

**THE BURDEN OF INVISIBILITY:
Visualizing Invisibility and
Hypervisibility as a Black
Woman in America**

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Veronica Jackson, 2020

The Burden of INVISIBILITY

What does it mean to be invisible? How does the designation of invisibility affect my identity and sense of self? These are two of the many internal queries that arise from my plight as a black woman living in America. They also provide context for the title of this body of work.

The Burden of Invisibility is autobiographical and stems from my position as a black woman marking space. It reflects my multidisciplinary visual art practice based on an interpretive exhibit design and architecture career spanning more than three decades. Simply put, this project tells stories using a range of quotidian objects such as felt-bulletin boards, clothing, hair, paper, time cards, and text.

Encompassing a constellation of individual yet integrated works of art, *The Burden of Invisibility* displays efforts employed to combat an environment indoctrinated to view me through a singular stereotyped lens, or not **see** me at all. The following installations not only look at African American women's **invisibility**, but also address their **hypervisibility**—an exaggerated visibility—subject to misidentification and mislabeling. Thus the term **burden**: something carried or that which is saddled with difficulty and obligation. Upon mislabeling, invisibility and hypervisibility were carved into the recesses of my mind like grooves in a vinyl record. They are burdens that I will perpetually carry, be obligated to hold onto, and resultantly respond to via my visual art making practice.

Although available for all who want to approach it, *The Burden of Invisibility* is dedicated to black women—a group historically disenfranchised in American society. These artworks visually illuminate the methods in which African American women are valued or devalued within our society, and how these attitudes affect their sense of agency in constructing their own imagery or endeavors to mark space.

LANGUAGE OF INVISIBILITY

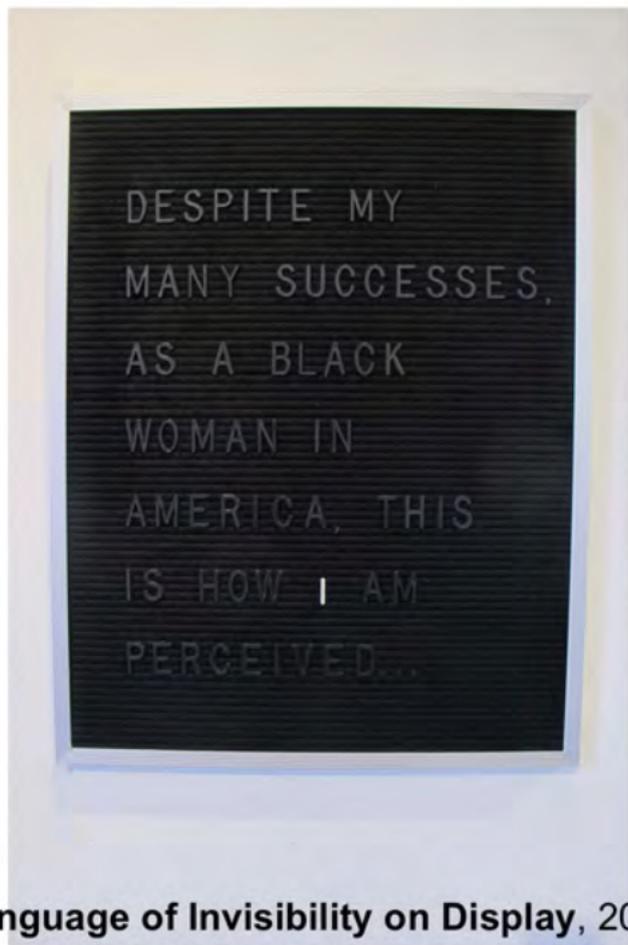
A framed artwork on a wall. The frame is white and the background is dark with a fine, horizontal ribbed texture. The text is white and arranged in six lines, centered horizontally. The text reads: "OH I DID NOT", "SEE YOU...", "...SIMPLY BECAUSE", "YOU REFUSE TO", "SEE ME.", and a period at the end of the last line.

OH I DID NOT
SEE YOU...
...SIMPLY BECAUSE
YOU REFUSE TO
SEE ME.

