Patience on a Monument
The New Gallery
The University of Texas at Austin
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reviewed by Phillip Townsend

In March of 2015, polymedia artist Eto Otitigbe participated in a performance conceived by Wideman/Davis Dance (a dance duo of principal dancers Tanya Wideman-Davis and Thaddeus Davis). That performance—which grew out of Otitigbe’s solo exhibition “Ruptured Silence” presented by 701 CCA (Center for Contemporary Arts) in Columbia, South Carolina, that same month—examined contemporary reactions to racist signs and symbols in public spaces. The exhibition featured a series of sculptures and experimental drawings that were substitutive representations of familiar themes and objects. While in residence at 701 CCA, Otitigbe collaborated with Wideman/Davis to develop the first iteration of “Ruptured Silence: Racist Symbols and Signs,” a media performance installation that explored the deconstruction of the Southern civil rights memento, the Confederate flag.

From his work with Wideman/Davis and on the merit of his exhibition at 701 CCA, Otitigbe was chosen as the Elizabeth M. Marion Visiting Artist at the University of South Carolina (USC) later that year. As a visiting artist, Otitigbe researched and presented materials on human and land interaction, public sculpture, monuments, and of course, his practice. In December of 2015, Otitigbe, in collaboration with Wideman/Davis Dance, (re)presented “Ruptured Silence: Racist Symbolism and Signs” as a response to the murder of nine people at South Carolina’s Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and the subsequent removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina State House grounds.

In January 2016, now consumed with the notion of monuments, Otitigbe traveled to Egypt as a part of a cultural exchange project with CEC ArtsLink. There, he spent three weeks in Aswan, a busy market and tourist center located in the south of Egypt, just north of the Aswan Dam on the east bank of the Nile River. The Aswan Dam has been and continues to be a controversial construction project. While the dam is credited with providing resources for irrigation, clean power (hydroelectric), and flood control, the dam actually flooded a large area, causing the relocation of over 100,000 Nubian inhabitants. Many archaeological sites, such as Abu Simbel, were submerged, while others were relocated. The dam is blamed for drying up the Nile (the largest, most powerful river in the world), coastline erosion, soil salinity, and health problems (schistosomiasis and bilharzias being the most apparent). While in Aswan, Otitigbe traveled along the Nile observing and recording natural rock formations and the impact of human interaction.

All of this brings us to “Patience on a Monument” at the New Gallery at the University of Texas at Austin—an exhibition that seeks to open a dialogue about the ways in which humans engage with monuments.
and other public sculpture. The displacements, journeys, and extensive international networks established by the artist are important to understand the significance of "Patience on a Monument." The exhibition of nine new works by Otitigbe (Fig. 1) demonstrates the artist’s continuing inquiry into issues of race, monuments, technology, politics, and human interaction. Myron M. Beasley, associate professor of African American Studies and American Cultural Studies at Bates College and "Patience on a Monument" curator, notes that Otitigbe’s work "acknowledge[s] the complex interplay between public memorializing, history, and everyday life" and "asks viewers to question how monuments invite audiences to participate in the memory and retelling of significant moments."5

Breaking from the traditional hierarchical arrangement of sculpture exhibitions, the works that form "Patience on Monument" are organized thematically, allowing for a comprehensive overview of Otitigbe’s contributions as an artist, writer, curator, and cultural agent. The work on exhibition demonstrates the extent to which Otitigbe’s travels and life experience have impacted the production of what he calls proposals—"models for monuments which mark one’s positionality but are subject to modification based on geographical and/or temporal changes."5

