Abstract

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

AN ARTISTIC DECONSTRUCTION OF OUR PUBLIC MONUMENTS

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A monument not only brings forward into the present the values of the subject it is commemorating, but also the values of those who decided to have the structure built/named. If we choose to make available only the positive elements of the commemorated person or event’s legacy, as most of our monuments do, the viewer is only able to place those positive contributions in present context. The negative aspects of the memorialized person/event are left out as well as the political climate in which the monument was commissioned. These monuments are, therefore, presenting an incomplete version of history which threatens to become our culture’s collective sense of history over time. All art objects are history tellers as each carries with it, at least, the cultural politics of its time and those of its influences, but public monuments are art objects that are built and/or named with the specific intention of reproducing historical values. It should be our duty as citizens to demand a more accurate telling of history in regards to public monuments if we wish for future generations to learn from the ups and downs of our past. This body of work attempts to shed light on the incomplete nature of several regional monuments as well as offer a version of a monument that presents multiple aspects of a single politician’s civic impact.
WHAT’S IN A NAME?
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INTRODUCTION

A monument is a structure that commemorates a particular person or event, usually through artistic means, focusing on that person or event’s positive contribution to the local culture. In the case of memorialized individuals, the time in which the person lived and the people they affected via their social influence and/or policy making, the politics of the times in which the monument was constructed and the people involved in producing it, and the politics of the current culture in which the monument exists are all important aspects of the structure’s social significance. Felt initially by the viewer or not, each monument does, in fact, reproduce the values of its subject and makers. The claim that monuments reflect a different era of ethics and should, therefore, be free of current political debate is, in my opinion, a ridiculous one. These monuments live in the current culture and demand current criticism, and visual art provides an aesthetic vocabulary with which an artist may present this criticism. In the case of this exhibit, each painting deals with a particular monument and the different historic values it is reproducing in today’s culture. Each layer of photographic imagery applied represents a different set of the memorial’s politics and the manner in which these layers interact may provoke a conversation within the viewer, whether internal or aloud, which will help approximate the memorial’s true social effect. In the end, I hope to offer a version of a monument that investigates the cultural impact of a particular civic figure, implicating all of us as participants in an active conversation about how to create memorials responsibly, and how to right the wrongs of previously made monuments.
When a viewer observes a memorial, whatever information they recall about the memorialized figure is conjured and their historic understanding of the figure and his/her works is placed in the current state of affairs. The viewer may remember certain “facts” about the figure from history classes which are then applied to the moment he or she is experiencing. The problem is that their version of history in regards to the memorialized individual is more often than not incomplete, or non-existent, resulting in a moment of disconnect between the viewer’s sense of history and how it places this person in today’s events. The other facets of this political figure’s legacy, which may have been purposefully ignored or systematically eliminated from the history books, are not presented in context with the figure’s celebrated deeds, nor in context with current politics. The viewer may look at the monument in a completely different way, with an entirely different set of parameters if they were aware of this figure’s entire impact on the civic process. With a more comprehensive education about the memorialized person available upon viewing, the viewer would be forced to place the person in the current state of affairs and make an informed decision as to what he/she should take from the experience. Seeing the figure in a contemporary setting and understanding their politics as they exist in the modern world would certainly leave the viewer with an important decision to make about what they will take away from that moment. In this case, the monument would offer an educational moment, motivating the viewer to determine how the politics of yesterday can be dealt with in regards to today’s issues. Visual artists are called upon to create memorials for various types of politicians, civic leaders and events, and I feel it is the artist’s responsibility to attempt to present a whole telling of the story to prospective viewers. My paintings are developed with this idea in mind in hopes of bringing the positive image of a particular memorialized figure into context with the negatives of their legacy.
Take, as an example, the monument of the 7th American President, Andrew Jackson (1829-1837), located on the North Carolina State Capitol grounds. A viewer isn’t simply looking at a bronze statue of a seemingly important man on a horse, but rather, one artist’s visual representation of Jackson (along with James K. Polk and Andrew Johnson) incorporating three different political periods.