Language of Invisibility on Display, 2017:
Veronica Jackson



Language of Invisibility on Display, 2017:
Veronica Jackson



Language of Invisibility on Display, 2017:
Veronica Jackson

AS A BLACK WOMAN
WORKING AND LIVING
IN A WHITE WORLD,
I FEEL LIKE A
VISIBLE EXCEPTION,
BUT TO THEM I'VE
BECOME AN
INVISIBLE RULE.

Language of Invisibility on Display, 2017:
Veronica Jackson



Language of Invisibility on Display, 2017: Veronica Jackson

Veronica Jackson

Language of Invisibility on Display (Mine-Refuse), 2017

Felt bulletin board panel, plastic letters, aluminum frame
16x20”

Language of Invisibility on Display (Professor Tonya Foster, Ph.D.), 2017

Felt bulletin board panel, plastic letters, aluminum frame
16x20”

Language of Invisibility on Display (Mine-Despite), 2017

Felt bulletin board panel, plastic letters, aluminum frame
16x20”

Language of Invisibility on Display (Professor Mabel O. Wilson, Ph.D.), 2017

Felt bulletin board panel, plastic letters, aluminum frame
16x20”

What does it mean to be invisible? ? How does the designation of invisibility affect my identity and sense of self? As a black woman in America, why am I concerned with being seen or more importantly acknowledged? Is it because I want to be recognized by my fellow citizens when I walk among them, when so often I am not? For example, while standing in line at Whole Foods a white man navigated around me and proceeded to the cashier as if I was not there. When I confronted him about his egregious behavior, he condescendingly stated, “No one was here. I literally just walked up and stood in line.” Or in other words, he **did not see me**.

In response to this slight, I created *Language of Invisibility on Display*: four bulletin boards that illustrate various phrases—mine as well as two other black women’s missives—that represent the invisibility enacted upon our being throughout the years. The black letters on the black felt evoke the concept of not being rendered legible while the signboards’ format visually announces that these messages exist and are ready to be communicated. A subliminal meaning is also created by strategically substituting certain black characters with white ones; thus when all four panels are read as a unit, **REFUSE ME HELP I FEEL INVISIBLE** is revealed.

THAT'S POPS'S MONEY



THAT'S POPS'S MONEY, 2020 @ Chroma Projects; Charlottesville, VA



THAT'S POPS'S MONEY, 2020 @ Chroma Projects; Charlottesville, VA



THAT'S POPS'S MONEY, 2020 @ Chroma Projects; Charlottesville, VA

TIME CARD

Name: **BETTA JEFFERSON**
Title: **WIFE, MOTHER, HOMEMAKER**
Supervisor: **THOMAS JEFFERSON**
Date/ Month: **OCTOBER, 1939**

DATE	WORK COMPLETED
Oct 1	Cleaned the house
Oct 2	Washed the clothes
Oct 3	Shopped for food
Oct 4	Cooked the meals
Oct 5	Cleaned the house
Oct 6	"Wifely" duties
Oct 7	Attended Church
Oct 8	Washed the clothes
Oct 9	Tended the garden
Oct 10	Raised the children
Oct 11	"Wifely" duties
Oct 12	Shopped for food
Oct 13	Washed the clothes
Oct 14	Attended Church
Oct 15	Marries T. Jefferson, Sr.
Oct 16	Tended the garden
Oct 17	Cooked the meals
Oct 18	Cleaned the house
Oct 19	Shopped for food
Oct 20	Cooked the meals
Oct 21	Attended Church
Oct 22	Raised the children
Oct 23	"Wifely" duties
Oct 24	Cooked the meals
Oct 25	Washed the clothes
Oct 26	Cooked the meals
Oct 27	Cleaned the house
Oct 28	Attended Church
Oct 29	Shopped for food
Oct 30	Tended the garden
Oct 31	"Wifely" duties

Total Hours: **372**

TIME CARD

Name: **BETTA JEFFERSON**
Title: **WIFE, MOTHER, HOMEMAKER**
Supervisor: **THOMAS JEFFERSON**
Date/ Month: **AUGUST, 2006**