Otitigbe’s work asks viewers to consider the nonverbal power of monuments and its effects on public memory. Who gets to be remembered? Who facilitates that remembering? What exactly is a monument and how does one engage it critically? In reaction to Otitigbe’s work, Cherise Smith, associate professor of art history and African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, asserts that difficulties in critically engaging monuments stem from the idea that "people often cannot find precise language to talk about certain objects such as statues, monuments, and reliquaries."5 Yielding and Agreeable (2016) (Fig. 2) serves to complicate even further the notion of monument. Sitting "patiently" on the dark hardwood floor of the gallery under soft light, the work asks viewers to reconsider their conceptualizations of monuments. Yielding and Agreeable comprised digital photographs on metallic paper, treated aluminum, and Valchromat—a material that can be categorized as somewhere between a wood fiber board and a solid surface. Using collaged photographs of the plinths upon which Confederate statues (Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee) from the Main Mall on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin once stood, Otitigbe has created what appears to be a solid piece of granite. Leaning on opposite sides of the collaged plinth are two engraved triangular support elements made from Valchromat. One reads “Yielding”—the other “Agreeable.” This work draws attention to what could be in the empty spaces now that the monuments have been removed. In fact, Otitigbe would like to see a spatial intervention; he suggests engraving new text on the vacant sides of the plinth explaining why the statue was removed, or perhaps testimony from those who were routinely traumatized by the now-absent monument(s).

As a “proposal,” Bound States (2016) (Fig. 5), a piece comprising video and Valchromat, deserves “patience.” Composed of footage shot by the artist over three nights and one afternoon during his time in Aswan, the video depicts a granite quarry—the material source of many monuments. Due to political turmoil in Egypt at the time of his residency, Otitigbe shot the video mostly at night using a Sony A7 S2—ideal for shooting video in low light. The footage was captured during the fifth anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution (the uprising that toppled longtime ruler Hosni Mubarak) during the artist’s stay on Elephantine Island in a Nubian settlement. With its jagged edges and subtracted forms, the Valchromat sculpture, sits in the middle of the gallery with its back towards its telegenic companion piece. The slightly inclined sculpture mirrors the entrance to the Temple of Ramses II, the Nineteenth Dynasty pharaoh who left a greater mark in history than many other accomplished and successful pharaohs. Ramses II ruled for sixty-seven years and built more monuments, of greater size, than any other pharaoh. The video and sculpture combine to evoke a history of human and land interaction as well as the technological advances that have changed the way humans interact with the earth and its materials.

As an extension of "Patience on a Monument," Wideman/Davis and Otitigbe

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3 Eto Otitigbe
Forced Away and Exposed (2016)
Valchromat and 32 inch flat screen monitor with looping video; 114.3 cm x 25.4 cm x 25.4 cm

4 Eto Otitigbe
6061/1909 (2016)
Leather accordion book with digital print on archival metallic satin paper; 13.3 cm x 18.4 cm x 6 pages
produced a performance piece in response to the removal of the confederate statues on UT Austin’s campus. Using movement and props designed by Otitigbe, the performance sought to express the collective fear and anxiety found in communities where individuals have been subjected to a visual and material culture that celebrates a very particular Southern heritage (Figs. 6–7). The performance also reenacted the violence perpetuated by white supremacist patriarchy (then and now) and its resulting traumas. The performance took place on the porch and front lawn of the Littlefield House, a home built in 1893 for Confederate Army Officer George Washington Littlefield. At the age of eighteen, Littlefield was listed in the census as the manager of his mother’s plantation, which included thirty slaves. He subsequently paid for the Littlefield Fountain, designed by Italian-born sculptor Pompeo Coppini; Littlefield also commissioned Coppini to create the Confederate monuments across UT Austin’s campus. Following the scheduled events and without context or permission, Otitigbe left a noose hanging in a tree near the fountain. After concerns were voiced by the student body and University administration, the noose was removed.

The New Gallery (under the guidance of Director Lise Ragbir), the exhibition’s hosting venue, claims to “support, promote and sustain the arts as an expression of creativity and social-justice and establishes the University of Texas at Austin as a premiere location to study the art and material culture of the African Diaspora.” “Patience on a Monument” is the inaugural exhibition for The New Gallery and signals an auspicious beginning for this space of scholarship, engagement, and activism. “Patience on a Monument” encourages viewers to reconsider their relationship with the signs and symbols they encounter on a day to day basis. This show also seeks to facilitate changes in the public’s perception and conceptualization of monuments and the power they wield.

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Notes
1 Myron M. Beasley in discussion with artist Eto Otitigbe, March 2016.
2 Interview with Eto Otitigbe, March 15, 2016.
3 Cherise Smith in discussion with curator Myron M. Beasley, March 2016.