equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius is such a monument, set in the center of the Campidoglio to represent by its symbolical presence the relationship between ancient, Imperial Rome and the seat of government of modern, Renaissance Rome.}\]\(^6\)

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The *Expanded Field* as described by Krauss in 1979 included then radical ideas [Fig 19] of authorship, site, viewer, materiality, and skill moving beyond architecture and landscape. What I am suggesting is that the Expanded Field today extends to documentary, both as a genre and as a critical method.\(^7\)

The current state of contemporary art, photography, sculpture, monuments, mass media, journalism, popular culture, and the like have all shifted and collapsed under the speed and weight of the post-internet, hyper-contemporary. We operate in a moment that is radically different than the one Krauss described nearly 40 years ago in which these mediums are “infinitely malleable.”\(^8\) As Hito Steyerl has so aptly pointed out, “The only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our times is that we always already doubt if it is true.”\(^9\)

If we prescribe to Barthes, Krauss, and Steyerl’s assertions that the distinctions, or rather the logic that once supported value systems of language, myth, and meaning via sculpture, monuments, and representation would eventually begin to fall apart and fail, however gradually, we must also acknowledge that our definitions of documentary photography must expanded to include other modes of reading images as truths. This is necessary to explore and establish new ways of reading icons and images within their multiple histories and the overwhelming rate in which culture, ideology, and information is produced and shared today.

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Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg wrote of James Agee who accompanied Walker Evans to cover the Dust Bowl for *Fortune Magazine*,

“*He recognizes the lack of language, the inevitable betrayals it will perpetrate, when faced with the overflowing materiality of the real.*”

Creating meaning through language is not a new challenge, but creating images that confront shifting ideologies requires a new measuring stick. If we are to believe that the public monument is obsolete, how do we create alternative histories? How do we create new narratives that challenge ones so staunchly held by people who believe symbols of the Confederacy aren’t culpable of promoting white supremacy but rather honor the past and the fallen of the “Lost Cause?” With the extensive research conducted by the Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center, it has become increasingly difficult to believe that Confederate monuments are symbols of pride and not hate.

The 44-page report titled: *Whose Heritage? Public Symbols Of The Confederacy*, discusses the physical, public manifestation of state and local governments intended to intimidate African Americans from organizing, following the abolition of slavery. Confederate statues, flags, holidays, federal buildings, public schools, courthouses, and military bases are all symptoms of the Jim Crow drive to keep blacks subordinate. The SPLC organized roughly 1500 examples of repressive public manifestations by location and year they were built [Fig 20]. The South was devastated by the Civil War and didn’t have the money to build statues for decades, so it should come as no surprise that there

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is a direct correlation between the era of Jim Crow, The Civil Rights Movement, the formation of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the spike in dedications to Confederate figures.\footnote{Gunter, Booth, Kizzare, Jamie, Kent, Cindy. “Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy.” SPLCenter, Southern Poverty Law Center , 21 Apr. 2016, www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/whoseheritage_splc.pdf}

What I propose with My project After-Ozymandias, is that we reflect on the absence of these monuments in the same way we reflect on Jeff Wall’s work, who often seems to me, to be suggesting, metaphorically, to look at his images for something we can’t see [Fig 21]. For my thesis exhibition, there were several considerations made with respect with scale, height, proximity and framing. Just as I mentioned earlier that Monuments are often build 1/3rd larger than human scale, of materials which suggest permanence, and height which obligates the viewer to tilt their head skyward, I too made decisions that orchestrate the viewer’s body in similar, yet opposing ways.

First, I printed my images at 40x60. This decision was in large part to take my images out of the economy of the press, printed matter, and mobile screen. The intent was to make the viewer feel like they could walk into my image. I also printed large format because I want my photographs to be in materials dialogue with history paintings. This method also removes it from the economy of the press. Next, I hung my images just 18 inches off the gallery floor, meaning the top of the image was under 60 inches, That is over 20 inches less than the traditional height many museum and galleries hang their art. The Reason so many galleries hang their works at 80 inches is because the average human height is 60 inches which would put a work of art
center-mass at human scale. I however decided to hang my work extremely low so change the physical act of looking down at a monument as opposed to up. And lastly, my images were all several feel away from each other, because I wanted the viewer to experience them as anti-monuments one at a time.