Andrew Jackson’s own civic impact must be considered, as well as the political climate he lived in, in order to fully understand the reasoning for it being there in the first place. Jackson is celebrated for many things such as increasing the size of the union and taking a strong stance on the national bank, but it doesn’t take much digging around to learn of the tragedies inflicted upon Native Americans by Jackson’s participation in the Seminole and Creek wars, and his implementation of the Indian Removal Act (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2959.html).
Between the years of 1830 and 1837, over 46,000 Native Americans were removed from their homes in the Eastern United States and forced to relocate West of the Mississippi River, and over 100 million acres of traditional Native American lands were cleared and taken over by whites (http://ncpedia.org/biography/jackson-andrew). Shortly after Jackson’s presidency (1838-1839) approximately 4,000 Cherokee were forced West in the infamous Trail of Tears (roughly 25% did not survive the journey) as a result of the Indian Removal Act and Jackson’s support of anti-Indian legislators in Georgia.

Jackson was also a slave owner and did his part to ensure that slavery would continue to flourish as a major part of US culture long after his tenure as President. Though this information is extremely important in terms of understanding Jackson’s influence on the politics of his time and beyond, none of it is available to the viewer.

Knowing more about Jackson’s contribution to the marginalizing and murdering of Native Americans would drastically change how the viewer places Jackson in today’s culture (as the monument does, physically speaking), but Jackson’s politics are only one factor in this civic equation. Who decided that this monument should be built and what were the political/economical motives given the political economy of their time? Who was the artist and why did he feel it necessary to create such a monument? What were the social conflicts happening at the time which the construction and placement of this sculpture may have been a response to? These are all questions that must be asked in order to understand the reasons why this monument was built.

Whatever ideas the viewer associates with Andrew Jackson, gathered from the viewer’s schooling and other cultural influences like TV and literature, are immediately brought into the experience, and, since the statue exists in the current moment, so is the
current political climate. This is where the lack of social responsibility on behalf of the monument’s creators and caretakers becomes apparent. If there is nothing on sight outlining the entirety of Jackson’s actions and their impact on a social, political and economic level, the viewer has no reason but to assume that the monument should exist as is. The monument of Jackson commemorates not only the positive legacy of the president, but also the horrific negatives, and though this piece was created at a time in which these atrocities were viewed by most as necessary acts for the good of the union, it has remained a part of our State’s landscape long since Jackson’s actions have been deemed socially immoral. Once a viewer takes into account the politics of Jackson, the monument’s builders, and the current social process, they can begin to learn from his legacy and form an educated opinion on whether or not it is responsible to have such monuments in the public realm.
The focus of this thesis exhibition and document is on the politics of memorials and the role they play in reproducing the values of our discriminatory Euro-American history. As a result of living and working in Eastern North Carolina and with the intentions of displaying this work in Greenville, North Carolina, the research has been focused on the life and political influence of Charles B. Aycock, former Governor of North Carolina (1900-1904). A “native” of Goldsboro, North Carolina, Aycock developed his sense of things in this area and put into place policy that effects the residents of North Carolina today. This coupled with the existence of several monuments bearing his name in the immediate area make him a subject of criticism which viewers of the work can participate in given their knowledge of current local culture. The following will attempt to summarize Aycock’s political life and describe how his civic contribution functions today, as well as discuss the politics of those responsible for the building and naming of Aycock Residential Hall on the campus of East Carolina University. As these
different politics are discussed, information and images will assist in describing the physical process used to create my own work and explain how each step relates to the narrative.

