

Full statement for **RELEVANT / SCRAP:**

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, roughly 1,500 place names or symbols representing the Confederacy can be found in public spaces in Virginia alone. Of that number, over 200 are located in public spaces maintained by local or state government. Monuments to the Confederacy have grown particularly controversial in recent years, and we can no longer ignore their significance regardless of our political views.

The work in this exhibition expresses our consideration of the complexity of the situation, the current post-truth context in the U.S. only adding to its complexity. The inability to agree on basic facts across the argumentative divide, such as why the civil war was fought, results in a situation where all voices, all viewpoints are simply sounding-off simultaneously. It is this cacophony of individual postures that some of the work in this show illustrates. We are all stakeholders in what happens with regard to monuments to the Confederacy, and it is clear that the status quo is not enough to prevent further civil discord. We must come to an agreement, collectively, on how to proceed.

We both grew up in the South (Virginia and Georgia) and have observed our own changing relationships to monuments to the Confederacy. Being white in the South meant for us that these monuments could be treated like furniture in the environment, relegated to the background through habituation and affiliation. In other words, we were privileged not to see them as contesting our rights or place in society. As we grew up it became clear that these public monuments did not represent the values of everyone. This is a fairly typical story for many of us. Ultimately, if a monument is meant to commemorate a notable person or event, perhaps these pieces exist more as elegies, embracing the losses we all share regardless of race. In seeing the inherent duality of the situation, and leading with forgiveness, we hope art becomes a healing lens through which history can be amended.

The issue does get complicated as we begin to assess the various arguments on both sides of the controversy. The clash is pronounced when considering the preservation of history, the commemoration of war dead on one side and social justice on the other.

“Are Confederate monuments reminders of the antebellum South, a mythical place where tradition, family, chivalry, a love of liberty, and a small government were paramount virtues, or do they recall an odious, divisive time in the nation’s history where bigotry, slavery, and rebelliousness were championed?”
(*Confederate Symbols in the Contemporary South*. Edited by Martinez, Richardson, McNinch-Su, p. 173)

Consider this thought experiment (that actually happened). You are the director of the Civil War Museum and the Sons of Confederate Veterans approaches you with an offer. They want to donate to the museum a bronze sculpture of Jefferson Davis walking, holding hands with two young boys (one black and one white). They have picked out a location on your campus, and they are ready to install. How do you respond to the Sons of Confederate Veterans?

- Jere Williams and Pam Sutherland