In closing I want to point to a text by George Baker who better articulates the oscillation photography enjoys between art, journalism, fact, and fiction as such:

*Perhaps photography’s notorious epistemological slipperiness—think of the famous difficulty faced by Roland Barthes throughout the entirety of his book Camera Lucida (1980) to define in any general way the object of his analysis—inherently resists the structural order and analysis of what Krauss called the expanded field. Perhaps, indeed, photography’s expanded field, unlike sculpture’s, might even have to be imagined as a group of expanded fields, multiple sets of oppositions and conjugations, rather than any singular operation. And yet it is striking how consistently photography has been approached by its critics through the rhetoric of oppositional thinking, whether we look to the photograph as torn between ontology and social usage, or between art and technology, or between what Barthes called denotation and connotation, or what he also later called punctum and studium, between “discourse and document” (to use an invention of Benjamin Buchloh’s), between “Labor and Capital” (to use one of Allan Sekula’s), between index and icon, sequence and series, archive and art photograph. One could go on.*
AFTER-OZYMANDIAS
(THESIS INSTALLATION SHOTS)
[Fig1] Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851 Oil on Canvas, (149 in × 255 in)
[Fig 2] Jacques Louis David, *Bonaparte Crossing the Grand Saint-Bernard Pass*, 1800 Oil on Canvas, (91 in x 106 in)
[Fig 3] Paul Delaroche, *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, 1850 oil on canvas (114 in × 87 in)
[Fig 4] Christopher Williams, *Kodak Three Point Reflection Guide*

[Fig 5] Christopher Williams: *The Production Line of Happiness*
[Fig 6] Christopher Williams: *The Production Line of Happiness*
Ozymandias.

I met a Traveller from an antient land,
Who said, "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command;
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings."
Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that Colossal Wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Glirastes.
[Fig 8] The Younger Memnon (Ramesses II), Granite C. 1270 b.c. (105 x 80 In) Room 4, British Museum, London
[Fig 9] William Alexander, *Installing the Bust of Ramesses II in the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery*, drawing 1834,
The British Museum, London
[Fig 10] Johannes Adam Simon Oertel, *Pulling Down the Statue of King George III*, 1859 oil on canvas

(32 x 41 1/4 in)
[Fig 11] Hungarians stand over the toppled statue of Joseph Stalin on Oct. 23, 1956. Andor D. Heller/Hungarian News Agency

[Fig 12] In 1991 Ukraine had 5,500 Lenin monuments. By December 2015 only 1,300 Lenin monuments were left standing
23 May 1989: Workmen cover a defaced portrait of Mao Tse-tung in Beijing, after protesters threw egg filled with paint at it during the Tiananmen Square protests. The portrait was quickly replaced with a spare.

[Fig 14] Depiction of the destruction of Buddhist sculptures in the early Meiji Period, Tanaka Nagane 1907
[Fig 15] Venezuelan demonstrators place a rope to take down a Christopher Columbus statue in Caracas, on Oct. 12, 2004. Jorge Silva/Reuters

[Fig 16] A U.S. soldier watches as a statue of the former leader of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, falls in central Baghdad’s Firdaus Square, in this file photo from April 2003. Goran Tomasevic/Reuters
[Fig] 17 Statue of President Bashar Al-Assad's father, Hafez Al-Assad, who was President of Syria from 1971 to 2000 toppled in Raqqa province, March 20

[Fig] 18 The head of Lenin, part of the props used on a barge during location shooting of the film *Ulysses’ Gaze*, directed by Theo Angelopoulos. Constanta, Romania, 1994.
[Fig 19] Illustration from pg. 38 of Krauss’ *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*

[Fig 20] Southern Poverty Law Center Timeline
[Fig] 20 Jeff Wall Dead Troops Talk (a vision after an ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986) 1992 transparency in lightbox
90 1/8 x 164 1/8 in. (228.92 x 416.88 cm)