Aycock, a loyal democrat, served as governor of North Carolina from 1900-1904, but his rise from a UNC Chapel Hill law student to that of a predominant North Carolina Democrat began years before. After finishing law school in 1880, Aycock began practicing law and teaching school in Goldsboro, quickly moving into the public eye as superintendent of schools in Wayne County and serving on the school board in Goldsboro (Connor, 48). In 1888, Aycock became a presidential elector for Grover Cleveland and, from 1893-1897, served as U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of North Carolina (http://ncpedia.org/biography/governors/aycock). The Republican party which included any politically active African Americans, and Populist party, made up of mostly low income white farmers, formed a loose union in which they supported each other’s cause on a state level in 1894 (http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/commentary/58/entry). This union, labeled “Fusion Politics” assured that one Republican or Populist would run on each state ticket in opposition to the Democrat nominee (http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/commentary/58/entry).

“In the 1894 election, the Fusion alliance of Populists and Republicans swept the state. Fusionists won control of the legislature, elected several Congressmen, and secured some statewide offices. They immediately pursued a reform agenda. First, Fusionists elected Marion Butler to the U.S. Senate for a full six-year term and
Republican Jeter C. Pritchard (1857-1921) to the two-year vacancy created by the 1894 death of Senator Zebulon B. Vance (1830-1894). Second, they repealed the County Government Act of 1877 and restored county home-rule. Third, they set the legal interest rate at six-percent, increased funding for public education, and for state prisons and charitable institutions. Perhaps the greatest legislation of Fusionist rule was ensuring that all political parties were represented by election judges at the polls and requiring designated colors and party insignias on ballots so that the illiterate had a political voice. The reforms were highly successful and popular. The election law alone led to an increase of registered voters by over 80,000.”

(http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/commentary/58/entry)

The state election of 1896 proved even more successful for the NC Fusionists as Republicans and Populists manage to control all statewide offices (http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/commentary/58/entry). Most importantly, African American Republicans were elected or appointed to approximately 1000 governmental positions in North Carolina (http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/commentary/58/entry). This fact provided the Democrats with a way in which to drum up support for their cause amongst the white farmers of North Carolina who voted for Fusionists in 1896, but were not happy with the inclusion of African Americans into the North Carolina government system. The time between the election of 1896 and the upcoming election of 1898 served as a window of opportunity for the Democrats in which they would use a message of White Supremacy to drum up support for Democrats wishing to gain government seats (http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/commentary/58/entry).
The White Supremacy Campaign of 1898 was led nationally by future U.S. Senator Furnifold M. Simmons (http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/1898/bios/simmons.html), but one of its most vocal supporters in NC was none other than Charles B. Aycock (Anderson, 253). This campaign spawned a local group of organized mouthpieces and thugs known as the White Government Union, which spread fear amongst would be African American voters and their sympathizers in the months leading up to the election of 1898 (http://core.ecu.edu/umc/wilmington/). The efforts of the WGU and those of area Democrat publications, such as the News and Observer – Raleigh, NC, editor Josephus Daniels – created an extremely hostile environment full of overt racist politics and racial violence (http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/1898/sources.html). Although he did not run for Governor in 1898, Aycock participated in a statewide series of debates with Populist Cyrus Thompson throughout the year leading up to the election in which he promoted the Democratic agenda of white supremacy (http://ncpedia.org/biography/governors/aycock). These debates helped Aycock add to his growing popularity, which propelled him to the office 1900.
TRASLATING THE LANGUAGE OF POLITICS INTO VISUAL ART

Relaying a multi dimensional narrative such as this to a viewer can be made easier by incorporating different techniques and media through an intense process of layering in which each layer of the historical narrative is represented by a layer of aesthetic content. This particular process begins with a set of images relating directly to the political content of each painting. In this case, an idealized image of Aycock presented as sculpture on the lawn of the NC State Capitol is imported into Photoshop and edited to maximize its effectiveness once burned onto a silk screen (the more simple/clean the image is, the easier it transfers). Once edited, the image is printed onto a translucent paper (typically, vellum) and set aside while the screen is prepared.