DATE	WORK COMPLETED
Aug 1	Raised the children
Aug 2	Shopped for food
Aug 3	Cooked the meals
Aug 4	Attended Church
Aug 5	Cleaned the house
Aug 6	"Wifely" duties
Aug 7	T. Jefferson, Sr. Dies
Aug 8	Washed the clothes
Aug 9	Cooked the meals
Aug 10	Cleaned the house
Aug 11	Attended Church
Aug 12	Shopped for food
Aug 13	Washed the clothes
Aug 14	Attended Church
Aug 15	"Wifely" duties
Aug 16	Tended the garden
Aug 17	Cooked the meals
Aug 18	Attended Church
Aug 19	Washed the clothes
Aug 20	Shopped for food
Aug 21	Cooked the meals
Aug 22	Cleaned the house
Aug 23	"Wifely" duties
Aug 24	Washed the clothes
Aug 25	Attended Church
Aug 26	Tended the garden
Aug 27	Raised the children
Aug 28	Cleaned the house
Aug 29	Shopped for food
Aug 30	Tended the garden
Aug 31	Raised the children

Total Hours: **380**



THAT'S POPS'S MONEY, 2018: Veronica Jackson



THAT'S POPS'S MONEY, 2018: Veronica Jackson



THAT'S POPS'S MONEY, 2018: Veronica Jackson



TIME CARD

Name: **BETTA JEFFERSON**
 Title: **WIFE, MOTHER, HOMEMAKER**
 Supervisor: **THOMAS JEFFERSON**
 Date/ Month: **AUGUST**

DATE	WORKED COMPLETED
AUG 1	Cleaned the house
AUG 2	Washed the clothes
AUG 3	Shopped for food
AUG 4	Cooked the meals
AUG 5	Cleaned the house
AUG 6	Washed clothes
AUG 7	
AUG 8	Washed the clothes
AUG 9	Washed the clothes
AUG 10	Washed the clothes
AUG 11	Washed the clothes
AUG 12	Washed the clothes
AUG 13	Washed the clothes
AUG 14	Washed the clothes
AUG 15	Washed the clothes
AUG 16	Washed the clothes
AUG 17	Washed the clothes
AUG 18	Washed the clothes
AUG 19	Washed the clothes
AUG 20	Washed the clothes
AUG 21	Washed the clothes
AUG 22	Washed the clothes
AUG 23	Washed the clothes
AUG 24	Washed the clothes
AUG 25	Washed the clothes
AUG 26	Washed the clothes
AUG 27	Washed the clothes
AUG 28	Washed the clothes
AUG 29	Washed the clothes
AUG 30	Washed the clothes
AUG 31	Washed the clothes

Richard Jefferson

Veronica Jackson

THAT'S POPS'S MONEY, 2018-2019

813 hand-printed letterpress time cards on black paper, black foil stamping, white foil stamping, blue ink, silver ink
4 x 11" each, placed in a grid

When discussing my 96-year-old grandmother's monthly finances, my mother made a reference to "Mama's money." In response, my uncle disrespectfully stated, "That's not Mama's money, THAT'S POPS'S MONEY!" referring to my grandfather. Oh really, so the annuity my grandmother received each month after my grandfather's death was not rightfully deserved? Did she not earn that money as a result of her 67-year marriage to a tyrant? Is my uncle saying that Pops worked for that pension and my grandmother did not? How about the three score and seven years of production inside the home, including bearing nine children? Does that labor not count? Obviously my uncle (her oldest child) saw no value in her work. My grandmother's travails remained invisible to her husband and sons her entire life.

Using the "time card" format—man's tool for chronicling the hours throughout the workday—*That's Pops's Money* visually documents the devalued drudgery my grandmother endured inside the home. The twelve wall-panels house 813 time cards (one card for each month of the 67 years that she toiled, plus nine cards that announce each decade the installation encompasses). The time cards are created by debossing a monthly timesheet into the surface of black paper using blue ink. This technique signifies my grandmother's invisible "blue collar" labor, while simultaneously creating a physical "impression" of her work into each card. The artwork begins in 1939—the year of my grandparents' marriage—and ends in August 2006, the month and year of my grandfather's death. And in an effort to pay homage to my grandmother's labor, I hand cut and cranked all 813 cards through a Vandercook printing press.