![Image of Sculpture of Charles Brantley Aycock Being Edited in Photoshop](image_url)

A 300 mesh count silk screen is then treated with light sensitive photo emulsion and allowed to dry.
The dried screen is placed inside a light exposure unit and topped with the printout of Aycock’s statue. Once activated, the fluorescent bulbs of the light table begin to heat the exposed areas of photo emulsion located beneath the translucent paper causing it to fill the gaps in the mesh as it dries. The dark areas of the printout block the light, keeping those areas of the screen from being saturated with dry emulsion. Once the exposure process is complete, the screen is rinsed with water and whatever emulsion was hidden from the light by dark ink washes out revealing the image of Aycock which may then be transferred to the painting ground with acrylic paint and a squeegee.

At this point, the image of Aycock is put into context with different parts of his legacy by layering in other images in the same fashion. Text from his speeches, photos
of particular events which he participated in (directly and indirectly), and images of buildings bearing his name are transferred to the same support in an attempt to visually explore and express Aycock’s multifaceted and conflicted cultural impact. In addition to screen printing, other transfer techniques such as polymer lift, Xerox transfers and collage are used to place the various images in context with one another. Below is a finished painting which shows the image of Aycock’s statue (State Capitol Grounds, Raleigh, NC) in front of his own words in regards to racial inequality. The image of Aycock is a polymer lift from a color copy, and the text is screen printed. The different layers of history layered together in the same image juxtapose the current statue of Aycock against the backdrop of a historical record of systematic racial bigotry.
Several pieces in this body of work attempt to place the memorialized Aycock in context with the race riots of 1898 which occurred in Wilmington, NC. Though Aycock’s physical involvement with these riots is not a matter of fact, he certainly helped motivate the actions of that day with a message of white supremacy in the months leading up to the election.

Race and its place in NC politics was becoming the foremost topic of the 1898 elections, and Wilmington, NC served as the hot bed for this political debate. Tension had been rising for some time in the area over the issue of white supremacy between Democrats and Republicans/Populists due in large part to the two major news papers’ writings and images. The N&O fueled the Democrats’ campaigns with inflammatory, hateful rhetoric which perpetuated fear and hostility of and for the African American population, and the Wilmington Daily Record attempted desperately to provide a platform from which the African American community could defend themselves against the accusations of the Democratic publication.
Alexander Manly served as the editor for the Wilmington Daily Record and contributed several editorials, which sparked controversy throughout the South. One editorial in particular, which he wrote in response to a speech given by Rebecca Latimer Felton of Georgia served as the “last straw” for white supremacists such as Alfred Moore Waddell, a leading voice of the White Government Union. Felton’s speech encouraged lynching of African Americans and instilled fear in her white constituents claiming that African American men were raping and beating white women in her jurisdiction and beyond. She also chastised white non-Democrats for supporting the advancement of African Americans. Manly’s response to her speech called for an end to lynchings and challenged Felton’s claims against black men, accusing white men of perpetuating actual crimes of that nature on a regular basis. Political figures in the Democratic Party such as Aycock and Waddell were outraged by these claims and, as a result, offered Manly an impossible ultimatum. In a speech given by Waddell the day after the election of 1898 known as the “White Declaration of Independence,” Manly was given twelve hours to leave town with his printing press before the White Government Union would take action against him.

“We therefore owe it to the people of this community and of this city, as a protection against such license in the future, that the paper known as the “Record” cease to be published and that its editor be banished from this Community.”

– Excerpt from the “White Declaration of Independence”, A.M. Waddell, 1898
Manly received this threat without adequate time to fulfill Waddell’s demands, but managed to escape town and retreat north, eventually settling in Washington, DC (http://ncpedia.org/biography/manly-alex). On November 8, 1898, Waddell led a mass of white men to Love and Charity Hall, the building in which the Daily Record was printed, and burned it to the ground (http://core.ecu.edu/umc/wilmington/). The mob then continued through the city of Wilmington destroying African American establishments and the people who stood in their way. Though different sources offer death toll numbers ranging from six to one hundred, the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission determined that “no official count of the dead can be ascertained due to a paucity of records from the coroner’s office, hospital, and churches (http://www.history.ncdcr.gov/1898-wrrc/report/report.htm).” Waddell, along with other mob members, forced the elected Republicans out of office naming himself as Mayor and claiming all seats of the city council (http://ncpedia.org/history/cw-1900/wilmington-race-riot). This forceful takeover of the government in Wilmington led directly to various racist legislative measures passed which would remain enforced by the institution until the Civil Rights Movement.
This aspect of Aycock’s political history is incorporated visually into the painting through screened images of his own speeches and the events of November 8, 1898, such as this one of the Coup burning Love and Charity Hall to the ground.