Similar to the *Language of Invisibility* felt bulletin boards, contrasting colors have been used to telegraph subliminal messages. For this piece, the birthdates of the five sons appear in white foil stamping, in reference to the five "valuable" issues from my grandmother's body. According to my grandfather, the four daughters' worth was in no way equal to the sons, thus their birthdates are represented via black foil stamping—present yet almost invisible, barely readable or acknowledged—like my grandmother's labor.

HOMELESS/ TOURIST



Homeless/ Tourist, 2017: Veronica Jackson



Homeless/ Tourist, 2017: Veronica Jackson



Homeless/ Tourist, 2017: Veronica Jackson

Veronica Jackson

HOMELESS/ TOURIST, 2017

Natural and synthetic hair, faux fur, bling stickers, clothing, shoes, Behr paint samples

While living in the Tenderloin—one of the most economically depressed areas in San Francisco, CA—I was misidentified as homeless twice, and on a third occasion mislabeled a drug dealer. To those who stereotyped me, it was the materials in the case on the left—the nap of my hair (specifically the dreadlocks cut from my head) and the color of my skin (represented by a commercial paint sample)—that signified me as always already homeless. It didn't matter that I wore fashionable and expensive garments and shoes. However if I had been a white woman with pale skin and a blond ponytail—even while wearing ratty workout gear (as depicted in the case on the right)—I'd be cited as a tourist.

Expanding this piece beyond the items displayed on the pedestal and to enhance the concept evoked by the contrasts in types of clothing, I embroidered the word “homeless” using Afro Kinky Braid synthetic hair into a hand-made fur vest. Conversely, the word “tourist” is spelled out on the opposing black sweat jacket using tacky faux bling and blond synthetic hair pulled into a ponytail to represent the “o.”

IN MEMORIAM...
(TREE-BANDS)

Jupiter b.1743.Mason.

GILL b.1744- d.1774,Blacksmith.

KING b. 1747.Waterman.

Peter. b.1748. Waterman.

Fanny. b.1755. Weaver.

BETT b. 1759.Cook.

Scilla b. 1762.Spinner.

In Memoriam: For Those Who Labored for His Happiness, 2018:
Veronica Jackson



In Memoriam: For Those Who Labored for His Happiness, 2018:
Veronica Jackson



In Memoriam: For Those Who Labored for His Happiness, 2018:
Veronica Jackson



In Memoriam: For Those Who Labored for His Happiness, 2018:
Veronica Jackson

A photograph of a tree trunk in a grassy area. A black tag with white text is wrapped around the trunk. The text on the tag reads "Jupiter b. 1743. Mar". The background shows green grass and other trees.

Jupiter b. 1743. Mar

In Memoriam: For Those Who Labored for His Happiness, 2018:
Veronica Jackson



Skill d. 1762.99

BETT d. 1759.C

KING d. 1747.W

In Memoriam: For Those Who Labored for His Happiness, 2018:
Veronica Jackson

Veronica Jackson

In Memoriam: For Those Who Labored for His Happiness, 2018

Felt, cotton, white embroidery thread

3" x various lengths

Comprised of seven symbols of remembrance, the “treebands” were wrapped around thick-barked trees in a grove along the Rivanna River (also known as “Jefferson’s River”) in Charlottesville, VA. These felt bands document a few of the many enslaved people at Monticello—the third President’s home and working plantation. Each person’s name, birthdate, and occupation are embroidered into an individual length of fabric. Reminiscent of traditional armbands, these physical reminders memorialize those forgotten and invisible laborers who either produced goods transported down the Rivanna, or watermen who worked beside its banks, or stone masons whose extant markings exist at dams along various points of the waterway.

The name of this artwork addresses *Those Who Labor for My Happiness*, a publication that reexamines slavery at Jefferson’s Monticello and whose title is a reinterpretation of Jefferson’s text written to the “Angelic” Church in 1793:

“I have my house to build, my fields to form, and to watch for the happiness of those who labor for mine.”

ERASED

Cell A, 1826-1855 MURDERED. White Supremacy & Slavery.

BONITA CARTER, 1959-1979 MURDERED. White Cop & Gun.