*Image of the Mob Burning of Love and Charity Hall, Wilmington, 1898*

*Examples Showing the Incorporation of Coup De’ Tat Images Into Paintings*

Placing the idealized version of Aycock’s image, which celebrates his positive contributions to the state, in the same visual space as this image of the Wilmington riots
ideally gives the viewer a more complete sense of what Aycock and others of similar
mind left behind in terms of social policy and public influence. The current monuments
of Aycock and other confederate era politicians do not offer this multi dimensional
education to viewers. When this image is layered into a painting along with an image of
Aycock’s positive achievements, the viewer may be encouraged to begin a conversation
with those around them about Aycock, or the issue of the memorial in general. This sort
of reaction is ideal, and conversations such as these, which call our senses of history into
question, will ultimately lead to a more informed public. Whether it sparks a positive or
negative reaction, at least it will bring the issues associated with commemorative
structures to the forefront of that viewer’s experience.
Another image used in this body of work is that of a dormitory on the campus of East Carolina University. This structure bears Aycock’s name and inevitably reproduces his values as well as the values of those who chose to name it. Putting this image in proximity with other photos and text relative to Aycock’s legacy highlights the fact that the dorm is functioning as a memorial and must be evaluated in those terms. The residents of the dorm as well as other people who visit the residence hall should be offered an accurate account of the influence Aycock had on NC.
Charles B. Aycock Hall was built in 1960 and named on Sunday, December 9 at a ceremony, which included addresses by Leo W. Jenkins (ECU President), Senator J. Ervin Jr., and J. Herbert Waldrop (chairman of the ECU Board of Trustees) celebrating the legacy of Aycock and his impact on education in NC. A portrait of Aycock, painted by ECU SoAD faculty member, Tran Gordley, was presented by family members, and a barber shop quartet sang “The Halls of Ivy” to a crowd of over 150 men, women and children (as reported in the Daily Reflector: Greenville, NC, December 10, 1962). Celebrated for his achievements in the expansion of public education, Aycock’s full political legacy was stamped on the wall of this dormitory which has housed students of all races and nationalities since. It is absolutely crucial that we are conscious of the fact that a monument reflects just as much, if not more, the politics of those involved in its creation than as the politics of the person being commemorated. The values of the ECU Board of Trustees and, to an extent, President Jenkins, motivated the naming of this monument and must be examined to understand the social impact of the naming then and now. The late 1950’s and early 60’s were a time of great change and great hostility in America due in large part to the progress being made by the civil rights movement. It would be foolish to ignore that fact and assume the naming of this dorm had nothing to do with the racial politics of the time as they related to Aycock’s own feelings towards racial segregation. This is, by no means, an attempt to single out any particular parties involved in the naming of the dorm, nor accuse them of being more or less racist than other Greenville citizens of that time. Rather, an acknowledgement that this monument’s name carries with it the racism of Aycock’s time as well as the 1960’s.
The image of the dorm is layered into the paintings as a symbol of Aycock’s noted contribution to state public education, but also as a reminder that black students currently occupying the dorm were not a part of Aycock’s vision of higher education. We celebrate certain advances in our state run institutions implemented during the time of Aycock’s tenure as Governor, but it seems incredibly insensitive to house minority residents in a building that bears the name of a white supremacist. The racist values of both the post civil war era and the civil rights era are being represented by the dorm and the state funded university which built it. At the very least, information should be provided to the students of ECU as well as their parents and other visitors explaining the multiple ways in which Aycock effected Eastern North Carolina and why the Board of Trustees decided to name the building after him. It seems as if that approach would lead to some sort of civic change, if even on a very small scale.
TREATMENT OF EXISTING MONUMENTS AND BUILDING OF NEW MEMORIALS