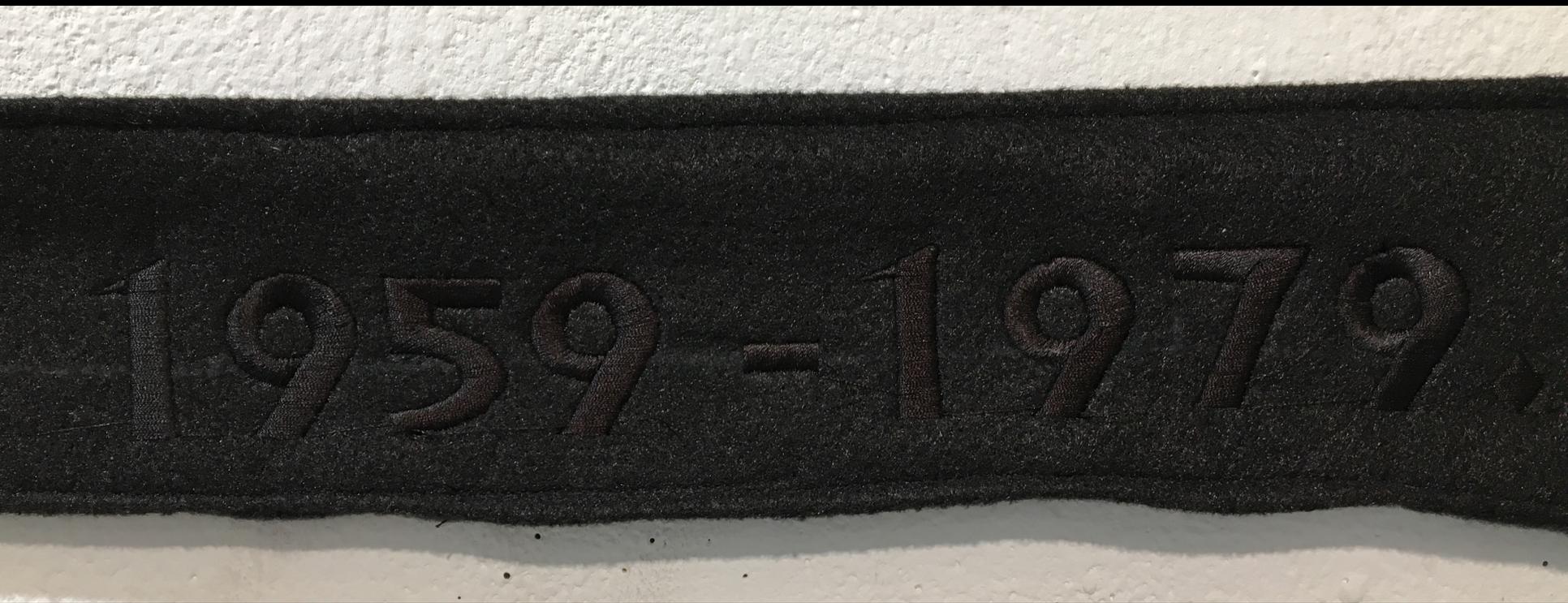
CATERINA HARRIS, 1975-1991 MURDERED. Korean Woman & Gun.



ERASED, 2020 (detail) @ VCCA, Amherst, VA



ERASED, 2020 (detail) @ VCCA, Amherst, VA



ERASED, 2020 (detail) @ VCCA, Amherst, VA



MURDERED.

ERASED, 2020 (detail) @ VCCA, Amherst, VA



ERASED, 2020 (detail) @ VCCA, Amherst, VA

Cell 4, 1836-1855

MURDERED. White Supremacy & Slavery.

Bonita Carter, 1959-1979

MURDERED. White Cop & Gun.

Latanya Harris, 1975-1991

MURDERED. Korean Woman & Gun.

Sakia Gunn, 1987-2003. **Murdered. Black Man+Knife.**

Nia Wilson, 1999-2018. **Murdered. White Man+Knife.**

Atatiana Jefferson, 1990-2019. **Murdered. White Cop+Gun.**

Veronica Jackson

ERASED, 2020 (in progress)

Felt, cotton, black and white embroidery thread

3" x various lengths

The *ERASED* series illustrates historic and contemporary accounts of systematic violence against African American women. The artwork consists of black text embroidered on black “armbands” in memoriam to black voices prematurely silenced. This initial group features six women literally and figuratively erased from society’s consciousness. Three of the six—victims of gun violence—were specifically selected to respond to the environment in which I now reside: a Second Amendment Sanctuary City, strongly favoring the right to own and bear arms free from government regulations. Since the majority of these advocates are white men, I suspect they do not recognize, understand, or concern themselves with the prevalence and consequences of the terror caused by firearms for women of color.