If a monument is to exist in the public realm, in honor of a public official or particular event, it is crucial that the entire story be made available to the viewer at the time in which the monument is being observed. Most art monuments have plaques or engravings attached which explain the reasoning for commemorating that particular person or event, but most do not include reasons why the person or event should not be celebrated. In the case of existing monuments that memorialize figures who offered both positive and negative contributions to the social landscape, additions must be made which include additional information on the “questionable,” or downright immoral actions of those figures. If a viewer happens upon a statue of Charles Aycock, they should be made aware of the advancements in public education begun under his administration, but they should also learn of the ways in which he fought to keep the African American population of NC from advancing at all. The creators of the monument and their own political agendas should also be added to the monument, since this part of the politics within the monument is an extremely important one. These additions can be made in ways which add to the aesthetic appeal of the structures, but the concern of appearance should fall well beneath the concern of presenting the viewer with a complete telling of history. It is with these symbols of an incomplete history that we continue to cheat the citizens of our world into seeing the past through a limited scope.

In the same breath, we should make it commonplace to include all of this information in new monuments being constructed and allow for additional information to be added to the monument in the future. As much as we would like to anticipate how our actions and the actions of our leaders will play out in the future, it is impossible to foresee some of the political actions being committed in the present as being unjust in the future. Thus, an open-ended right to amend the information provided by the monument as time
progresses is entirely necessary if we are to be responsible in our act of commemoration. We must try to represent, with our art, a more complete sense of history, which includes our collective injustices, if we expect the world to change for the better. Leaving information out due to embarrassment or shame will harm generations to come by not allowing them access to an honest version of their history.

The following images reflect my attempt at creating a monument in honor of Charles B. Aycock. A 33’ x 9’ wall engraved with one of Aycock’s speeches frames three paintings, each containing scenes from the Wilmington massacre, images of the construction of Aycock Residence Hall (ECU Campus), and excerpts from his speeches.

“What’s In a Name?” Installation
“What’s In a Name?” Installation, Left Detail

“What’s In a Name?” Installation, Right Detail
“What’s In a Name?” Installation, Center Detail

“What’s In a Name?” Installation, Text Detail
IN CONCLUSION

A monument not only brings forward into the present the values of the subject it is commemorating, but also the values of those who decided to have the structure built/named. If we choose to make available only the positive elements of the commemorated person or events’ legacy, as most of our monuments do, the viewer is only able to place those positive contributions in present context. The negative aspects of the memorialized person/event are left out as well as the political climate in which the monument was commissioned. These monuments are, therefore, presenting an incomplete version of history which threatens to become our culture’s collective sense of history over time. In dealing with historical figures such as Aycock who have contributed both tremendous positives and horrific negatives to our culture, a public awareness of each is crucial if we are to benefit, culturally speaking, from his life and works. If history is the inventory that we refer to when creating the present, shouldn’t that inventory be complete with the successes and failures of the past, no matter how shameful those failures may be? All art objects are history tellers as each carries with it, at least, the cultural politics of its time and those of its influences, but public monuments are art objects that are built and/or named with the specific intention of reproducing historical values. It should be our duty as citizens to demand a more accurate telling of history in regards to public monuments if we wish for future generations to learn from the ups and downs of our past. This body of work attempts to shed light on the incomplete nature of many regional monuments as well as offer a version of a monument that presents multiple aspects of a single politician’s civic impact. I hope that the pieces in this exhibit generate conversation amongst viewers, their friends and families, and others within our community and that this discourse leads to positive change in the way we handle the commemoration of history in the future.
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