Similar to the *In Memoriam (Tree-bands)* project, the armbands document the name and dates of each victim, in addition to the cause of death, the perpetrator, and the method of attack against them. Embroidered in black thread, the biographic information for each woman—their name and years of their birth and death—symbolizes their invisibility and erasure from society, while the remaining data—prominently readable in white thread—signify the overwhelming and evident power of the perpetrators.

VEILED RACISM SERIES



Caroline Wozniacki minstelizes Serena Williams: Brazil, 2012



Black men arrested in Starbucks: Philadelphia, 2018



**A VEILED
COMPLIMENT
OR
VEILED RACISM...**

If imitation is the highest form of
flattery, what do you call this?



**VEILED
JUSTICE
OR
VEILED
RACISM...**

Who's really the
threat here?

Veronica Jackson

Veiled Racism Series: A Veiled Compliment (Wozniacki), 2018

Veiled Racism Series: Veiled Justice (Starbucks), 2018

Hand-made Mitsumata paper, photocopy, vinyl letters, light box
12x20" each/ 24x33" overall

The *Veiled Racism Series* exemplifies hypervisibility or an exaggerated visibility that is subject to misidentification and mislabeling. Sandwiched between two pieces of hand made Japanese tissue paper, the images in both artworks speak to society's hypervisualization of the black body.

Supposedly in the spirit of good clean fun on the tennis court, Caroline Wozniacki minstrelizes Serena Williams's form by stuffing her breast and buttocks to a grossly exaggerated degree. Is Wozniacki's imitation of this black woman's body an innocent jest or is she lampooning a figure that she really wants to emulate? If imitation is indeed the highest form of flattery, what do you call this?

And in this infamous image that documents one of the two men arrested at a Philadelphia Starbucks for "sitting while black," we see a docile citizen being led away in handcuffs by the police. His hypervisible black male presence is always already a threat in the American consciousness, and thus must be dealt with accordingly—restrained and removed from the premises. The image begs the question: Who's really the threat here?

By placing the two reproductions between tissue paper, the reality of each portrayal is obscured. In one instance the veil masks the severity of the act, it lessens the pain of the exaggeration. Yet in another the translucent cover distorts the image—bringing more attention, interest, and intrigue to the depiction.

OBELISKKK



OBELISKKK

2018: Veronica Jackson

OBELISKKK, 2018

Nine captioned and framed photocopies, hand-cut vinyl letters

12x18" each (framed size)

Unveiled on June 16, 1909, the Bedford County Confederate Memorial is sited in front of the Bedford County Courthouse. It is an obelisk—an ancient and enduring symbol of Rome’s conquest over Egypt. Eight ancient Egyptian obelisks currently reside in Rome and are positioned in prominent locations throughout the republic. For instance, the uninscribed Egyptian obelisk re-erected at the center of Saint Peter’s Square in Vatican City is the only obelisk in Rome that has not toppled since ancient times.

Interpreting the obelisk as an emblem of power, supremacy, and domination—and prompted by the Bedford Confederate Memorial’s form—I investigated and subsequently discovered that many Confederate war memorials around the nation utilize the obelisk as their main if not only design feature. In fact, one source lists 62 nationally recognized memorials and monuments that contain an obelisk. 26 are Confederate memorials and nearly all are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Thus I chose to visualize the word **OBELISK** as the foreground to nine, southern-situated Confederate monuments from both a literal and figurative perspective. As I developed the piece I saw that by replicating the final letter in the word, the meaning of the work was extended—the series of three **K**’s evoked the white supremacy group that has historically and currently aspires to *conquer* the disenfranchised and promote systems of *conquest* over opportunity, freedom, and equality.

This artwork is in response to the 2017 Unite the Right rally convened in Charlottesville, VA: a backlash to the actual and planned removal of Confederate memorials and monuments throughout the country, especially in the South.

ONWARD!